The Advantage of Perspective

by UP2L8

Summary

Years after the Promised Day, Führer Roy Mustang is well on his way to achieving everything he’s ever dreamed of for Amestris. Then he discovers that there might be something he wants for himself.

Notes

I wasn't too happy with the way Brotherhood ended. Blame this on those damn pictures.
Dear General Mustang,

I hope this letter finds you in good health. It was a lovely surprise to receive your package. Thank you very much for the teddy bear you sent for Sara’s birthday. She absolutely loves it. In fact, not only does she sleep with it every night, she won’t be parted from it during the day either. She takes it with her everywhere she goes. For some reason she has decided to name it ‘Broccoli’, even though it isn’t even a little bit green. Apparently three year olds have a special kind of logic all their own.

The rest of the family is fine. Granny is very happy to have us back in Resembool. The move from Rush Valley went smoothly, despite Maes’ reluctance to leave his Uncle Domenic behind. Our little boy starts Kindergarten this September. That’s just six months away, can you believe it? It seems like only yesterday he was a tiny baby in my arms. He’s still quite small for his age – takes after his Uncle Edward that way, though I’d never dare say that to brother – but he keeps up with the older kids in town with no trouble. Like Ed and I back when we were young children, Maes is quite advanced intellectually, and I think the older children appreciate his inventive and devious nature. Since we’ve moved home there have been quite a few elaborate pranks played on our neighbours, aggravating but nevertheless completely harmless, and suspicious eyes have been on Maes as the instigator. I’m quite certain his accusers are correct in their assumptions, though we haven’t been able to catch him or any of the other suspects in the act as yet.

Winry and I will most definitely be in Central for the inaugural ceremony next month, and look forward to seeing you and the rest of our old friends. Thank you for offering the use of your beautiful townhouse, but we have already made arrangements to stay with Gracia. Dinner on the 12th sounds like a great idea though. It will be wonderful to get together and reminisce with you and our Central friends and comrades, and to share what’s been happening in all our busy lives. I’m sure it goes without saying, but we are so incredibly pleased that you have finally achieved your goal, and are eager to celebrate the no doubt historic inauguration of the greatest Führer in Amestrian history. I suppose this also means that my brother will soon have to pay back the 520 cens he owes you.

Speaking of Edward, I’m reluctant to ask as I know you are really busy, but I wonder if you could do me a favour. It’s been quite some time since I’ve heard from my brother, and as much as I hate to admit it, I have no idea where he might be, and haven’t for almost a year. I hope that he shows up at your inauguration, but knowing his disdain for all things political, I suspect that he may not even be aware that Amestris is about to come under new management. If you have heard from him, or know where he is, would you let me know? And if you happen to see him, could you tell him that I miss him? I would really appreciate it.

Well, that’s all the news I have for now. I am enclosing a few pictures that I hope you will share with all our Central friends. The one of Maes and Sara on the tire swing is my current favourite. I’m sure you’ll note Maes’ striking resemblance to Edward with his tongue stuck out so disrespectfully. Please give everyone our love, and Winry, the kids, and Granny Pinako send their fond greetings your way as well.

Yours truly,

Alphonse Elric.
Masquerade

The architecture of the traditional Aerugoan Renaissance palazzo was characterized by a harmonious form of strict, mathematical proportions, and the specimen Roy Mustang was currently drifting through aimlessly was a classic example. Roosting comfortably atop the crest of an escarpment overlooking the Southern Sea, its elegant rampsats enclosed great, triumphal staircases, graceful arches, and intricate balustrades casing lofty balconies. The panorama beyond the Grand Ballroom’s floor to ceiling windows was breathtaking, a moonlight silvered view of the city, Nicaia Meditarania, nestled in the thin crescent of shoreline between the sea and the steep ridge surrounding it.

Aerugo had more than its fair share of palatial ancestral estates. This particular sprawling manor belonged to the Doge of Nicaia, who had graciously welcomed Roy Mustang, Führer of Amestris, and his retinue into his home earlier that day with genuine pleasure. The elderly man and his much younger wife seemed to regard their esteemed guest as more of a screen idol than a foreign Head of State, and the Dogaressa had nearly swooned when Roy gallantly kissed her delicate hand. A tour of the house and grounds had followed, hampered very little by the extensive preparations for the evening’s much anticipated gala. The peace treaty signed just that morning was certainly cause for celebration on both sides of the border, and if there was one more thing Aerugoans were well known for, it was their elaborate formal celebrations.

The Führer moved smoothly through the celebrants, his half glass of champagne successfully keeping the wait staff at bay. Gracefully navigating the ballroom, artful avoidance was his aim. Roy had been on his diplomatic game throughout the three long weeks of final negotiations and needed a bit of a break. He held himself politely aloof from the festivities, and their host’s attractively arranged ambience helped him to achieve his purpose. A string quartet played at just the right timbre to offset the low hum of many conversations. The lighting was just subdued enough to make it relatively easy for the more notable guests to merge anonymously with their less notorious fellows. The elaborate decor was pleasing to the eye, providing artistic distraction. But best of all, the perimeter of the main hall sported a number of conveniently placed alcoves to provide a means of escape for those wishing to evade their admirers, and the dark haired man made frequent use of them.

Roy had to admit to feeling a bit sorry for Riza Hawkeye on that score. As head of his security detail, the many options for concealment had given the woman migraines trying to anticipate possible threats to her old friend, and defences against them. In fact, simply attending this function had been a rather large bone of contention between the Führer and his most trusted protector. If the Hawk had had her way, Roy would have been on a train halfway back to the dubious safety of Amestris by now, sequestered in his private coach. Still, she’d been well aware of Roy’s penchant for making himself a very public figure when she accepted the position of Chief Security Officer, and Roy flatly refused to cloister himself in the name of personal safety. Besides, he wasn’t your average deskbound head of state. He was Roy Mustang, Flame Alchemist. He’d battled inhuman monsters and their deified Father, stone blind, and had survived to tell the tale. By comparison, defending himself from a few mortal assassins would never seem quite as challenging. And it wasn’t as if he didn’t have backup. Glancing behind, Roy noted that Heymans Breda, his appointed close quarters bodyguard for the evening, was diligently shadowing him at a discrete distance, and the Führer knew that other, less conspicuous protectors were also on hand, ready to defend him instantly should the need arise. The arrangement was a common security practice for most of the senior officials present, and with the many foreign dignitaries in attendance that evening, it would not have surprised Roy to discover that the guards outnumbered the guests.

The Führer continued his meandering through the stately ballroom, no real destination in mind, letting his path lead where it might. It eventually led past one of the small sitting rooms off the main
hall, where an all too familiar voice caught his attention.

“I think our friend Borya is starting to get a little impatient with your bullshit,” the voice was saying, grin very evident in its tone.

Roy eased closer to peek into the curtained enclosure, pleased to confirm his suspicions. Three young men sat in large, overstuffed arm chairs, lounging around the crackling fireplace keeping the early spring chill in the ancient, drafty manor at bay. One was unfamiliar; a dark haired, beefy youth, ruddy of feature, by his attire a Drachmann of minor nobility. The second sported shaggy red hair falling into bright blue eyes. Tall but slim of build, this young major Roy recognized as a junior aide to the newly appointed Amestrian Ambassador to Aerugo. The third was Edward Elric. There was no mistaking that youthful face, amber eyes now sparkling with mirth. Smirking, the Führer of Amestris kept silent, settling against the doorframe to observe his former subordinate and eavesdrop shamelessly.

Edward’s frank observation had the young Amestrian aide sputtering in protest. “It’s not bullshit!” he declared, crossing his arms over his chest defensively. “I just think we should consider all possible consequences before we do this. Maybe it isn’t such a good idea.”

The Drachmann snorted and made a comment to Edward, who barked a short laugh of his own. Edward’s wry response earned him an answering grin from the Drachmann. Roy did not speak Drachim himself, but the former Fullmetal Alchemist seemed perfectly fluent.

“What did he say?” the ginger haired major asked suspiciously, eyes shifting between his two companions.

Edward sighed, and leaned forward in his chair. “Basically, that you should shit or get off the pot, Collins. You issued the challenge. He accepted. If you’re backing out just say so, and stop wasting his time.”

Collins scrubbed his hands over his face, sighing. “This is stupid,” he said.

“Yes, it is,” Ed confirmed. “But you started it. You have to finish it, one way or the other.”

The Drachmann watched the exchange, dark eyes amused, and smiled a predatory smile when Collins finally stood and faced him.

“Let’s do this,” he said, expression grim, and Roy prepared to intervene if it appeared violence was in the offing.

Edward answered the Drachmann’s questioning glance with a thumbs up and a grin, resulting in the young noble eagerly launching himself from the armchair. Though his Amestrian opponent stood taller, the dark haired Northman was clearly the more powerfully built, and Roy knew who his money would be on if this proved to be a contest of strength. Rubbing his large hands together, the Drachmann youth rumbled a laugh that voiced his approval of the Amestrian major’s decision. Then all three young men leaned in to speak too quietly for Roy to hear.

Suddenly the Drachmann took Collins by the arm and pulled him to the curtained doorway so abruptly that Roy didn’t have time to step away. The look on Collins’ face when he saw who they’d nearly bulldozed was priceless.

“Excellency, I’m sorry!” he stammered, snapping to attention with a sharp salute as the Drachmann dipped a short, apologetic bow.

“At ease, gentlemen,” Mustang returned the salute with a lazy smile. “My fault entirely.”
“Yeah, that’s what you get for lurking around doorways, listening in on private conversations,” Edward offered, resting an elbow on the back of his chair with a wry grin.

“I couldn’t help but overhear . . .” Roy started.

“With your ear pressed tight to the curtain,” Ed muttered.

“. . . that you have some sort of contest planned,” Roy finished, ignoring Edward’s aside. “Please do keep in mind that while friendly competition is a healthy way to express our patriotism, it would be inappropriate for pride to get the better of us, and for flaring tempers to stain the conclusion of a successful diplomatic mission.”

“Don’t worry Mustang,” Edward retorted, easy grin still firmly in place. “As usual, you’ve got it all wrong. There’s nothing going on here that you have to worry about.”

“I’m just offering a bit of friendly counsel. No need for you be short with me Edward,” Mustang said, the picture of innocence.

“Been saving that one up for a while, have you, bastard?” Edward growled, smirk wiped away by his scowl.

“Well it has been quite some time since we’ve talked,” Mustang observed, crossing his arms to lean against the doorframe once again. “If you’re done scheming, perhaps you could spare me a little of your time. I’d enjoy hearing what you’ve been up to these past few years.”

The Drachmann was observing the exchange with a puzzled half smile while Collins stood stunned, as pale as a ghost, mouth gaping. Clearly the young Amestrian Major was appalled at Edward’s blatant disrespect for his country’s leader. The Drachmann youth noticed his companion’s distress and placed a steadying hand on Collins’ shoulder.

Edward scratched thoughtfully at his chin. “Are you actually admitting that there are things going on in the world that you aren’t aware of?” he asked. “That would be new.”

“I didn’t mean to suggest that there were things I didn’t know about, Edward,” Roy told him with a benign smile. “I simply meant that I would enjoy listening to your always imaginative version of your exploits. For old time’s sake.” Clasping his hands behind his back, the Führer turned to the other two young men. “Don’t let me keep you from your hopefully nonviolent contest, gentlemen,” he said, dismissing them with a smile.

Collins took advantage of the presented opportunity, snapped his commander a perfect salute, and then all but bolted away, dragging the stocky Drachmann youth along in his wake.

The Führer entered the small sitting room and moved to sit in the large armchair closest to the fireplace, raising an eyebrow at his former subordinate when he made no move to join him. “Well, Fullmetal? Unless you have urgent business elsewhere?”

“If only,” the younger man muttered, reluctantly taking a seat across from his former Colonel. “Fine. If it’s a trip down memory lane you’re after, great. But don’t call me Fullmetal. That’s over, and good riddance.”

“True,” Roy said with a placid smile. “You do realize that it didn’t have to be, don’t you Edward? Alchemy was only one of your many talents. I would have been more than happy to have you as part of my personal staff. Still would, in fact.”

Edward rolled his eyes. “Like I want to hang around with some asshole who thinks pushing my
Roy had to admit that his former subordinate had a point. “So how have you been keeping yourself occupied? I saw Alphonse last year at the inauguration, and he writes quite regularly. You on the other hand are still very good at staying under the radar.” Roy bit back the height reference that was on the tip of his tongue. It was too soon to pull out the big guns. The best way to get information out of Edward was to keep him off balance, and then push his temper over the edge so that he blurted out what he might be trying to hide.

“So? As you just pointed out, you’re not my commander anymore. I don’t have to report my every move. Where I go and what I do is none of your business.”

“Is it so hard to imagine that I might just be interested in the wellbeing of an old friend?” Roy leaned back into the armchair, allowing a small, offended frown to crease his brow.

“Yes.” The younger man levelled an incisive glare at the Führer.

“Ouch,” Roy grimaced. “That’s rather cruel treatment of someone who simply wants to catch up with a respected colleague he hasn’t seen or heard from in nearly four years.”

“Cut the crap, Mustang,” Edward’s eyes narrowed. “If all you wanted was a travelogue, you wouldn’t be going for my soft spots. You’re fishing for something.”

Hmm. So he wasn’t going to be able to use the guilt card. Pity. It used to be a very effective means of softening the blond’s defences. And Edward was aware that Roy was trying to manoeuvre him into some sort of admission. Interesting. Keeping his predatory grin internal, the older man prepared for a somewhat more stimulating battle than he had first anticipated.

“Not at all, Edward,” he said, eyes locked to the younger’s. “Your suspicions are quite unfounded, I assure you. I was really just hoping that you might entertain me for a while, recounting some of your undoubtedly amusing adventures. After three weeks of intense negotiations, I just want to unwind. If I gave you the impression that this was some kind of interrogation, I apologize. Old habits are hard to break.”

The younger man’s glare softened somewhat, and he sighed. “For me too I guess,” he admitted, relenting. “I haven’t been doing very much lately, if you really want to know. Spent the last couple of years in Xing. I got to Aerugo early last week. Crossed the Eastern Desert with Ling Yao’s delegation.”

“No easy trip, that,” Mustang remarked. “Are you planning to continue your travels, or will you go to Resembool to visit your brother and his family? I’m sure they’d love to see you.”

“Yeah, I plan to, as soon as I’m done here. The automail needs some adjustments, too.”

“Alphonse has certainly done well for himself.” Roy kept his tone carefully neutral. “A beautiful wife, two lovely, healthy children, a thriving country practice, three innovative alchemical treatises published and a fourth in the works. I understand that people come from miles around to discuss the practical applications of his theories.”

“He’s writing another dissertation?” Ed asked with interest. “Any idea what he’s working on at the moment?”

“He’s keeping that to himself this time, strangely enough. When I spoke with him last month he told me that this paper would likely be quite controversial.”
“Hmm,” Edward’s gaze drifted somewhere off to Roy’s left. “I hope he hasn’t gone back to his chimera research.” Noting Roy’s look of surprise, the younger man explained. “He wasn’t trying to create chimeras Mustang. What he was working toward was an effective reverse transmutation. It’s a bit of an obsession I think. His last attempt involved applying Thompson’s genetic theories, but they just didn’t translate beyond the cellular level, and we couldn’t figure out if it was the theories that were fundamentally wrong, or if the screw-up was with one of our equations. I mean, on paper it looked great, but . . . What?” The blond had finally noticed his companion’s astonished expression had not faded.

“I . . . thought you couldn’t do alchemy anymore,” Roy said flatly.

Edward rolled his eyes. “Just because I can’t transmute doesn’t mean I’ve forgotten everything I know,” the young man said, disdain for his former superior’s intelligence evident. “It’s all still there: the Truth’s knowledge, everything I studied, all the research. I can still design arrays. I just can’t use them.” The young man shrugged, appearing unconcerned under Roy’s covert scrutiny.

“That must be frustrating,” the older man observed. “I wonder how sought after the Alchemist for the People would be if he was still an alchemist.” More famous, more respected than his little brother?

Edward actually shuddered. “Yeah, that’s the good part about not being a practical alchemist anymore. I can just get on with my life and do what I want. Al can have the fame. People like him. He could do without the attention, but he can handle it, though he gets embarrassed when strangers flock around him asking stupid questions about personal shit that’s none of their business. He enjoys debating and defending his theories, even with people who don’t have a hope in hell of understanding them. I have no patience for any of that crap and just end up losing my temper.” The blond’s amber gaze was amused. “Not all of us are attention whores like you, Mustang.”

The Führer’s dark eyes held concern. “So you don’t miss it Edward? The notoriety, the excitement of your days as the Fullmetal Alchemist?”

The young man sniffed. “Are you kidding? Being a State Alchemist was a means to an end. Yeah, sometimes I still miss my alchemy, but look at it objectively, Mustang. Alchemy is a tool. A way to perform specific tasks. There are other ways to get things done. And it was well worth giving it up, considering what I got in exchange. Al’s life. And he’s happy. And so am I.”

Roy expected to hear a measure of bitterness in Ed’s tone, but all he could detect was honest contentment. It seemed at least that hadn’t changed. Al’s wellbeing had always been Ed’s main concern, and knowing his little brother was leading a normal life, successful in his professional endeavours and happily raising a family with Winry, made the young blond’s face glow with pleasure. Edward really did appear to be happy. The older man thought back to the letter he had received from Alphonse, nearly a year ago. He had asked for Roy’s help to contact his missing brother. Surely Al would have let Roy know if Ed had been in touch, wouldn’t he? Something didn’t add up.

Roy schooled his expression into quiet acceptance. “I’m glad to hear it, Edward,” he said with a smile. “I’m sure you’re looking forward to seeing your brother and his family. When was the last time you spoke to him?”

Now Edward looked a little sheepish. “Well, you know how it is, Mustang. I never was much of a letter writer, and it’s kind of hard to keep in touch from Xing anyway. Can’t phone, telegraphs are unreliable at best, and mail takes months.” The younger man rubbed a hand on the back of his neck, an unconscious gesture Roy recalled as an indicator that Edward was ill at ease.

“When was the last time he heard from you?” Roy repeated.
“It’s been a while I guess.”

“How long?”

“I don’t know exactly. Pretty long.”

“Do you measure ‘pretty long’ in days, weeks, months, or years, Fullmetal?” the Führer asked, no nonsense in his tone.

Edward was uncomfortable enough to miss the use of his old title. “Um. Years. But only two,” he defended half-heartedly.

“Two years.” Roy kept his face neutral as the younger man avoided the Führer’s eyes. “Edward. How could you do that to your brother?”

“Do what?” The blond’s temper flared. “And what business is it of yours anyway?”

“Oh, do forgive me,” Roy snarled, refusing to back down. “How terrible of me to care more about your brother’s peace of mind than you appear to.”

“Fuck you, Mustang,” Edward growled, voice low. “As usual, you don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.”

“Then why don’t you enlighten me?” the Führer invited with a scowl.


“It is when every letter your brother writes to me has how much he misses you between each and every line,” Roy shot back.

A direct hit. Edward sagged back in his chair, the wind sucked completely out of his sails. Roy let him stew for a few moments before going back on the offensive.

“After all you both went through for each other, how could you abandon him like that?” the older man asked quietly.

“You . . . never mind.” Edward’s glare was tempered with a healthy dose of guilt. “I’ll be seeing him in a few weeks. I know he misses me. I miss him too. This is . . . what it is. And you’re one gigantic asshole.”

“And you’re a relatively small one.” Roy mentally braced himself for the explosion that would effectively destroy Edward’s control over his tongue, and allow Roy to move in for the kill.

Much to the Führer’s surprise, the expected histrionic blast did not occur; a lethal amber glare and a quiet ‘fuck you’ were his former subordinate’s only response. It seemed that the younger man had finally gotten control of his temper, to a certain extent at least. His height was a familiar trigger, and Edward had obviously mastered his reaction to attacks in that quarter. Oh well. The passionate blond was bound to have other soft spots that Roy could exploit, and the older man was well practiced in the art of finessing peoples’ weaknesses. Edward had always been a fairly open book, wearing his heart on his sleeve for all to see. This rollercoaster ride was far from over.

“Well bastard, now that you’ve had your fun, I guess I’ll be on my way,” Edward said, youthful face still marked with a scowl. “Wish I could say it’s been a pleasure, but . . .” The young man shrugged as he rose from his chair.
Now this would never do. A condescending smile gracing his features, Roy leaned forward. “Well this is new,” he said. “Edward Elric running away when the conversation gets a little lively.”

“I’m not running away, asshole,” the blond snapped, freezing halfway out of his seat. “What the fuck do I look like, the entertainment committee? You want to get your kicks messing with someone’s head, find someone else. I’m not your dog anymore, and I don’t need this.” Teeth bared, Edward’s eyes were all but shooting sparks.

The momentary image of a leashed Edward in a spiked leather dog collar flashed through Roy’s mind. Now there was a delightful thought. And there as well, perhaps, was another weak point. Edward was young and unattached, and likely susceptible to the urges all men were prone to – and the requisite insecurity and resulting awkwardness most young men experienced thereof.

“My dog? No, Edward. Whatever you may think, I never considered you my dog,” Roy stated, voice dropping to a practiced purr. “A dog is much too domesticated a creature compared to you.” The dark haired man noted his quarry’s raised eyebrows with satisfaction. “A pet. Too tame. No. Not a dog.”

Edward remained halfway out of the armchair, eyebrows pushing towards his hairline, the curious turn this conversation had taken effectively stalling his exit from the room. Roy pressed his advantage.

“I always saw you as something much wilder, more feral,” he continued, rubbing a graceful finger thoughtfully along his jaw as he regarded the young man in front of him speculatively. “A wolf. Yes, that’s more appropriate. An unpredictable creature much harder to master, ferocious, passionate, but still fiercely loyal to his pack mates.”

Edward’s eyebrows remained high, his eyes locked on Roy’s, but aside from that, the young man showed no sign of what he might be thinking about the surprising, and hopefully discomfiting direction this conversation had taken. Good. The blond was likely so off balance now that a single tiny push would tip his composure into the red zone and the battle would be joined.

“What’s the matter, Edward? If you find my frankness disturbing, I do apologize. I assure you, there’s no reason to be concerned; I don’t bite.” The dark-haired man’s eyes smouldered, locked on the younger’s. “At least, not in public.” Roy relaxed into the comfort of the armchair, a lazy smile quirking his lips, and braced himself for Edward’s explosive, red-faced reaction, secure in the knowledge that some things never changed.

But apparently they did.

Much to the Führer’s surprise, the expected explosive reaction never came. Instead, Edward settled into his seat once more. He leaned forward, cocking his head to one side, Roy’s gaze catching on the length of golden braid as it slipped over the blond’s shoulder. Eyes sparkling in the firelight, Edward smiled a slow, easy smile as he tapped a thoughtful finger to his lips.

“I never expected to see Roy Mustang on the hunt from his prey’s point of view,” the blond said, amused. “You certainly have a unique seduction routine, pissing me off, then coming on strong. Not that I would have preferred poetry and flowers; I’m not that kind of guy. To be completely honest, I actually wouldn’t mind verifying the truth of all those rumours I’ve heard about you. But do you think you could handle me, old man?”

Roy had great difficulty keeping his jaw from becoming unhinged, and only his years of practice at concealing his natural reactions allowed him to mask his astonishment. Suddenly he was aware that the heat in the air between himself and the former alchemist had taken on an entirely different quality.
And just as suddenly, this was no longer a child’s game, no longer just a new way to tease and infuriate a much younger and assumed unsophisticated opponent. Without any prior warning this had become something infinitely more intriguing. It was as if a previously unnoticed door had cracked open in front of him, and Roy was catching a glimpse of some new and very attractive options with regard to his former subordinate on the other side.

Of course Central’s former premier playboy couldn’t have helped but notice that Edward had grown into a striking young man, but had only registered that information in a very objective manner. Now, as he took in the young man’s appearance anew, it was like Roy was actually seeing Edward for the first time.

Yes, Edward had grown up. At twelve, small for his age, hair and eyes a bright gold, he had been startlingly precocious and cute as hell, drawing out the parental instincts of his friends and colleagues, much to his obvious, explosive dismay. At sixteen he had cut a striking figure, lean and lithely muscled, poetry in motion, and had begun to catch the eye of those with more mature, less innocent intentions. And now . . .

Now Roy had to admit that Edward at twenty-four was, quite simply, beautiful. Leaning forward across the coffee table, the Führer found himself captivated by wide amber eyes sparkling with mischief. The flex of golden silk draped over a strong, broad shoulder invited Roy’s fingers to test if it felt as luxuriously soft as it looked. Ed’s face had matured to a classical, angular beauty, strong of line, smooth, youthful, and unblemished. Roy’s eyes drifted lower, taking in the breadth of the young man’s shoulders under a finely tailored jacket, the swell of his muscular chest behind a snug fitted vest tapering down to a trim waist, where the Führer halted his eyes’ wanderings. Lifting his gaze once again to this man’s face, he found only a challenging, speculative smile.

“But why would it surprise you to discover that I might be interested, my dear Edward?” Roy purred. “I have very discerning standards, and you more than satisfy my criteria.” Roy leaned back, one fine eyebrow raised in appraisal. “You’re remarkably intelligent, strikingly attractive, and you speak your mind with forthright sincerity – all very important qualities in my book. As for my being able to ‘handle’ you, I don’t generally ‘handle’ my lovers. In a sophisticated encounter the participants generally work together to achieve mutual satisfaction. Under the circumstances however, I would definitely be inclined to make allowances for your youthful impertinence.”

“Hmm.” Edward’s smile became cocky. “You talk a big story, Mustang, that’s for sure. I guess I could cut your geriatric ass some slack in the stamina department,” he said. “You know, for old time’s sake.”

Roy brought out his infamous smirk. “How very thoughtful of you,” he said, low voice smooth as silk. “I’m understandably intrigued by your offer, though I do hope you don’t have some kind of endurance competition in mind.”

“No at all,” Edward assured him. “It’s just that I have heard a lot of rumours about you, and it would take considerable time to confirm them all.”

“I’m pleased to see that you are still the consummate scientist,” Roy observed. “I find that I am also intrigued by this unexpected development. And I agree. Such a unique and appealing opportunity definitely warrants extensive investigation.”

Roy’s words were met with a smile so open and honest that the Flame Alchemist was helpless to do anything but smile back. This chance encounter had moved in an unanticipated, but certainly not unwelcome direction. In fact, the turn this impromptu reunion had taken was presenting the Führer with an opportunity to attain something that, under the circumstances dictated by his ambitions, he had long since resigned himself to doing without.
As the most sought after eligible bachelor in Amestris, Führer Mustang received many invitations to intimate liaisons, both subtle and blatant, but rarely did he indulge. His mostly invented reputation as a lady’s man still followed him, but Roy did not think that engaging in meaningless flirtations and insincere romantic pursuits was appropriate behaviour for the supreme commander of his nation. He had realized long ago that within the confines of his position it would now be difficult, if not impossible, to pursue a more meaningful relationship. Many of the offers the Führer received were couched in obligations he did not want to take on; proposed alliances and informal agreements with strangers that screamed of personal and political commitments he was not willing to make. And even if he were, it would take a very special kind of person to be his lover. Someone who would understand the demands of his position. Someone who would know that as Führer, Roy’s country would always come first. Someone who would not resent his commitment to his duty. In realizing his political aspirations, the Flame Alchemist had been effectively cut off from any possibility of a genuine, long term, intimate relationship.

Or so he had thought.

Roy had known Edward for most of the young man’s life. He had watched over him as best he could while the Fullmetal Alchemist and his brother searched for a way to correct their devastating mistake. Edward would have given anything to get his brother back, and the only thing that had stopped him from giving up his own life was the fact that Alphonse would have suffered greatly from that sacrifice. Instead Edward had given up his ability to perform alchemy, something that had been an integral part of his life from a very young age, and by all appearances never regretted that decision for a moment.

Roy had been surprised to hear that Edward was not keeping in touch with his brother. When he’d finally cornered his former subordinate here in this quiet alcove, he had expected to discover bitterness over his sacrifice, perhaps jealousy that Alphonse had moved on with a life, a family, a happiness that Edward felt he was excluded from. But that was not the case. Edward was not selfish in his love for his brother. He didn’t expect Alphonse to treat his sacrifice as a debt that had to be repaid. It appeared that he was giving his brother the space he needed to find his own way, clearly pleased that Alphonse was a normal human being again, married to the girl of his dreams and living the life he had chosen for himself. Edward would not stand in his brother’s way or hold him back.

If Roy started something with Edward tonight, could he expect the same kind of selflessness?

Even back in the day after Ishbal, as a lowly Lieutenant Colonel, Roy had often run afoul of conflicts between his personal and professional ambitions. Each time he and a partner had begun to develop emotional attachments, Roy had been faced with his partner’s disappointment regarding his level of commitment. His lovers had not been able to accept his all consuming dedication to his duty, to see beyond his ambition as more than just a blind lust for power, to understand what really drove him to strive for that power. Feeling neglected, their demands eventually became more than Roy could meet, and parting ways became the only viable option. It wasn’t very long before Roy decided that his best course of action was to keep himself from getting close to anyone.

Would it be different with Edward? The young man knew what it was like to have a goal that had to be reached to the exclusion of all else. He knew that some goals required the ultimate in self sacrifice. And as explosively passionate as he could be, Edward also knew how to be discrete, always playing his own cards very close to his chest. Too, he was loyal almost to a fault. And honestly, next to Hawkeye, Roy couldn’t think of a more capable person to have at his back. What was being offered still presented risks and challenges, but to Roy that was the icing on the cake. One thing was certain. Time spent with this volatile young man would never be boring. This golden opportunity was far too attractive to pass up.
Roy was just about to propose a change of locale to one more private, to see just where this new development might lead, when the curtain was roughly brushed aside, brass rings chiming loudly on their ornate bar. It took the Führer a moment to recognize the man who swept into the small sitting room, heavy formal robes richly embroidered with Xing’s Imperial motif.

“Ah, Edward.” Ling Yao, current Emperor of the East, moved around the two seated men to flop unceremoniously into the unoccupied armchair nearest the fireplace. “I was wondering where you were hiding yourself.” Looking closely at Edward’s companion, the Xingan monarch’s face lit up with a happy grin. “And Führer President Mustang! How nice to see you again! And how fortunate, as I was planning to make Amestris the next stop on my tour of the west.”

“It is my pleasure as well to see you again, your Eminence,” Roy said, inclining his head with a smile.


“Actually, when I heard that you would be in attendance tonight, I wondered if Xing might be interested in a formal trade agreement with her Western neighbour.”

Ling Yao didn’t look at all surprised by the suggestion. “I thought you’d never ask,” he said. “As you no doubt already know, I plan to be visiting your lovely capital city in two weeks.”

“Of course. I look forward to welcoming you and your retinue at that time.” The Führer held his pleasant smile, wondering how much longer the Xingan man planned to hang around. Roy Mustang was on the hunt and really wanted to get back to his quarry.

“And I look forward to expounding the many advantages our countries would enjoy as trading partners,” the Emperor returned, then cast a fond smile toward Edward. “At any rate, the services of my venerated interpreter won’t be needed for our negotiations. I’m sure he will take the opportunity to spend his time off with his family.”

Edward slouched into his chair. “I really hate it when you talk about me like I’m not even in the room,” he grumbled.

Roy resisted the urge to blink, instead holding onto his benign smile. Edward was a part of Ling Yao’s entourage? Although he’d mentioned that he had crossed the desert with the Emperor’s party, it had never occurred to Roy that the young Amestrian might be in the Eastern monarch’s employ.

The Xingan reached over to give Edward’s knee a conciliatory pat, receiving an annoyed growl from the blond. The Führer caught an appraising glance from dark, narrowed eyes, and suddenly remembered that he wasn’t the only one in this small room who practiced the fine art of deception and manipulation. The dark-haired man before him might be years younger, but he had been born into the Imperial High Court of Xing, and had successfully manoeuvred himself into the Dragon’s Throne.

“Please don’t be angry with me Edward,” the Xingan said, eyes still on Roy. “I’m only suggesting that you should spend as much time with your brother as possible once you are back in your homeland. You know that your wellbeing is important to me.”

“Yeah, it’s right up there, after scrounging food and cheating at cards,” Ed shot back.
“I do not cheat at cards!” Ling said indignantly. “Führer Mustang, can you believe the abuse I’m forced to endure at the hands of my old friend?” The hand Ling had used to pat Edward’s leg had remained on Edward’s leg, and with a scowl Edward brushed it roughly off.

Roy was nothing if not observant; an expert at picking up clues from casual observations, he could easily judge the underlying dynamic in most personal interactions. In this case however, Ling Yao was making absolutely no effort to hide anything. Shrewd, calculating eyes held the Führer’s, his lazy smile almost challenging, and Roy suddenly wondered how long the Emperor had been standing outside the sitting room, listening to the conversation within, concealed by the curtain just as Roy had been earlier.

And of course Edward, Captain Clueless himself, was completely oblivious to the tacit exchange going on between his two companions.

Roy knew that these two young men had spent months together, living rough in the wilds of Amestris before the Promised Day. They had formed a bond, despite Ling’s possession by the personification of Father’s Greed. And Edward had more recently spent two years in his Xingese friend’s Imperial Court. Had their friendship developed into something more, or was there a one sided attraction on Ling’s part? Either way, until Roy knew more, Edward was sadly out of bounds. There was no way that the Führer of Amestris, despite his reputation, would interfere with an established relationship.

But how disappointing, that just as Roy became conscious of how rewarding the amorous pursuit of his former subordinate might become, that he should also discover it might be too late to act on that realization.

Narrowed eyes still on Mustang, the Emperor’s voice held nothing but cheerful camaraderie. “I would love to stay and chat, Mr. Führer President, but I came in search of my interpreter for a reason. It seems that the Drachmann Ambassador’s nephew and one of your Ambassador’s aides have run afoul of Princess Mei’s hair trigger reflexes.”

Edward’s expression suddenly became guarded as he slouched farther down into his chair, slightly hunching his shoulders. The two heads of state pretended not to notice.

“Oh?” Roy said, voice mild. “No serious injuries I hope?”

“None. Just some minor scrapes and bruises,” Ling informed him. “Apparently the young men were interested in dancing with two of the Princess’ lady attendants, but when they approached, Mei Chang’s pet and constant companion, Xiao Mei, took exception to their proximity to the Princess and gave the Amestrian youth a nip on his . . . well, let’s just say that he was bitten.”

“Lousy little mutant,” Ed muttered under his breath.

Ling didn’t bother to spare him a glance. “Of course the young man let out a yell, which startled Princess Mei, and by the time it was all over both young men were flat on their backs.”

“Please accept my apologies for my countryman’s indiscretion,” the Führer said, looking pointedly in Edward’s direction.

Ling held up a placating hand. “Oh, the young men gave no offence,” the Emperor said. “Both of them were perfectly respectful. Someone had even taken the time to teach them how to formally and politely ask the two ladies to dance in the proper Xingese dialect.” The Xingese monarch turned his attention to his interpreter. “So my friend, if you will please accompany me, the Drachmann Ambassador would like to know what is going on with regard to his nephew’s split lip and bruised
ego. It appears that his own interpreter is far too drunk to understand what’s going on in his own language, let alone somebody else’s.”

Edward levered himself up out of his chair and directed a measuring glance at his former commander. “Well, it looks like we’ll have to put our joint research venture on hold,” he said with a wry smile.

Roy nodded with a frown as he rose as well. “Perhaps I should join you,” he directed the suggestion to Ling. “An Amestrian is also involved in this incident.”

“Sure, give Collins a heart attack,” Ed said with a snort. “It would be the ideal end to his perfect evening. First he nearly tramples his hero who just so happens to be the leader of his country; next he gets bitten by a nasty little Xingan skunk; and then he gets his ass handed to him by a tiny bean girl. You showing up to witness it would be the final kick to his nuts. Don’t do him any favours Mustang.”

“Your Ambassador has the situation well in hand, Excellency,” a grinning Ling reassured the Führer, swinging his slippered feet to the floor and rising gracefully from his armchair. “I’m sure your esteemed presence will not be required for such a minor matter. And so, if you will excuse us?”

Taking Edward’s arm, the Xingan steered his interpreter from the room without another word.

The Führer stood in the small sitting room for some minutes after the two younger men had gone, half tempted to follow. It wasn’t that he thought it necessary to get involved with this incident. The Ambassador he had appointed was more than capable of handling such an inconsequential matter. No, when examining his disquiet, Roy realized it had more to do with how his exchange with Edward had been cut short. He was more than just a little let down with how his evening had turned out. It had been a long time since Roy had been tempted to chance an intimate encounter with anyone, but even so, he was surprised at the depth of his disappointment that Edward was likely off limits.

But was Ed really off the market? The former Fullmetal Alchemist had most certainly been interested in his former commander’s advances. And unless the young man’s nature had changed drastically over the last few years, he wasn’t the type to betray a trust, let alone one so intimate. Still, Ling Yao had definitely been warning Roy off in no uncertain terms, and the Führer of Amestris couldn’t afford to go poaching in another Head of State’s territory. Best to just let it go.

With a sigh, Roy swept aside the drape and stepped out into the main hall. Draining the champagne from his coupe, the dark haired man located his bodyguard a few feet away, Breda’s sharp grey eyes regarding him curiously. It was still rather early, but for Roy the life had gone out of this party. It was time for the Amestrian Führer President to make his apologies, say his goodbyes, graciously tender his thanks to this evening’s host, and head for home. Riza at least would be happy to have him tucked safely back under her wing. A phone call to Alphonse would also be in order, to inform him of his brother’s whereabouts and plans for a visit to Resembool in the near future.

And then, to add insult to injury, Roy suddenly realized that Edward had managed to distract him from his impromptu interrogation.

Chalk one up for the shrimp.
Dear Führer Mustang,

Thank you so much for the phone call to let us know that you had run into Edward in Aerugo, and that he was soon to be making his way to Resembool. Typically, he simply showed up on our doorstep last week and yours was the only warning we had.

We were all very happy to see him. Granny gave him some grief about not keeping in touch, remarking on his similarity to our father in that regard, which shamed Edward into grudging apologies and promises to stay in touch as much as possible from now on. Mollified, Granny proceeded to cook up the biggest pot of stew I’ve ever seen, a feast we all enjoyed.

Winry was expecting Ed’s automail to be in rough shape, and was fully prepared to let Ed have it (verbally of course – she doesn’t sling wrenches any more) about his lack of appreciation for her workmanship. She was pleasantly surprised when that wasn’t necessary. All the automail needed was a thorough tune up and some adjustments for a slight height increase, which incidentally put a rather big smile on Brother’s face. As a homecoming gift, my lovely wife is working on an upgraded leg for him. She is putting all the experience gained from working in the pressure cooker commonly known as Rush Valley to good use. The new leg will be much lighter and more responsive, but just as strong as his current model. She has also hinted to me that it will have a few special modifications, but refuses to give me any details.

It’s been so long since Ed has visited that in effect, he was meeting his niece and nephew for the first time. Maes was three years old the last time Brother was here and barely remembered the uncle he hears so much about. At first he was a bit shy, but in no time at all the two of them were spending a lot of quality time together, mock sparring in the front yard, eating everything in sight, and wandering the fields. They are very much alike, in appearance and personality, though Maes has much better control of his temper than Ed ever did at his age. They have bonded so completely that I know Maes will sorely miss his Uncle Ed when he leaves, though this time he won’t be likely to forget him.

Sara was just over a year old when Ed was here last, and didn’t remember Brother at all. She made up for lost time however, getting to know him by asking all kinds of embarrassing questions that Ed did his best to answer, honestly and with a straight face. It wasn’t long before she was showing him her prized collection of dolls complete with automail attachments, and the miniature tools she uses to make them. She also helped Winry tune and adjust Ed’s automail leg, her face such a mirror image of Winry’s in concentration that it was hard not to laugh. Now she often rides on Ed’s shoulders when he and Maes go out to range around the countryside amid early spring blossoms, and spends much of the evening snuggled comfortably in his lap, listening to the stories he tells about his travels.

As for me, I can’t begin to tell you how happy I am to have my brother back. While he was out of touch I felt as if a piece of me had been jarred out of place, a nagging sensation that something wasn’t quite right. Your phone call banished that feeling instantly. Simply knowing that Brother was safe and sound made a world of difference. Now, having him home, watching him interact with Maes and Sara, listening to him argue with Winry and trade good-natured insults with Pinako, being able to bounce my thoughts and alchemic theories off him to gain his inventive and unconventional perspective - all these things give me a sense of peace and wellbeing I have not felt in a long while.

I know Brother will be moving on sometime in the near future. He has only been here for a week, but already I can see the signs of his restlessness. I have asked him what his plans are, but his answers are vague, and I realize that he doesn’t know where he will go next, or what he will do.
when he gets there. He doesn’t appear to be unhappy; he just lacks a sense of purpose.

Back when we were searching for the Stone, my centre of gravity was my brother, just as I was his. We kept each other balanced, and that was how we were able to endure the seemingly insurmountable challenges that we faced. I still feel that connection to him, but I’m sorry to say that he appears to have distanced himself from me and is facing the challenge of finding his own special place in the world all on his own. I suspect that he believes I am better off without him in my life, which saddens me. Our lives have taken very different courses. I have everything I ever wanted, living quietly, happily, with Winry, Granny, and the kids, here in Resembool. I know that this way of life would never suit my brother, but I wish he would at least let me be there for him until he regains his sense of direction.

Well. This letter was supposed to be a short but heartfelt thank you for some long awaited news about my brother. It seems to have become a ramble about the sorry state of my relationship with him. I hope you don’t mind; after the terrible times we all survived together, and the challenges you now face leading Amestris into peace and prosperity, my concerns must seem quite trivial. The truth is that I find it easy to write to you about these things. You have been an important part of our lives for a very long time, a constant in the chaos, always there to support us through good times and bad, and I trust that you always will be.

I am enclosing a few pictures of the family that I hope you will share with all our friends. The one of Maes, Sara, Granny, and Edward, tangled up asleep on the couch, is a personal favourite. Until next time, we all send our love and best wishes your way.

Yours sincerely,
Alphonse Elric.
One month after his chance meeting with Edward in Nicaia Meditarania, the Führer President of Amestris found himself waiting impatiently for the Emperor of Xing to arrive at the Presidential Manor for an informal and very private summit.

Negotiations with the Xingese delegation were complete, the details of a formal trade agreement with Xing hammered out by Trade Ministers and their advisors to both nations’ satisfaction. The documents were prepared, awaiting the signatures to be publicly inscribed early the next morning on the terraced landing in front of Central Military Headquarters with much fanfare. The official accord between Amestris and Xing was a done deal, so this meeting had nothing to do with matters of state, though the Führer President had not said as much when he extended his invitation. Roy’s true intention was to speak privately with Ling Yao about a personal matter. Given the sharply perceptive look he had received upon extending it, the Führer had been somewhat surprised when the Xingese monarch had enthusiastically accepted the invitation to this clandestine dinner date in Roy’s home. Apparently a free meal was still quite the effective enticement for the Xingese Royal.

The Führer had planned the evening very carefully. Due to the many official functions the State’s Imperial guest was pleased to attend, Roy’s staff had already researched the Emperor’s preferences with regard to providing appropriate menus, and Roy made use of that intel for this informal meeting as well. To reinforce the relaxed atmosphere he wanted to cultivate, the Führer had chosen to dress casually, forgoing his uniform for a simple grey dinner jacket over a white dress shirt, sans tie, and grey slacks. As well, instead of entertaining Yao in the manor’s State appointed dining room, Roy chose instead to receive him in the more intimate setting of his private apartment. Everything was in place.

Everything except for his guest.

Roy stopped his restless pacing of the library and returned to the windows overlooking the circular driveway. The crushed white stone was still vacant, and a quick glance down the long, tree lined drive informed Roy that the main gate was still closed. Damn. His advisors, Riza Hawkeye among them, had insisted that the Presidential estate would be best situated outside of the city, mainly for reasons of security. Roy had eventually given in to their arguments, but it was times like these when he wished he hadn’t given up the convenience of closer proximity to the capital.

As mansions go, the Führer’s abode tended toward the ascetic. Set on twenty acres of unsullied woodlands some thirty kilometres east of Central, no extravagant statuary or gardens graced the neatly kept grounds. The house itself was quite stately, in keeping with a sense of style handed down through generations of family tradition. A large three story main building of stern grey limestone soothed by ancient Xerxesian ivy housed the State appointed areas, ornate wrought iron window railings the only concession to style. A single two story wing of sprawling neoclassical design, accessed by a wide vestibule off the main entrance hall, enclosed the five lavishly appointed guest suites, Roy’s own private living space, the kitchen and other facilities, and the staff quarters.

Built during the late 1700s as a country home away from home by the Armstrong family, the manor conveyed an atmosphere of duty and tradition. Though most of the State’s political and diplomatic affairs were conducted through Central Headquarters in the city, Roy had had much of the mansion remodeled to allow him to perform some of the more social functions of his office from the security of the manor when occasion called for a venue more elegant than the austere and imposing centre of
military operations. The renovated State rooms consisted of the Diplomatic Reception Room, the State Dining Room, the Ballroom, and the Press Briefing Room, all joined by a large, oval entrance hall on the main floor. A grand staircase swept up to a wide central hall on the second level accessing the Cabinet Room, the Emergency Operations room, five meeting rooms of various sizes, two sitting rooms, and Roy’s private offices. The third floor was fully occupied by the library. Left to a decorator under strict orders to avoid the ostentatious, the interior furnishings were elegantly appointed period pieces complementing the manor’s architecture.

Turning from the window, the Führer glanced at the library’s mantle clock to note that his guest likely would not arrive for at least another twenty minutes. Time enough for Roy to tame his impatience and organize his thoughts.

Which had turned to Edward more often than Roy was comfortable with over the last month, and was the real reason for this private meeting, not with the Emperor of the East, but with Ling Yao. Between Alphonse’ letter and Roy’s disappointment with the way his previous meeting with Edward had been interrupted, the Führer was reluctant to simply let the matter drop. He wanted answers, and where better to get them than from the man who had put a very effective stop to Roy’s play for his former subordinate in the first place? The more he re-examined their exchange in that quiet alcove, the more convinced he was that Edward’s Xingese employer had been determinedly warning Roy off. The question though, was why? Ed had certainly been interested in Roy’s advances, meeting them head on, which meant he could not be in a relationship with Yao - or anyone else for that matter. Edward just wasn’t the type to betray that kind of trust.

There were, however, a number of other reasons why the Xingese man might wish to dissuade Roy from pursuing his former subordinate.

One possible explanation was purely professional. Perhaps Yao thought that if Roy began an intimate relationship with Edward, the Emperor stood to lose a valuable employee to the competition. Roy did not speak Drachim himself, but it seemed to him that Edward spoke the language with native fluency. After spending two years immersed in Xingan culture, it was likely that the former alchemist spoke Xingese just as well. Edward soaked up knowledge like a sponge, and it appeared that learning languages was another practical talent of which the young man could boast. Roy wondered how many other tongues he might have mastered.

Naturally the Führer of Amestris had trusted and capable interpreters in his employ as well. Most of them were bilingual, some trilingual, and one talented linguist was fluent in four languages. All were privy to some of the State’s most delicate diplomatic secrets, and Roy would be reluctant to lose a single one. Still, should any of them decide to leave his office for greener pastures, he would certainly try his best to convince them to stay, but failing that, would bid them farewell and graciously wish them good luck. Roy trusted his people implicitly, and would never stand in another’s way or hesitate to support them in their efforts to reach personal goals, just as he had been supported in reaching his own. If it turned out that something along these lines was the Xingan Emperor’s main objection to Roy’s romantic pursuit of Edward, Roy would reassure the man by reminding him that Edward was an honorable individual, completely and utterly trustworthy, and Xing’s secrets would always be safe with him. After all, Edward was also Ling Yao’s friend.

Which was another possible reason for Yao’s opposition to Roy’s pursuit of Edward: simple friendship. The Flame Alchemist had a reputation, though mostly invented, as a man interested in only the basest of liaisons. Perhaps Yao wanted to protect his friend from someone he assumed was a sexual predator. If that was the case, Roy would do his best to assure the young Emperor that he had never unduly pressured a partner who seemed in the least apprehensive about what Roy was offering, and had no intention of starting now. He had always preferred confident partners who could
give as good as they got. Deflowering blushing virgins or coercing the reticent and vulnerable to his bed, only to leave them feeling as if they had been ill used, was definitely not Roy’s style. As far as he was concerned, one night stand or long term, good sex didn’t include hard feelings.

Yet another reason why the Xingan man might have warned Roy off, and the most likely possibility in Roy’s estimation, was that Yao had amorous intentions of his own concerning the young ex-alchemist. Edward was after all a very attractive young man, and friendship was an excellent foundation for a deeper relationship. However, since Yao had failed to make any progress in that regard during the two years Ed had spent in Xing, it was fairly safe to say that Edward had no interest in moving his friendship with the Emperor in that direction. If the Xingese man did indeed hope for an affair of his own with Edward, Roy would point out the Emperor’s folly as diplomatically as possible, and deem the field clear to make a move on the blond man himself.

There were other possible reasons for Yao’s interference of course, but Roy was extremely good at counter arguing his position from unanticipated quarters, particularly when the stakes were high. And the more he thought about it, the more the idea of pursuing Edward intrigued him as a high stakes game worth playing. Still, until he was sure there would be no complications that could cause problems for the State, the Führer would not act on his attraction to the former Fullmetal Alchemist. Roy sincerely hoped that this informal dinner would prove his concerns unfounded.

Because the extent to which he just wanted this continued to astonish him.

The soft click of the library’s door alerted Roy to the unobtrusive arrival of the manor’s butler. Like all of Roy’s house staff, Winston Smith had been hired by Riza Hawkeye after passing a rigorous background check and professional screening. In his late fifties, the portly, gray haired gentleman had been attached to one of Amestris’ most prestigious houses for many years. With the Bradley regime’s collapse and the resulting economic instability, however, the family had fallen on hard times, forcing Smith’s reluctant dismissal. Reserved and unobtrusive, cordial but not familiar, polished and precise in the execution of his duties, and almost eerily anticipative of the needs of his employer, the man was the epitome of professional decorum. Roy could not have asked for a better manservant to oversee his household staff.

“I have received word that your guest will be on the grounds in approximately ten minutes, Sir,” the older man said. “Will you receive him in the foyer, or would you prefer that I escort him to your rooms when he arrives?”

“I’ll receive him in my rooms, thank you Winston,” Roy said.

“Very good, Sir.” With a short bow, the manservant moved to the stairway, then waited for Roy to precede him.

They parted ways in the grand entryway, Winston to await Ling Yao’s arrival, and Roy to his suite. Now that his meeting was at hand, the Führer was amused to discover a nervous tingle in his chest. Taking a deep calming breath, he quickly mounted the stairs in the residential annex. His rooms were situated directly at the top; a single honor guard in full dress uniform on duty for this evening’s conference stood at attention by the door. With a smart salute, the soldier opened the door for his commander, then snapped back to attention. Roy returned the salute and entered, closing the door behind him to lean back against it, shaking his head at his edginess. Casting his eyes about the living room, he allowed the familiarity of the space to soothe him.

The Führer made his home in the largest upper story suite of the east wing. Consisting of a living room, a small dining room, a study, and a large bedroom, Roy’s private space was almost plain compared to the manor’s more public quarters. Polished cherry panels set an intimate tone, the furnishings spare and subdued, but comfortably homey, and Roy did feel very much at home here in
this small corner of the manse. The life of a soldier had left him with few large possessions, and waving off the services of the decorator, he had simply moved in the small number of furnishings he owned and left it at that, wanting the comfort of familiar belongings, but more concerned with matters of State than his accommodations. His paternal aunt and adoptive mother, Chris Mustang, had snorted her opinion of her nephew’s decorating skills the first time she had come to visit, then promptly sent over a few of Roy’s sisters to ‘cozy it up’. They had. With thick pile rugs of deep maroon and dark gold; with comfortable furnishings in autumn tones of ochre and burnt umber splashed with rich burgundy; with subtle accents of cream, ash, and silver; and with Roy’s treasured keepsakes of times past sprinkled throughout.

This evening a low burning fire warmed the living room, lighting it with flickering gold. The lamp by his favorite armchair cast a balanced glow, adding to the ambient light. The scent of polished wood and the appetizing aroma of the dinner awaiting him in the dining room completed the welcoming atmosphere. Roy moved into the comfortable surroundings and wondered what the Emperor of Xing would think of this modest space in contrast to the opulent decor of the more public areas of the manor.

Roy didn’t have long to contemplate his guest’s reaction. A quiet knock, and Winston opened the door to announce that Roy’s royal visitor had arrived. Ling Yao entered with a benign smile, followed by his most trusted protector, Lan Fan, her eyes swiftly surveying the room from behind her white and scarlet mask. Roy’s Amestrian guard entered as well, moving to stand at ease behind Roy’s shoulder. The Xingese warrior stationed herself in a like manner behind her master.

“Excellency. Welcome to my home.” The Führer inclined his head with a smile. “In the interest of good will, might I suggest that your guardian make a security sweep of my quarters to put her mind at ease?”

“Thank you, Führer Mustang,” the Emperor responded. “I’m sure my devoted retainer will appreciate the gesture. But first . . .” Yao snapped his fingers, and seemingly from thin air, Lan Fan produced a pair of matching porcelain decanters, glazed white and decorated with an intricate pattern of delicate blue blossoms. The Emperor took one and presented it to the Führer. “Shaoxing wine,” he explained as Roy accepted the gift. “This vintage is of particularly high quality, aged fifty years. It has a distinctive rosy tint, imparted by the red yeast rice from which it is distilled.”

“Thank you, Highness.” Roy smiled as he conveyed the exquisitely crafted bottles to Winston. “Do you recommend it as a compliment to our dinner, or for afterward?”

“I will leave that up to you. It is my hope that you will save it, to sample at your leisure,” the Xingese man said with a wave of his hand, eyes alight with secret amusement. “And now, with your permission, my trusted protector will inspect your lovely home.”

“Of course,” Roy said.

At Ling Yao’s nod, the Xingese Emperor’s bodyguard, accompanied by her Amestrian counterpart, left her charge to walk through the Führer’s rooms. The pair quickly returned, then with a deep formal bow and a sharp salute to their respective leaders, the two guards retreated to the hall to take up positions on opposite sides of the doorway. Winston closed the door behind them and slipped unobtrusively into the apartment proper to ready the dining room.

The Emperor of Xing cast his eyes about Roy’s personal space, appearing somewhat incongruous. The Xingan man was exotically elegant in a black silk changshan embroidered with a small, blood red dragon coiled just above his heart. His face displayed frank, innocent curiosity, and Roy was reminded once again that the supreme leader of the Xingese Empire was actually a year younger than his former, and youngest, subordinate. Yao moved to the mantelpiece to examine his host’s
collection of framed photographs. Selecting one that caught his eye, he studied it with a fond smile, then held it up.

Taken in Rush Valley, the picture featured Edward holding his brother’s two year old son up for the camera, uncle and nephew sporting identical, maniacal grins. Winry stood beside them, happily cradling her infant daughter in her arms. Alphonse stood centered behind his wife and his brother, looking very pleased with himself. Mei Chang stood at Ed’s right shoulder, gazing at Alphonse with an adoring smile. Alphonse had sent Roy the picture not long after Sara was born.

“Edward carries this with him,” Ling said with an easy smile. “This is one of the few photos I have seen of Edward with his family. His extended travels tend to keep him out of the picture.”

The double entendre was not lost on the Führer, but he chose to let that matter slide for the moment. Roy caught the downward tilt Yao’s smile had momentarily taken, and realized that the young man might be a source of reliable information about Edward’s self imposed estrangement from his family. He hastily included strategies to glean what information he could from his younger guest that evening as well.

“Alphonse and I correspond regularly,” Roy confided. “He has become quite the photographer since his children were born, and likes to share his pictures with anyone he deems worthy,” His smile became rueful. “He reminds me a bit of an old friend of mine, though Alphonse isn’t quite as aggressive.”

“You’d be surprised at just how aggressive Alphonse can be.” Yao placed the picture back on the mantle, giving it a small pat. “I received a letter along with a rather large packet of photos last week, delivered directly to the Embassy. Alphonse’ way of making up for lost opportunities I suppose.”

Again, Roy caught the suggestion of a dual meaning in the Emperors words. Was it unintentional, or was the Xingan man dropping hints by design, knowing that Roy would surely pick them up? Perhaps this evening wouldn’t be the frustrating game of cat and mouse Roy had initially anticipated.

Winston’s quietly cleared throat preceded his announcement that dinner was served, and Roy led his guest into the dining room. As Roy did most of his official entertaining in the State designated portion of the Manor, this room in his private quarters was relatively modest, though not inelegant.
Covered serving dishes surrounded the candelabrum on the sideboard, candlelight glittering on the crystal and silver table settings. The manservant waited by the buffet as the two men took their seats, then approached to serve the wine, displaying the vintage for Roy’s approval. Yao eyed the covered china on the sideboard cabinet with hungry anticipation.

As Winston moved unobtrusively about the table, Roy observed his guest. The younger man seemed quite content to wait for Roy to explain why he had invited him into his home, though Roy suspected the Xingan already had a very good idea as to the reason. His next words proved Roy was correct in his assumption.

“Edward was quite upset with me for putting a stop to your . . . conversation the other day,” Yao said, examining the ginger carrot soup Winston had neatly ladled into his bowl before taking a taste. He sighed with satisfaction. “Very nice,” he purred.

“I’ll be sure to pass on your appreciation to our chef,” Roy said, taking a sip of his wine. “To be honest, I was rather annoyed with your interruption as well, but I did understand.” With a lifted eyebrow, Roy made his intentions more clear. “Business must come before pleasure, your Eminence.”

Yao waved a dismissive hand at the honorific. “After all the trials we have gone through together to our mutual benefit, I think we can drop the formalities, at least here in the security of your home.” The young man reached across the table. “Please. My name is Ling.”

Roy clasped the offered hand. “If you will call me Roy, it would be my pleasure,” he replied.

“Of course.” Ling took another taste of his soup, then lifted his wine glass, peering through it into the candlelight. “And I must say that you have exceptional taste, Roy,” he said with a deceptively innocent grin, his eyes turning to examine his host with sharp intelligence. “Edward would indeed be an excellent . . . acquisition.”

The flair of anger he felt at the younger man’s words surprised Roy to the extent that he was unable to immediately disguise it. Ling noticed it instantly, and for the first time that evening, the Xingan seemed to relax.

“Acquisition? That’s an unusual way to describe a trusted friend,” Roy observed, the sting of anger under control. He still couldn’t resist adding, “I suppose Xing’s Son of Heaven is above such mundane things as simple friendship with lesser mortals.”

“Perhaps,” Ling allowed. “The question is, are Amestrian Führers above such things as well?”

Roy said nothing, turning his attention to his soup under Ling’s penetrating gaze. His guest was deliberately pushing his buttons with surprising accuracy, and the Amestrian wasn’t used to being so easily played.

When it became clear that Roy would not respond, Ling sighed.

“Let me tell you what this Son of Heaven has discovered,” he said quietly. “It is something I thought I understood before I ascended the Dragon Throne, but the reality almost overwhelmed me at first. I have since come to terms with it.”

Roy laid aside his spoon and politely gave Ling his attention.

“To be king requires the will of the people. They grant to me their loyalty, and I return it in kind. It is my duty to serve them and protect them. They must always come first. My own wants and desires are of secondary importance.” Ling noted Roy’s nod of understanding and continued. “I have
acknowledged this obligation from a very early age. When I was younger, the wellbeing of my clan was my priority, and I determined that the only way to ensure their safety was to become Emperor. When I achieved that goal, I declared all the people of Xing to be my clansmen, and their welfare my main concern. I have devoted everything of myself to my people, and have no regrets.”

“It seemed that there are a great many similarities between your position and my own,” the Führer stated pensively.

“There are,” Ling agreed. “But there is one duty that is expected of me that is not a requirement of your station. Your successor will find his or her way to leadership much the same way as you have done. I must provide an heir of my own blood, another link in the royal chain that stretches into eternity.”

Roy slowly nodded, beginning to understand.

“I have taken a princess consort from each of the fifty noble houses, except for my own of course,” Ling continued. “In addition, I have a number of concubines from the lesser houses. At the moment, I have sixteen sons and twelve daughters. They all live with their mothers on the estates of their respective clans, visiting on occasion. These visits are very formal events, full of ceremony and ritual, ensuring that the honor of everyone involved is duly acknowledged. Unfortunately, it also ensures that I barely know my wives and children. I will not know the joys of a loving spouse, or of true fatherhood, or of close family.”

As harsh as his assessment might be, Roy knew that under the circumstances this was the only viable arrangement under which a hereditary monarchy could survive the centuries. One inept ruler, a single weak link in the ancestral chain, would shake the people’s loyalty and jeopardise the Imperial family’s power structure, resulting in the possible downfall of their dynasty. Consequently, Ling’s children would grow up with the understanding that they had been born into a competition for their father’s power. They would struggle to outdistance, outshine, and outdo each other in their pursuit of the Dragon Throne, just like their father and his siblings before them. And it would one day be the Emperor’s duty to select as his successor the person most suited to rule in the best interests of his people, a natural selection of the fittest candidate for the position. Personal feelings and emotional attachments would be a liability, clouding objectivity with sentiment.

“It is indeed lonely at the top,” Roy said in sympathy. “I had long since given up hope of finding someone with whom I might share the unofficial portion of my life, such as it is. It was a decision I reached well before I fought my way to the Führership.”

“‘Had’?” Ling raised an eyebrow. “Not ‘have’?”

Keeping his face neutral, Roy gave himself a mentally slap. What was wrong with him tonight? He was off his game, letting intimate clues slip. Covering his discomfort behind a sip of wine, he regained his composure. “Your command of the Amestrian language is impressive, Highness, to note such a minor grammatical . . . distinction.”

“Please. Ling.” the Emperor corrected. “And my Amestrian has improved over the last two years through regular practice. I can also swear effectively and quite colourfully, thanks to my most excellent teacher, though I have too few occasions to use such an unconventional skill.”

It was easy for Roy to guess who that teacher might be. “That kind of ability can only be practiced among close friends,” he granted. “It requires a great deal of honesty and conviction to speak so frankly.”

“Indeed. I have many faithful and trustworthy advisors, but there is actually only one person that I
can count on to tell me very directly that I am being an asshole when he sincerely believes that I am being an asshole.” Ling grinned an honest grin. “As someone who spends most of his time with politicians and diplomats, I’m sure I don’t have to tell you how refreshing that can be. And how important.”

Roy knew the truth of Ling’s statement very well. It was one of the reasons why even now, after eight long years, he still missed Maes Hughes terribly, and probably always would. His old friend had been the only person Roy knew who could knock him off an inappropriate pedestal and back down to earth when necessary, and just as easily boost Roy up when he found himself foundering in self doubt.

Ling was not finished. “I must admit that I miss the days of my youth,” he said with a smile, and Roy had to smile himself, as from his point of view his dinner guest’s youthful days were far from over. “I often reminisce about that bold and daring trek I made to a distant land, desperately following the whispers of a myth that might help me reach my goal. And find it I did, but I found many other priceless treasures as well, quite by accident. Wisdom from experience. Humility from hubris. And the greatest treasure: friendship. For a king, true friendship is rare and priceless, a much richer gift than the fealty owed me by right. I honor that gift by returning it in kind.”

“I mean him no harm,” Roy stated, his eyes never leaving Ling’s as the younger man took a moment to search for the truth within them. The younger man frowned, and Roy decided right then to place his cards on the table. “I told you that Alphonse writes to me regularly. He is worried about his brother.”

Ling’s surprise was obvious. “He told you this?”

“Not in so many words,” Roy admitted. “We have been casually corresponding regularly over the years. Edward had been out of contact with his family for a year before Alphonse asked for my help to find him. When I ran into Ed in Aerugo, I took the opportunity to fish for information. I wanted to find out why Edward had abandoned his family, and perhaps find some grounds for reconciliation. The . . . intimate turn our conversation took was completely unexpected.”

Ling tapped a long finger to his chin thoughtfully. “And were your advances just part of your fishing expedition?”

“Not exactly.” Roy grimaced. “The brat threw me off my game when he met those advances head on. I have known Edward since he was eleven years old. Believe me when I tell you that I had never contemplated any kind of relationship with him before, beyond the professional.”

“And now?”

Roy leaned forward, tenting his fingers under his chin. “And now, I must admit that much like Xing’s Son of Heaven, this Amestrian Führer also finds honest friendships rare and valuable. And since I am not required to provide a suitable heir for my people, I am free to discover if a friendship can become something even more rewarding.”

Winston stepped over to the table to refill both men’s wine glasses. Ling pushed his soup bowl aside and leaned back, expression unreadable. The younger man cast his eyes around the modest dining area, pausing here and there on the framed photographs hung about the room. He lingered longest on Riza and Miles’ wedding photo, the couple beaming radiantly. Roy had never seen Riza as happy as she had been that day. After his own failed attempt at romance with Hawkeye, Roy was profoundly grateful that his friendship with the blonde sharpshooter had not been damaged. He had been deeply honored when she’d asked him to act in her father’s place, and it had been his genuine pleasure to give the bride away to her ecstatic groom that day.
“Sometimes friendship is all one can hope for,” Ling’s quiet words intruded on the Führer’s thoughts.

“I mean him no harm,” Roy gently stated again.

“I’m sure Princess Mei believed that as well when it came to her expectations concerning Alphonse,” the Xingese man said. “But even when she knew of his enduring love for Winry, she refused to give up her romantic fantasy and move on. She made a number of trips to Amestris in pursuit of her dream, ignoring her duty to her clan and their marital plans for her. Even after Alphonse finally married his childhood sweetheart, Mei refused to let go of her infatuation, unable to see that it wasn’t really Alphonse she was in love with, but her ideal of Alphonse. She was still very young.” Ling grinned wryly. “I don’t know exactly what happened, but she finally returned to Xing two years ago, full of anger and malice. As I recall, she and Edward arrived in my homeland at the same time, though I doubt they traveled together.”

Roy turned this information over in his mind for a moment before he couldn’t resist asking, “Does this have anything to do with why Edward fell out of touch with his family?”

Ling pursed his lips and frowned. “I know why he left.” Roy waited. “But what kind of friend would I be if I revealed to another the things my friend told me in confidence?” Now it was Roy’s turn to frown. “Perhaps, if your own friendship with Edward progresses, he will tell you himself,” Ling concluded. The younger man’s set gaze told Roy that he would say no more on this matter.

The Führer sighed and leaned back in his chair. He should have known that it would not be easy to get to the bottom of this mystery. Nothing concerning Edward Elric ever moved effortlessly to a simple conclusion. But Ling was right. Roy had to get his answers directly from Ed, particularly if he planned an amorous pursuit of his former subordinate. If a relationship was in the offing, Roy did not want to taint it with deception before it even got started. Roy had to earn Edward’s trust.

Roy’s attentive manservant unobtrusively removed the now cooled and largely untouched soup bowls as the two heads of state contemplated each other across the dining table. Surprisingly, Roy found the Xingese man a genial dinner companion. The young man smiled, as if sensing Roy’s thoughts.

“So tell me, Roy, was it my blessings you were after when you invited me to dinner this evening?” he asked, a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

“Yes,” Roy stated outright, surprising the younger man. “I would like to see more of Edward, but I don’t want that to cause problems between you and I. As heads of our respective states . . .”

Ling snorted a laugh. “I’m Edward’s friend, not his keeper. He is free to do as he pleases, and if it pleases him to do you, then so be it.”

This complete about face dropped Roy’s jaw, though he did his best to conceal it.

He failed miserably. Ling smirked at the older man’s surprise and waved a casual hand. “You have allayed all my fears, Roy, and I trust Edward to look after himself.”

“I only hope that Alphonse will come to trust his brother as easily as you do,” Roy said dryly. “While I do wonder what has caused such a rift between them, I know that Edward can always be depended on to withstand whatever life may throw at him.”

“Oh, but Alphonse does trust his brother,” Ling quietly insisted. “In many things, his faith in his brother is complete. He trusts his brother’s instincts. He trusts his brother’s intelligence. He trusts his
brother to always do what he believes is right, even if it is difficult, because he trusts his brother’s courage. He would trust his brother with his life. Indeed, he has, many times. But there is one thing he does not trust his brother to do. He does not trust Edward to do what Edward needs to do for himself.” The Xingese man leaned forward, thoughtfully examining Roy’s carefully expressionless face. “For some reason, Alphonse has involved you, Führer Mustang. If I were you, I would be asking myself why. Because there are two more things that I know with great certainty about Alphonse Elric. He loves his brother deeply. And he is a man of great intelligence.”

Roy sat quietly for a few moments, taking in what Ling had so earnestly told him. Finally, with just the hint of a smile, he said, “So I take it you would make no objection if I were to offer Edward a position on my staff?”

“Oh, are you in the market for the services of a multilingual interpreter?” Yao asked, taking a sip of his wine and offering a smile of his own.

“As it happens, yes, I am,” Roy allowed over his own wineglass.

“Edward does come highly recommended, though I will be very sorry to lose him. I should tell you that he often does double duty as a bodyguard as well. Most people tend to underestimate his abilities due to his youth and stature. To their regret.”

“Some things never change,” Roy murmured with a small smile as Winston began to serve the main course.

Chapter End Notes

*Picture from the closing credits of Fullmetal Alchemist Brotherhood, Episode 64 (final).
Dear Führer Mustang,

Thank you for the Cretian wine Mei Chang was pleased to deliver when she came to visit. We enjoyed it over a lovely dinner of Arni me Patates, prepared in the traditional manner by Mei herself. It was wonderful to see her again. The last time she visited we parted ways with hard words and hurt feelings on both sides, and I’m very happy to say that we have managed to put that behind us. I had always counted her among my dearest friends, and have missed her very much. Her clan has arranged a marriage for her to a man she deeply admires, and she told me very sincerely that she is happy, possibly for the first time in her life. This is very likely the last time she will visit Amestris, and came to Resembool to make amends for past mistakes. Her heartfelt apology was enough. We all make mistakes. I find them somehow easier to forgive when they are made in the name of love. And there I go, getting overly sentimental. I find it happens more and more as I get older.

I’m glad to hear that General Hawkeye has finally recovered from the flu she caught while in Aerugo. It must have been very difficult for her to be away from work, but I’m sure she will forgive you eventually for forcing her to take a week off. The kids and Winry were miserable with the same illness for nearly two weeks, and Granny had been avoiding us like, well, the plague. I don’t blame her. The virus was a particularly nasty strain, and at her age she finds it difficult to bounce back as quickly as she once did. I was fortunate enough not to catch it, as was Edward, and given that everyone else is back to normal I suspect we are now safe from that bug.

I’m sorry Brother was away both times you telephoned, and that he has neglected to return your calls. He has been ranging far and wide lately, visiting all our old friends, though, as promised, he has been very careful to keep in touch with us here in Resembool. Last week he went to Dublith to see Izumi and Sig Curtis. Two weeks prior he was in Liore visiting with Rose and her husband. He will be in Central next week to deliver the final draft of my latest research article to my publisher. As usual, I made a copy for you, which I have asked Edward to deliver personally while he’s in town. As for his plans after that – your guess is as good as mine. He told me that he might continue to travel with Emperor Ling, their next planned destination Creta’s capital city, but he didn’t seem too committed to the idea. Maybe you can offer some suggestions when he comes to visit. You may not realize this, but he’s always had a great deal of respect for you, and as stubborn as he can be, he at least considered your advice before rejecting it outright.

As usual, I’m enclosing a few pictures for you to enjoy. The one of Maes and Sara proudly showing off the results of their fishing expedition reminds me of a similar photo of myself and Edward when we were around their age, an eternity ago. After all we went through, I feel a great sense of peace knowing that my children can grow up without the constant threat of war – and worse - hanging over them, thanks to what we all did, and what you continue to do. I don’t believe I have ever thanked you for everything you did for Brother and me, probably because a simple thank you doesn’t seem adequate. Nevertheless, I do thank you, Führer Mustang. You made it possible for me to look forward to watching Maes and Sara grow up strong, happy, and safe here at home.

Sincerely,
Alphonse Elric.
Words and Deeds

Chapter Notes

Warning: This chapter contains explicit scenes.

The day Edward showed up at Headquarters, Roy was dealing with three separate and unrelated political crises.

First of all, on the international front, the Cretian Union had issued an official communiqué that morning criticizing Amestris’ position on Creta’s recent annexation of six townships on the Drachman side of their shared border. As much as the Führer had hated to throw a wrench into the current treaty negotiations with Amestris’ western neighbour, Roy’s office had publicly condemned the action. The disputed territory in question changed hands every few years in an ongoing tug of war between the two countries, and given the proximity to her own border, it was in Amestris’ best interests that a peaceful solution be negotiated once and for all. Like bullies posturing in the playground however, neither Drachma nor Creta were willing to admit that their usual method of ‘solving’ this chronic problem – shooting at each other – was proving ineffective in the long run.

At the risk of having the two countries set their current grievance aside in indignation and their collective gunsights on Amestris, Roy had offered his country’s services as an unbiased arbitrator in hopes that a long term solution could be found that would satisfy both parties. So far neither of the combatants had responded positively to the gesture, but a portion of Roy’s capable staff, headed by Riza Hawkeye, were calling in allies native to both countries willing to endorse Amestris’ proposal to their respective governments, and keeping the situation under close observation. It was a long shot, but Roy was falling back on a time tested political strategy to hedge his bets: crossing his fingers. After all, it couldn’t hurt.

At the same time, on the National front, someone, likely a Bradley sympathizer, had leaked sealed documents dating back to the Ishbalan conflict that cast some of Amestris’ leading citizens - all supporters of the current Führer - in a far less than heroic light. Roy had personally spent two and a half years in Ishbal helping to rebuild what he and his countrymen had come close to destroying, and restoration was ongoing, but he knew that all was not forgiven by many of the red eyed, dark skinned desert people. Occasionally old wounds would be reopened and tempers would flare, causing undue misery on both sides of the cultural divide. The graphic description of the war crimes outlined by the leaked documents guaranteed that extensive damage control would be required to maintain the tentative amity the two peoples were currently enjoying.

Roy did not condone the terrible deeds done to the Ishbalans by order of Führer King Bradley, and knew that no legitimate defense could be made for the people, himself included, that had carried out those orders. Still, he didn’t believe that publicly rehashing those horrendous deeds would ultimately do the situation any good. Quite the contrary. It would only serve to perpetuate the prejudice and hard feelings on both sides. Colonel Miles Mairuzu was in the hot seat for this crisis. His partial Ishbalan heritage, along with his intimate familiarity with both sides of the issue, made him the person most likely able to cool heated tempers and defuse the situation peacefully.

And last, but certainly not least, on the home front, Führer King Bradley’s widow had petitioned the Führer’s office early last week for permission to travel to Southern Aerugo with her son, Selim, for a
seaside holiday. The petition had been rejected out of hand, given Selim Bradley’s true nature. Now seven years old, the last surviving homunculus showed no sign of regressing back into the personification of Father’s Pride, but there was no way to be sure that he would not. The last time Roy had seen the youngster was two months ago, and the homunculus had behaved like the normal seven year old he appeared to be, aside from the hermetic symbol for gold centered on his forehead.

Not for the first time Roy pondered the significance of the alchemical icon imprinted on the child, representing the perfection of the mind, soul, and spirit. The youngster was under constant surveillance and would be for the rest of his life – however long that might be. He appeared to be aging like a normal human child, already surpassing Pride’s former apparent age, but it was anyone’s guess whether there was a limit to the homunculus’ life span. Without benefit of a Philosopher’s stone, Roy doubted that the boy was immortal, but with no frame of reference it was impossible to predict. Only time would tell. And all of that time would be spent in Amestris under close observation. The general public was still unaware of the true origin of King Bradley and his adopted son, and that wasn’t likely to change. Unfortunately, that left the current Führer’s office open to complaints of human rights violations against the former Führer’s family. Bradley’s First Lady had made a statement to the media early last evening expressing her outrage at being unable to take her son abroad for a holiday, lamenting the injustice of having their personal freedom restricted on Führer Mustang’s whim. Heymans Breda was in charge of damage control on that front, assuring the press that the safety of Führer Bradley’s family was the main reason for refusing to grant them the requested visas, cryptically hinting at unspecified threats and intrigues to provide distraction from the issue.

The Führer counted himself lucky to have such a capable staff at times like these. His old team, augmented now by fresh but just as dedicated faces, worked so efficiently that Roy had only to suggest a course of action or specify a desired outcome, and they jumped to make it happen to the best of their ability, sharing advice, suggestions, and mutual support. Watching as they laboured shoulder to shoulder, fielding phone calls, issuing orders, perusing documents, maps, and charts, all with a cheerful, optimistic camaraderie, the Führer couldn’t have been more proud of his senior staff. And as much as he would have liked to take credit for their rapid rise through the ranks, that credit had to go to General Olivier Armstrong and former Führer Grumman.

In the aftermath of Father’s Promised Day, Central Headquarters and the surrounding city had seen a disheartening level of devastation in terms of both personnel and property. Much of the military’s upper echelon had been willing allies to Führer Bradley’s plans, betraying their countrymen for the immortality Father had falsely promised them. Most had perished when that day came, either in battle against Mustang’s forces or betrayed just like the bottled Homunculus’ Xeresian allies had been four hundred years before. Those who survived had been arrested in the aftermath as dangerous subversives. Major General Olivier Armstrong had stepped in, and with the ruthless efficiency for which she was so well known, quickly confirmed their guilt and personally saw to their executions.

The freshly instated Führer Grumman then promptly made use of this power vacuum to surround himself with people he could trust, promoting most of Roy’s staff, and Roy himself, in the process. Jean Havoc, Alphonse Elric, and Sig and Izumi Curtis, along with a great number of the couple’s non-military allies, were given special civilian commendations. At the time, his spinal injury newly repaired, Havoc had been undergoing intensive physiotherapy and wanted to be sure he was ready for active duty before he rejoined the military. It had later been General Roy Mustang’s great pleasure to welcome him back into the fold, and to promote him as well. As for Edward, he had also been offered a substantial promotion. His answer had been his resignation, and the return of his State Alchemist’s watch.

Roy’s office still appeared to be a chaotic storm of activity by mid afternoon, but all three political
situations were inching their way towards a positive resolution. Into the midst of this turmoil Edward waded, booting open the door and bulldozing his way into Roy’s office with a blatant disregard for propriety, Roy’s personal secretary and the two soldiers serving as his honor guard that day chasing frantically in behind him. The blond waved his Führer a flippan greeting before engaging in some enthusiastic back slapping with Jean Havoc and Heymans Breda, then stepped back to survey the scene of bustling activity with undisguised amusement.

Roy dismissed his discomfited guard and smoothed his secretary’s ruffled feathers before turning his infamous smirk on his former subordinate.

The blond didn’t even notice. He was offering his congratulations to a beaming Riza and Miles on their recent marriage, and though the well wishes were definitely heartfelt, Roy suspected the move was also a ploy to distract Riza from taking issue with Edward’s boisterous entrance. An effective ploy. Roy’s usually reserved Security Chief’s eyes sparkled with pleasure as her stoic husband shook hands with the younger man. Kain Furey and Vato Falman joined the group gathered around Edward as well, while those new to Roy’s staff looked curiously on from the sidelines, eagerly waiting to be introduced to this young man they had heard so much about.

The Führer watched, amused, as his delighted staff both old and new interacted with Edward, and Roy took the opportunity to check out his former – and hopefully soon again to be - subordinate. He had to admit that he liked what he saw.

Illuminated by Aerugoan firelight Edward had been beautiful, and he was no less so in the mid-afternoon summer sunlight slanting in from the high arched windows. But by the dim light of a low burning fire he appeared almost ethereal, a banked ember. By bright daylight he appeared more radiant than the sun. The honey blond, amber eyed expression of his Xerxesian heritage, enhanced by the healthy glow of sun bronzed skin over toned muscles, combined with the burn of his inner vitality to give Edward a powerful presence.

Despite his characteristically flamboyant entrance, Roy also couldn’t help but notice how Edward had changed. He would never be a tall man, though Roy noted that he had grown to within an inch or two of the Führer’s own height. Edward still managed to dominate the room. But while a younger Edward had done so with a deep scowl and an aggressive demeanor, this more mature Edward did so with an engaging grin and a self-confident flair. His choice of attire had also changed. As a desperate twelve year old his preferences had tended toward clothing that all but shouted his presence. Now his tastes were more refined. A light jacket of tan suede slightly battered around the cuffs fell open over a crisp white shirt. Comfortably faded blue jeans fit just snugly enough to ensure Roy of an inspiring posterior view. The young man bounced energetically on the soles of his canvas sneakers, enjoying the company of Roy’s team as they in turn clearly enjoyed his.

“So, bastard,” Edward finally addressed him, causing one of Havoc’s younger aids to noticeably flinch. “I see you’re still up to your old tricks, slacking while your poor, hard working subordinates bust their asses to make you look good.”

“It takes considerable skill to assemble a team perfectly suited to guarantee the successful outcome of a specific task,” Roy confided. “It’s a talent I’m quite proud of, and I make use of it at every opportunity.”

Edward snorted as he tugged a thick and somewhat battered leather letter pouch from under his jacket. “If you say so,” he said skeptically as he extended the bulging shoulder bag to Roy. “Al asked me to hand deliver this to you. Enjoy.”

Roy accepted the pouch with a smile and slipped it under his arm. “Thank you Edward. I always
look forward to reading your brother’s treatises.”

“No problem,” Edward said with a grin, glancing around as Roy’s staff returned to their respective assignments. “Looks like you’re pretty busy around here, so I’ll just be on my way.”

“Are you staying in town Edward?” Roy’s words stopped the young man as he began to turn away.

“Yeah,” Edward said, raising an eyebrow. “Gracia invited me to stay over for a few days. Why?”

Roy didn’t bother to check the smirk that was growing on his face. So the blond was going to play it cool, was he? Two could play that game. “I was hoping we could meet for dinner.” Edward’s eyebrow inched a little higher. “Tonight perhaps?” The other eyebrow lifted. “To discuss your brother’s research.” Both eyebrows dropped. “I’ll send a car around to pick you up at seven o’clock.”

Edward returned the Führer’s cocky grin, a totally different reaction from the explosion Roy had half expected, and muttered a quiet, “Huh. Still a pushy bastard,” under his breath. The younger man held his former superior’s level gaze for a moment, then smiled that open, honest smile that had so beguiled Roy in a quiet Aerugonian alcove weeks ago. “Fine. Dinner it is,” he said.

Roy masked his elation with an easy smile of his own. “Excellent,” he said. “I’ll be sure to give Alphonse’ abstract my full attention later this afternoon while my most capable staff keeps an eye on the country.”

Edward’s eyes twinkled in mirth, shooting Roy a most appealing grin over his shoulder as he slipped out the door, and the Führer was amused to note the warm feeling it gave him. Resisting the urge to sigh contentedly, Roy clasped his hands behind his back and wheeled around to intercept Riza’s penetrating gaze. Smoothing on his most innocent expression did nothing to dispel it.

“Something on your mind, Brigadier General?” Roy asked, deciding to take the bull by the horns.

The Hawk’s eyes narrowed, and she moved closer to her Führer. A lesser man would have swallowed nervously, mouth suddenly dry under such intense scrutiny. Keeping her voice low to ensure their privacy, Riza locked eyes with Roy as she spoke. “Correct me if I’m mistaken, Roy,” she said, her use of his first name bringing the conversation to a personal level, “but I get the impression that you’re planning something with regard to Edward.”

Holding his air of ingenuousness, Roy sighed. “As a matter of fact, I am,” he admitted. “I plan to offer him a position on staff.”

“Oh?” Riza cocked her head to one side, continuing her careful cross-examination of her old friend. “In what capacity?”

“I thought he could get his feet wet as an interpreter, and we would see how it goes from there.”

She considered this for a moment. “A civilian position. Good strategy,” she said. “Will this come as a complete surprise to him, or have you given him prior warning?”

“It will definitely be a surprise.” Roy shook his head in mock weariness. “Wish me luck. I’ll need it.”

“Good luck,” Riza said automatically, then frowned. “Would you mind telling me what brought this on?”

The Führer contemplated his alternatives. He could tell the whole truth, a portion of the truth, or
blatantly lie. The third option would be foolish, and a complete waste of time considering how well Riza knew him. Roy hadn’t been able to successfully pull the wool over his friend’s eyes since their teen years. He decided to go for option number two – the truth, but not the whole truth. His pride wouldn’t allow him to reveal his romantic interest at this point, even to his closest friend and comrade, when he could still so easily be rejected.

“Actually, I’ve been thinking about this ever since I met Edward in Aerugo,” Roy said. “Alphonse confided to me that his brother had been out of touch for the last couple of years. Now that he’s back, Al feels that Edward is drifting aimlessly and needs to regain his sense of direction. I thought I might be of service in that area.”

Riza mulled this over for a moment, still frowning. “I think he would be an excellent addition to the team,” she said finally. “He’s brilliant of course, and he’s obviously matured quite a bit. But as an interpreter? Do you think he’d be up to keeping his head during intense diplomatic negotiations? His temper . . .”

“He has been in Ling Yao’s employ as an interpreter for the last two years,” Roy interrupted. “He has experience, and comes highly recommended.”

Riza looked unconvinced, but did not argue. She simply held his eyes for a few more moments, then sighed and, surprisingly, gave his arm a gentle squeeze. “I hope you can convince him,” she said. “Just remember that he has many talents; he might be looking for a change. Come up with a few counter proposals, and be sure to keep it honest if you want to gain his trust.” Her frown smoothed away to a small smile as she again wished him good luck, and this time Roy knew she meant it.

The Brigadier General, once again all business, moved back to her team for a status report on the Creta-Drachma situation. Roy breathed an internal sigh of relief. She obviously suspected that he was withholding something from her, but had chosen to let it slide. He wasn’t altogether sure how she would react to the news that her friend and commander planned to initiate a romantic pursuit of the eldest Elric, though if this dinner engagement went well, Roy would soon find out.

Now all he had to worry about was making plans for the evening. It had been a long time since Roy had had the opportunity to plan a date, and he found that he was keenly looking forward to it.

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As it turned out, all Roy’s evening plans for a night on the town flew out the window in the face of Riza Hawkeye’s sudden insistence that he retire directly to the Manor later that day. She vehemently denied that there was any specific reason for her assertion, but Roy knew his Security Chief very well. The coolly efficient blonde woman never did anything on impulse. On top of that, Roy noted that there were considerably more than the usual number of guards stationed around Headquarters that afternoon as she personally escorted him to his car, and a small but undoubtedly well armed motorcade escorted the Presidential roadster all the way to the estate. The tension in the car had Roy reflexively tugging at the cuffs of his gloves throughout the seemingly endless drive which the Führer endured sandwiched between Riza and Heymans Breda, their attention fixed grim-faced on the countryside rolling by. When they finally arrived safely on the grounds, Hawkeye hurried Roy inside the mansion, then set about securing the house and organizing a very strict guard rotation that included increased patrols of the entire estate. Something was definitely up.

As a public figure, Roy took his fair share of abuse from both the media and outspoken individuals.
The current administration governed as fairly, justly, and transparently as possible, but nobody could please everybody all of the time. Most of the criticism Roy accepted philosophically as part of the job, and after years of Bradley’s oppressive rule, the current Führer considered it a personal victory that the Amestrian people felt they could openly criticise his policies without fear. Sometimes however, whether from a sense of frustration, desperation, or outright derangement, threats of violence were made. Roy guessed that this was one of those times. More often than not these threats came to nothing, though they were always taken very seriously. As Chief of Security it was up to the Hawk to handle such matters, and Roy saw no reason to second guess his trusted friend. She would handle the situation as she always did – quietly and capably, the Führer’s safety her first priority – and if she chose not to burden Roy with the details, so be it. The Flame Alchemist had never been the type to micromanage his most trusted subordinates.

Shrugging off his disquiet with the ease of long experience, Roy informed Winston that he would be entertaining a dinner guest that evening in his rooms. He requested steak and potatoes, nothing too elaborate, with the details left to his manservant’s discretion. Riza had advised Roy to have some alternate job offers ready to bring to the table, so with dinner attended to, the Führer made his way to his private rooms to follow her advice.

Aside from his linguistic skills, Edward did indeed have other talents. For example, he had a proven track record as an in-depth researcher, his years searching for the Philosopher’s Stone an exemplary curriculum vitae. Ling Yao had mentioned Edward’s experience as a personal body guard, and Roy had witnessed firsthand the young blond’s martial arts prowess countless times. As Roy’s subordinate, Edward had also shown an innate flair for investigation, always managing to ferret out the truth of whatever situation he found himself in while on assignment. It went hand in hand with his unique problem solving style. He often came up with practical solutions in dire straits that would never occur to other, more seasoned veterans in the field. Throw in the fact of the young man’s genius, and factor in his public appeal as the Hero of the People, with all things considered Roy was surprised that the man hadn’t been approached by any number of private sector organizations already. It was very likely he had, and had chosen to follow his own path, free of professional commitments. So what enticement could Roy offer that might convince Edward to come work for him?

The problem was that most of the positions that came to mind were normally staffed by career military personnel, not civilians, and Roy didn’t even want to imagine Edward’s reaction to the suggestion that he be reinstated. The closest Roy might come to offering Edward a position equal to his talents was as a research consultant attached to either Research and Development or the Investigations division, or as an advisor attached to the committee restructuring the State Alchemist program – neither option an ideal fit as far as the Führer was concerned. Still, it was something that Roy hoped Edward might be willing to consider if he did want a change from his current line of work.

Checking his watch, Roy determined that he had about two hours before Edward was delivered to his doorstep. He wondered how the blond would react when he realized that he would be having dinner with Roy in his former commander’s private rooms. The dark haired man grinned at the thought, then retired happily to his study to give Alphonse’ dissertation his undivided attention.

Sinking into a large armchair, Roy opened the bulging pouch. A large spill of photographs flooded his lap, and his grin widened. One caught his eye, and he plucked it from the pile. Gazing at the beaming face of Alphonse’ son, he couldn’t help but wonder what the man this child had been name for might say if he were here with Roy right now. Ed and Al had been like sons to Maes Hughes. How would he feel about Roy’s intentions towards the eldest of the pair? Ever the optimist, but at the same time always practical, Maes would almost certainly have examined Roy’s motives, issued a few dire warnings, and then clapped his old friend on the back with a rueful smile.
“Wish me luck tonight, Maes,” Roy whispered. “I’m going to need it.”

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Dinner went very well, though it didn’t turn out quite the way Roy expected - par for the course when it came to the Fullmetal Alchemist, former or otherwise.

Edward had arrived with an appetite for both dinner, and apparently, Roy’s company. Hair tied back in a high tail that fell well below his shoulders, the young man showed up smartly dressed in a dark jacket over matching slacks, a light grey vest over his crisp white shirt. As Winston relieved his guest of his jacket, the Führer took a moment to admire how the waist coat flattered the young man’s trim physique before showing him into the dining room.

By the time the dessert stage was reached, both men were past any lingering formalities, sleeves rolled up, waving silverware enthusiastically about to stress points and opinions. The steak had been a hit, as only melt-in-your-mouth tender porterhouse can prove. The discussion was invigorating, as only the meeting of two highly trained scientific minds examining theories at the forefront of innovation can make it. The company was delightful, as only the vision of Edward Elric in animated conversation by candlelight could be. Roy leaned elbows contentedly on the table watching the younger man polish off his apple pie à la mode, reflecting on the success of his dinner date. Winston cleared the table, then refreshed their coffee and excused himself for the evening as Roy invited Edward to the den to pitch his offer of employment.

“So Thompson isn’t as big a douche as it first appeared,” Edward was saying as he followed Roy into the living room to take a seat in one of the large armchairs by the fireplace. “His DNA recombination theory did finally have the required practical application in terms of gene separation. It just turns out that it was more a matter of partition than division, primarily at least.”

Roy relaxed into his favorite chair and admired the young blond view seated before him. “I still can’t believe Alphonse has successfully split a botanical chimera. How long has it been since the initial separation?”

“It’s been six months, and not only are all the separated plants still alive, they have flowered and produced seeds,” Edward told him with a grin. “If the seeds sprout, grow to reproductive maturity, and remain true to the parent species, that will be Al’s crowning glory. And his next research paper.” Edward beamed with pleasure in contemplation of his brother’s future triumph. “Of course he’s nowhere near attempting separation with animals, but this is one hell of a first step.”

Roy shook his head, marvelling still at this successful chimeral separation, and wondering at the implications. “I must say that I’m amazed, though I suppose I shouldn’t be,” the older man admitted. “Setting the Amestrian Association for Clinical Alchemy on its ear is a documented Elric talent. How did Alphonse come up with the idea of separating the chimeral elements through an accelerated natural growth process?”

Edward’s grin became feral. “That’s kind of a funny story,” he said with a quiet laugh. “There was this guy up in Xenotime who was passing himself off as me. Al caught wind of it, and went out there to . . . advise him against it. Turns out the guy and his brother were doing some pretty amazing things with plants, like using natural flora to leech toxins from contaminated soil, and more importantly from Al’s point of view, stimulating accelerated growth in herbaceous vegetation. So after Al warned him about the consequences of committing fraud by claiming someone else’s
accomplishments as his own, they got to talking alchemy. One thing led to another, and just like that,” Ed snapped his fingers, “the final problem Al had with confirming his hypothesis was on the road to resolution.”

“Final problem?”

“Yeah. Al’s transmutation causes the chimeral elements to literally grow apart as separate entities, so that each element’s differentiated cellular systems develop to replace any missing portions according to their original genetic makeup. When Al tried to tie the separation to subsequent natural growth rates, the time it took for the missing or undeveloped systems to regenerate became problematic. Incorporating components of the Tringhams’ growth acceleration arrays into the transmutation eliminated that complication. At the conclusion of the transmutation, the separated organisms are complete.”

“The name Tringham rang a bell when I read Alphonse’ references,” Roy responded. “There was a Nash Tringham involved with the research team at Lab 5 during the Ishballan Conflict. I wonder if these brothers are any relation to him.”

Edward shrugged. “Beats me. Alphonse introduced them to his publisher, and their first alchemical abstract will be out by the end of the month.”

“I look forward to reading it.” Roy took a sip of his coffee and placed it on the side table. “Right now, though, there is something else I’d like to discuss with you Edward.”

“No.” Edward placed his own coffee cup aside as well. “I’m not interested in working for you.”

Roy blinked. “Did Emperor Yao . . .”

“No.”

“Then how . . .”

Edward shrugged again. “I just figured. No offense, but I already explained why I left the military in the first place. Being kept in the dark and led around by the nose, the manipulation, the politics, getting picked on about being short, which I wasn’t, and still am not, all that shit really got on my nerves, and I didn’t want to deal with the bullshit anymore. Still don’t.”

“Have I made any references to your height this evening?” Roy asked, frowning.

Ed bristled. “No,” he growled.

“Have I attempted to manipulate you in any way during dinner?”

“No.” Edward noted Roy’s raised eyebrow. “But you’re on your best behaviour because you want to get me under your thumb again for some reason. It wouldn’t be in your best interests to piss me off.”

“This is not about getting you under my thumb,” Roy said earnestly. “I believe that having you as part of my team again would be of great benefit to all of us, yourself included.”

“Drop it, Mustang,” Ed said, surprisingly without rancor. “It’s not going to happen.”

“Won’t you at least listen to what I have to offer?”

“You’d be wasting your time.”
“It’s my time to waste.” Roy leaned an elbow on his armrest to rest his chin on his hand. “I’m not suggesting that you to be reinstated. I thought you might prefer a civilian position, perhaps as an interpreter attached to the Führer’s office.”

“You thought wrong.”

“You’ve been working for Ling Yao in the same capacity. How would this be different?”

“Ling’s my friend.”

“And I’m not?” Roy very carefully kept his smile innocent.

“I don’t know. Are you?”

It was Mustang’s turn to shrug. “I’m quite sure you are my friend. I have counted you as such since that day underneath Headquarters, when you stopped me from making a terrible mistake.”

Edward sighed, remembering that day, and Envy’s fate. “Yeah, okay. You’re right. I consider you a friend too. You looked out for me and Al as best you could through all the shit back then, even when things got rough for you. But no. I’m still not interested.”

Roy studied the younger man’s expression, hoping for a cue. He found it frustratingly unreadable. “Perhaps you’re looking for a change. Would you consider a position as a research consultant? R and D is always in the market for good people, and you more than qualify.”

Ed shook his head, eyes unequivocally stating ‘no way.’

“The Investigations Division has the same needs, as you are very well aware.” As he should be, after working as Roy’s operative in that department for five years.

A grimace. And a thumbs down.

“I have a standing committee planning an extensive reorganization of the State Alchemist program. They could use your invaluable input.”

“But they’ll do fine without it,” Edwards amended.

This was getting frustrating. “Presidential dog walker?”

Edward raised an eyebrow. “You have dogs?” he asked.

“Unfortunately, no.”

The eyebrow lowered. “Too bad.”

“I could get some.”

“Don’t bother.”

This wasn’t going well. Roy had thought Edward was stubborn as a teen. He was twice as bad now, and not as easy to talk around, particularly since his flat refusal to negotiate left no room for argument. “There must be something I can offer that might interest you,” the older man griped.

Edward’s eyes sparked with amusement. “Well, now that you mention it, there is. But it has nothing to do with employment, and I definitely won’t be looking for any kind of monetary compensation. It would actually be more like equivalent exchange.”
The young blond stood and crossed the short distance to Roy, stepping in very close. He slowly eased himself onto the large armchair, moving to bracket Roy’s hips between his knees, and gently settled into Roy’s lap. This gave the dark haired man the unique experience of having to look up into Edward’s grinning face, and a new appreciation for his oversized armchair. Satisfied that Roy was offering no protest, the blond rested his hands lightly on the Führer’s shoulders. Roy’s hands naturally found their way to the younger man’s trim waist as Edward leaned down to gently touch his forehead to Roy’s.

“I can think of much better ways to waste your time,” Edward said, voice low.

“Mmm. You’re moving awfully fast, Edward,” Roy observed evenly, though his heart pounded.

“Too fast for you?” The younger man’s honest inquiry held no hint of challenge, just simple consideration for the other man, making no move to force the issue. “You don’t have to romance me, Roy.”

“Oh. A shame. It’s part of the fun,” Roy said regretfully. “It also serves to eliminate any misconceptions by either party. I don’t want to rush this, and run the risk that either of us might regret what happens here this evening.”

“I’m not in a rush; I know what I want. And unless you changed your mind somewhere between Aerugo and Amestris, you did admit that you wanted it too.” The blond leaned in even closer, close enough for Roy to feel Edward’s quiet words breathed against his lips, but no closer, leaving Roy to make his choice. “Do you want to fuck me, Roy? Because I want to fuck you, and life’s too short to play games.”

Roy would still have preferred to take it more slowly, but Edward had other ideas, and Roy had to admit that the blond’s strength of resolve was quite the turn-on.

“Who am I to argue with a man of such obvious intelligence?” Roy murmured, bringing their lips together.

That was all the permission Ed needed to take control, deepening the kiss, carding his fingers gently through Roy’s hair. The older man tightened his grip around the younger’s waist, pulling him closer. It had been a long time since Roy had held another in his arms this way. Far too long in fact. And all too soon the blond pulled away, eyes glittering like molten gold, hands smoothing down Roy’s chest.

Edward fingered the buttons barring access to Roy’s skin. “How much do you like this shirt?” he asked, rubbing the soft material of the collar between his fingers. The buttons were small, and there were a lot of them, and the young man was clearly wondering if he should just tear the shirt open and be done with it.

“I’d like it a lot more if it was on the floor. Preferably in a heap with the rest of our clothes.” Roy said, voice rough.

Edward’s low laugh was husky. His grin sharpened into a look that suddenly had Roy’s stomach tied in knots, a look of hunger, want, almost frightening in its intensity. Roy’s nerves tingled as his own desire was honed to a fine edge. Roy wasn’t sure what he had expected when this evening began. Certainly not quite . . . this. But there was a rightness about this intimacy in Roy’s quiet, fire-lit den, about the heat in Edward’s amber gaze, about the way the young man ran his hand lightly down Roy’s chest almost reverently. The older man didn’t resist when Edward’s fingers curled around his wrist, bringing Roy’s hand up for his lips to brush the narrow scar in his cupped palm. The gentle touch sent an electric jolt to the pit of Roy’s stomach and instantly he was more aroused than he
could ever remember being.

Roy’s eyes closed as a tongue traced over his life line, his heart line, flicking briefly over his curled fingers. Then the hot mouth shifted from his hand, and Roy’s head fell back when lips began to trace a delicate line up his throat, along his jaw and then... wet heat against his parted lips, teeth delicately nipping, nimble tongue teasing, and Roy could remain passive no longer. He felt Ed’s breath hitch as he slid his fingers into blond silk to cradle the back of the young man’s head, meeting the kiss, responding to it, deepening it. Ed kissed like nothing Roy had expected, with a lazy sensuality that pulled the older man out of the driver’s seat and made him content just to feel. When their lips finally parted, Roy opened his eyes to catch a glimpse of something underneath the unbridled desire on Ed’s face, something grave. Then it was gone, and Roy wasn’t entirely sure it had been there at all.

Edward’s hungry gaze made his stomach twist as ferociously as the touch of his lips. Earlier impatience overcome, the young blond began to slowly unbutton Roy’s shirt, fingers trailing lightly along the older man’s body as they moved from button to button, popping each one free, then sliding down to the next. Edward’s hands slipped inside Roy’s shirt and stroked up his sides, the touch strangely innocent, almost reassuring. Edward was playing his older, more experienced partner like a master, and Roy couldn’t help but wonder where the young man had learned the steps of this ancient dance, and from whom, torn between a feeling of appreciation and the sting of irrational jealousy.

Roy allowed just a bit more of his own hunger to show as he tugged meaningfully at Edward’s waistcoat with a single raised eyebrow. Ed shrugged the vest off, letting it drop to Roy’s feet with a soft whisper of cloth. It was warm in the den by the fire, and Roy did not hesitate to pull Ed’s shirt open to a sleeveless white undershirt. The young man’s skin was almost feverish through the thin layer of cloth as Roy slid his hands lightly down Edward’s sides to his hips, guiding him gently back and off the older man’s lap. It was time for a change of venue, preferably to the comfort of Roy’s bed. Mustang started to ease himself up from the armchair, but Edward had other ideas and stopped him with firm but gentle hands on his shoulders. The blond then dropped to his knees, grinning up into Roy’s face. That smile would have looked dangerous at any other time; the canny smile of a hunter, eyes on his prey. It held no malice however, just intense desire edged with the burn of passion, drawing Roy in with a familiar magnetism. Being the centre of Edward Elric’s undivided attention was a unique and exhilarating experience.

A quiet sound caught in Roy’s throat when Edward’s hands slid down his thighs, curling under his knees and pulling to spread them wide. Settling between, the young man unfastened Roy’s belt, unbuttoning his pants a moment later. The older man couldn’t help but gasp when his pants were pulled open and eased down with his boxers, his already hard cock circled and pumped by a firm hand. Leaning back into the armchair, Roy stared down at himself, sparks quivering his spine. His eyes lifted, settling on Edward’s hungry golden gaze with a jolt, realizing the young man’s eyes had never once left his.

Fingers tensing and relaxing on the arms of the chair, Roy tried to retain some grip on his control, but his hips wanted to thrust up every time Ed’s fist slid down, and he bit his lip hard when the young man’s thumb circled over the head of his cock. He couldn’t stop the groan that emerged, but he wasn’t quite ready to start begging, at least not yet.

Maybe Edward had mastered the art of mind reading in his travels, because his smile suddenly became challenging, eyes glittering with anticipation, and then he leaned forward and -

"Ed," Roy breathed as his head tipped back and his eyes fell shut, hips flexing up off the chair. Edward’s lips and tongue followed the down stroke of his fist, his fingers remaining tightly circled at the base of Roy’s cock as his mouth slid up again, slowly, tongue teasing along the shaft. Edward paused with just the head of Roy’s cock in his mouth, and then he moved to swallow him all the way down in one smooth motion. Only Ed’s firmly clasped fingers kept the older man from coming on
the spot. Careful to keep from clenching his fists too tightly in blond hair, Roy stroked the younger man’s head as Edward continued to torture him in the most skillful way imaginable. Roy’s hands wandered down to knead strong shoulders, doing his best not to rock helplessly up into Ed’s mouth and thrust for all he was worth as the younger man bent enthusiastically to his task. Feeling orgasm fast approaching, Roy opened his eyes at last, dazedly intending to make some kind of warning. Face flushed, he looked down at the blond head in his lap and moaned aloud, pinned by Edward’s fierce stare.

"Ed," he managed, "I'm... I'm -" Edward hummed around him, and Roy lost it right there. Back arching, both hands buried in Ed’s hair, he came with a long, low, incoherent cry. It seemed to go on forever, winding up, and up, until his spine melted, collapsing him splayed into his chair. "Edward," Roy whispered when his throat finally allowed it, his body still trembling in reaction.

Ed was looking extremely full of himself as he swallowed the last of Roy's spend and sat back on his heels, running soothing hands over Roy’s thighs. If Roy thought Ed looked good before, he looked incredible now, hair in disarray from the clutch of Roy’s hands, wide pupils ringed with gold, lips bruised and slick, smug satisfaction in his smile. Roy wondered if the younger man would now be amenable to taking this to the bedroom, because he wanted more, much more.

Ed grinned at him when Roy held out his hand wordlessly, well aware of the dark haired man’s current state, but Roy didn’t care. The younger man took the offered hand without hesitation and pulled Roy to his feet into another mind searing kiss.

"Bed," Edward whispered, his lips brushing Roy’s as he spoke.

Roy nodded with a lazy smile, obediently turning to lead the way, hand still twined with Ed’s. Roy had never made a habit of giving another person this sort of control, and he wasn't entirely sure why he was doing it now. He only knew that it felt right, that he wanted this. He wanted to know that Edward was here for no other reason than simply because he wanted to be here, with him.

Roy walked into the bedroom and stopped by the door, waiting for Edward to move past him. The young man stopped a few steps in to survey his surroundings as Roy closed the door behind them. Like the rest of his private quarters, Roy’s bedroom was tastefully appointed, designed to suit his modest preferences by his Aunt Chris and her girls. A comfortable king size bed was the main feature, though the room was more than just a place to lie down and sleep. Roy had had the dresser, night stands, and desk in his possession for years, and they were comfortable in their familiarity. Earth tones were the rule for the drapes, rug, and bed clothes, with warm hints of maroon and ginger woven in to the room’s subdued decor. The small balcony offered a place to take a breath of fresh evening air and a view of the estate’s lush grounds if the Führer so desired. In short, his bedroom was a refuge; the perfect place to get away from the world and ease the stresses of Roy’s busy life. More perfect now, with Edward standing by the bed in the soft glow of the bedside lamp, looking expectantly over his shoulder, invitation in his smile.

Pausing only to divest himself of his trousers and shorts, Roy stepped up behind his new lover to wrap his arms around him, pulling him against his chest. Nipping gently behind his ear, Roy’s deft fingers slipped the tie from Ed’s hair, releasing a cascade of honey over both their shoulders, and Roy very nearly purred. He tugged insistently at the young man’s undershirt, and Edward raised his arms to allow the older man to pull it over his head, the younger shivering a little at the cool air of the bedroom against his skin. Roy noticed and set about caressing him with warm hands, moving gradually downward, admiring the tight, well-muscled form, tracing stories told in old scars, down the chest, the midriff, down. He unbuttoned Ed’s slacks and slowly slid them over his hips, the boxers following close behind. Edward stood quietly through it all, submitting to Roy’s touch
Roy had just had one of the best orgasms of his life, but he was already hard again, and determined to ensure that this encounter was just a memorable for Edward. Ed moaned when Roy wrapped his hand loosely around the other man’s hardened length, patiently stroking as Ed tried to thrust into the slack circle of his fist. It was a tease, not fast or hard enough to get the younger man any closer to where he wanted to go, and it teased Roy as well when Ed’s body flexed against him with each thrust, sending bolts of pleasure up his spine. The older man gently nudged his willing captive towards the bed, turning him slowly until they were face to face, chest to chest, hand never pausing in its gentle rhythm. Their lips came together once more, the kiss languid, unhurried. With slow careful movements Roy guided Edward closer to the bed until it met the back of his knees. Roy continued to slowly press forward, the younger man having no choice but to sit, and then to lie back as Roy closely followed, moving over him.

Roy pulled his hand away, savoring the hungry sound Ed made, then reached over the young man for the nightstand. He had to stretch, feeling his way through the clutter in the drawer, searching for the small tube that had sat idle for so long. Ed growled, irritated, until Roy returned his attention to him. Then the growl became a purr when slick fingers slid under his balls to tease his entrance slowly, giving Edward the chance to say no, that this wasn’t the way he wanted this to go. Roy needn’t have worried; the slow smile that spread across Ed’s face was proof enough that he was exactly where he wanted to be, and he bent his knees to give Roy better access.

Ed’s eyes closed completely as Roy’s long fingers circled and stroked, pressing in at last so slowly that the blond had to bite his lip to keep from voicing more than a needy whimper. One finger became two, Roy moving carefully at first, letting Edward relax, get used to it, and then - deeper, and Ed moaned out loud, quivering with the effort to be still, wanton amber eyes demanding more. Roy’s fingers shifted, searching, finding the place inside Ed that arched the blond’s quaking body, back completely off the bed for a moment. The young man couldn’t stay quiet, cursing reverently as Roy’s fingers twisted, stroked, curled. Ed couldn’t stay still when Roy’s other hand once again closed around his cock, stroking more firmly now. Roy watched Ed rocking his hips up to meet Roy’s slow, deliberate rhythm, thrusting up into Roy’s touch, panting as Roy bent his head to trace lingering kisses down his stomach and tease his straining erection. Roy watched intently, wanting to see Ed come apart at the seams with Roy’s fingers deep inside him.

"Roy," Ed groaned, reaching out to pull the man closer, shifting until Roy was settled lightly on top of him, growling again at the loss as Roy’s fingers slid out.

Roy was rock hard now, and as he lined himself up and thrust slowly inside, he felt two smooth hands settle at his hips, urging him on. And then Roy wasn’t thinking about anything but how good it felt, how he wanted this to last, so he held back, stroking in long and deep, letting himself feel the flex of Ed’s body against his, each hitched breath as his cock found the perfect angle. Ed was moaning curses, quietly breathless, one hand on himself matching Roy’s thrusts as the other gripped the edge of the mattress above his head. Roy could feel the clench of the other man’s need, felt his own cock throb in answer deep inside Ed’s heat. Part of Roy didn’t want it to end, but he could feel Ed tightening up around him, panted curses becoming ragged, faltering. Closing his eyes, Roy rested his brow against Ed’s shoulder, paused just for a moment, and thrust in hard. Ed cried out wordlessly, jerking up against him, so Roy did it again, and again, and Ed was coming, arching up in his arms, every muscle cored tight. And then, instead of falling loosely back, Ed was pulling Roy down, legs folding tight around his back, hungry lips devouring Roy’s neck, the sharp symmetry of his teeth, the furnace heat of his mouth, it was enough to drive Roy insane, and he could feel the slick wetness of Ed’s spent erection against his stomach each time he thrust, and it was too much, too good –
The world was pure white light for an eternal moment, then faded to grey as Roy just managed not to relax heavy and boneless on top of his sprawled and panting lover. He levered himself onto his back to wait for his pounding pulse to settle back to normal, serenely sated. One look at Edward, lying limp, a satisfied tilt to his lips, half-lidded eyes on Roy’s, was enough to spread a roguish grin on the dark haired man’s face.

“What’s that smirk about?” Ed asked suspiciously.

“I was just wondering how I measure up to those rumors you mentioned,” Roy said, a glint of wicked amusement in his eyes.

“The rumors don’t measure up to you,” Edward said with a languid stretch. “I may have to start spreading a few of my own. The current talk doesn’t come close to doing you justice.”

“Don’t be in a rush to publish your findings,” Roy smiled, smug. “As a scientist, you certainly understand the importance of replicating results. I recommend broadening the scope of your experimental data. Extensively. Over a considerable period of time.”

“Oh?” Edward’s brows twitched up for a moment, in what appeared to be . . . surprise? “Well. That’s one rumor that I can mark down as bullshit.”

“Which rumor is that?” Roy asked with a lazy smile, rolling to face the younger man, head propped on a hand.

“I heard you were only interested in one night stands.”

“Some stands definitely warrant more than a single night my dear Edward.” The dark haired man traced a finger down the blond’s chest, then lower. “And what makes you think we’re finished? The night is still young.”

“Yeah, but you aren’t,” Edward pointed out, all innocence. “I wouldn’t want you to strain yourself.”

Roy pounced without warning. And soon discovered that while he was no match for Edward’s physical strength, the young man was extremely vulnerable when it came to strategic tickling.
Dear Führer Mustang,

Thank you very much for loaning me your first edition Rosarium Philosophorum. I must admit that I was delighted when you offered to have Edward bring it with him to Resembool this week, and have been pouring over it constantly since it arrived, much to my neglected family’s dismay. I have seen the woodcuts reproduced and referenced in other texts many times over the years, and it’s quite a thrill to see them in their natural habitat. Rest assured that I will keep it safe, and see it returned to you in the same, pristine condition that I received it.

On the home front all is well, though Granny Pinako had us a bit worried a couple of weeks ago. She suddenly became unusually cranky, keeping to herself, eating very little, and working herself to distraction, refusing to tell us what was bothering her. Then last week right out of the blue she decided to take off to Rush Valley for a few days, no prior warning, and was out the door and on a train inside of an hour. Winry called her friend Paninya and her old boss, Mr. Garfield, and asked them to keep an unobtrusive eye out for her, which they were only too happy to do. They reported back with the news that Granny was stepping out with an old flame who shall remain nameless, living it up out on the town. She came home just a few days ago happy and recharged, back to her quirky old self.

Winry and the kids are fine as well. Due to Granny’s little holiday, the shop has been very busy with repairs and refits, so most of the child care has been left to me. Maes and Sara are endlessly entertaining. I can’t believe how fast they are growing up. Sara seems to be getting taller by the minute, and is fast becoming Maes’ chief accomplice instead of just his sweet, tag-along little sister. It’s gotten to the point where if the house suddenly becomes too quiet, Winry, Granny, and I all brace for some kind of impact. Between the three of us we can usually keep the little monsters out of trouble, but it isn’t easy, and they are getting better at pulling the wool over adult eyes. These days I often find myself wondering how my mother managed as a single parent, all on her own. Bringing up healthy, happy children is a challenging job, even with backup.

Maes starts school in just two months, and is looking eagerly forward to it. His Kindergarten teacher is an old friend of ours, and knows that our little boy is quite advanced for his age – he’s been reading and writing since he was two years old, though his handwriting is atrocious. She assures me that he won’t be bored in her classroom. Much of her program includes cooperative learning interactions, in which she expects Maes to take a leadership role. I just hope that Maes doesn’t lead his classmates where their teacher never expected them to go. He has a tendency to deliberately choose the path most likely to cause maximum chaos for unsuspecting adults, and then he stands back to cheerfully observe the effects.

Brother tells me that he will be heading back to Central by the end of the week. He wants to pay a visit to Tim Marcoh to talk to him about something that has been bothering him for a while, though he artfully avoided telling me exactly what that might be, the brat. I let it go, because he doesn’t appear to be in ill health, and because he seems quite content lately - for obvious reasons. I hope I didn’t sound too much like an overprotective parent when I spoke with you on the phone. I realize that Ed is more than capable of looking after himself, but he has a deceptively gentle inner nature that is easy to wound, and I can’t help but worry.

And there I go again, switching to parental mode. The way I feel right now, I suspect that Maes’ and Sara’s future boy and girlfriends are in for a particularly difficult time. But in all honesty Roy, I am completely comfortable with your interest in my brother. I can’t remember the last time he has been
so at ease and relaxed. He is happy, and that is everything I wish for him. And I have you to thank. However long this may last, short term or long, I know he will not regret a moment of it.

As usual, I am enclosing a few photos. The one of Sara and Edward hanging upside down from the tree branch is a little blurred because Winry’s scream startled me – and practically shattered my eardrums - when she saw what they were doing. It’s been quite a while since she’s been motivated to threaten my brother with a wrench, but she came very close that day. Personally I think she overreacted, her protective mother instincts on high alert. The branch was only a metre or so off the ground, and I know that my brother would never allow our little girl to come to harm. He’s very careful that way, particularly with the people he cares for the most, so Winry had no real need to worry.

Still, I don’t blame her. It’s hard to stand by and watch without reacting while someone you love is taking what you perceive as a serious risk, but I’m sure you’ll agree that more often than not, the things most worth having can only be gained by taking big chances. Everyone deserves to decide for themselves whether or not to reach for the brass ring, even when it’s hard to tell whether or not it might be out of reach. You never know until you try.

All the best,

Alphonse Elric.
Safe Haven

Whispers had a reputation for excellence in the Central City entertainment district. It was the place to go for a pleasant evening out with great music, a spacious dance floor, stiff drinks, and, hopefully, a chance to meet someone beautiful to go home with. While the main portion of the club was open to those in the general public who chose to brave the long line winding toward the entrance, the club’s exclusive upstairs lounge welcomed only the cream of Amestris’ social and political elite. Separated from the club proper by thick partitions and tight security, Whispers’ inner sanctum boasted a secure and discrete venue where the wealthy and connected could meet to discuss important matters in utmost secrecy, safe from prying eyes.

Or the majority of prying eyes at least. The nightclub was well named, given the chosen vocation of its owner. Chris Mustang, formerly known as Madame Christmas, still liked to be the fly on the wall, and her extensive intelligence network ensured that she usually was.

The upstairs lounge was relatively quiet for a Friday evening when the Führer arrived. Only a few other men sat speaking quietly in some of the cozy booths that ringed the room, and they paid Roy no mind as he made his way to the bar. The house pianist’s soft strains of slow, moody jazz drifted up from the club’s public area as Roy checked his watch to discover that he still had nearly half an hour to wait before Edward was due to arrive for their rendezvous. He would have preferred to personally escort the younger man to the club, but the blond had pled a prior commitment and arranged to meet the Führer at his Aunt’s place of business later in the evening instead. The dark haired man cast a surreptitious glance at the two secret service men assigned to watch over him as they took up innocuous positions in the room, then he moved to the smirking older woman seated at the bar observing his approach.

Chris Mustang had never been considered an attractive woman by any standard, and by her words and mannerism not a particularly clever person either, which only served to prove that a book could never accurately be judged by its cover. And if there was one person in Amestris who knew just about all there was to know about cover, it was Roy’s paternal aunt. Once described by Führer Grumman as a bulldog, the physical description was so fitting that it immediately stuck. Her frame heavy set and stocky, the middle-aged business woman’s beefy, heavy-jawed face was a study in all things unappealing, accentuated by truly artistic efforts to highlight the imperfections. She had seen it all, and done it all, and made no apologies for either. A shallow assessment of her character based on appearance alone would result in deeming her a crass, unintelligent woman of low morals and even lower character. That assessment would be completely wrong, which was exactly what she intended.

From the beginning of his Führership, very few of Amestris’ dedicated patriots thought loyalty to their country synonymous with loyalty to Führer King Bradley. His ruthless drive to expand national borders was cause for concern even without knowledge of the underlying purpose, and the more opposition to Bradley’s aggressive foreign policy initiatives was suppressed, the more it flourished in back alleys and taprooms.

At a very early age Chris Mustang had learned that far more interesting tidbits of information could be gleaned from talk in the boudoir than the boardroom. Her familial connections with the military, first through her brother, and then through Roy, ensured that she would always have sources and a market for her merchandise. Guided by wit, determination, and a strong sense of integrity, the dark haired Madame naturally fell in with those questioning the wisdom and motives of the Bradley
administration. By the time her nephew had need of her services, the astute businesswoman had built an extensive information network completely off the regime’s radar, which she continued to maintain. Though her methods might sometimes be crude, they were inarguable effective. Chris Mustang was still a vital resource for Amestris’ current Führer.

Aside from all that, Roy valued his close relationship with his Aunt for many other reasons. The fact that he could always rely on her honest opinion was one. She had taken in her grieving nephew, a lost, frightened child, and had done her best to make a strong, honourable man of him, refusing to hide life’s ugly truths from the boy. Aunt Chris was never inclined to minced words, and had no patience for sentimental foolishness. She had seen too much, lost too much, had watched too many friends fail and fall, and if preventing her nephew from suffering at the hands of fate meant hard words on occasion, so be it.

Still, as much as he trusted his crusty relative’s honesty and insight, Roy couldn’t help feeling a little anxious when he had asked her to join him for a casual drink with Edward. The sly smile with which she had accepted made Roy wonder what she knew about the steadily increasing time he was spending with Ed, and how she knew it.

Because Roy had been spending more and more time with Edward over the past few months.

After that memorable evening in his private rooms at the Presidential Manor, Roy found that Edward was an itch he couldn’t resist scratching. He had awoken the next morning to discover Edward missing from his bed, and assumed that the young man had fled. Such was not the case. Winston had soon arrived to inform him that Edward was downstairs in the kitchen, charming his house staff. The young man had wandered in unashamedly begging for coffee, and ended up invited to join the Führer’s domestic team for breakfast by Roy’s shy young Isballan chef, Isa. Amused, Roy had gone to crash the spontaneous breakfast party, and was relieved to learn that Edward had no regrets about what had happened the night before. Quite the contrary. After consuming a startling amount of breakfast, he had proceeded to lure Roy back to bed to make him very late for his first appointment of the day. Since then, the amount of time Roy had been spending with the young former alchemist had been steadily growing.

At first, whenever he found out that Edward was in Central, Roy began inventing official reasons to call him in to the Führer’s Office, often to pitch another job offer to the younger man. When the offer was invariably rejected, Roy would then suggest they spend some personal time together, to which Edward frequently agreed. Gaining more confidence, the Führer then began calling Edward in Resembool, just to pass the time, incidentally wondering when the young man might be back in town. Roy had finally come to the point of actively and unashamedly seeking out the blond wherever he might have ranged in his restless traveling, making casual phone calls just to talk, and to ask when he might be in Central, and if he might be interested in dinner. Roy was beginning to wonder if he was getting too deep, if he was perhaps letting his heart – or at least his libido - blindfold his reason. So he had invited Chris Mustang to meet his lover and stand in for Roy’s objectivity.

Perched casually on a comfortably padded bar stool, this evening saw the beefy older woman in a low cut black evening dress, pose and attire a holdover from her days as a working girl. A string of south sea pearls dipped into her ample cleavage and bright rhinestones glittered on her wrists and fingers in the room’s subdued lighting. Leaning an elbow on the bar, shrewd eyes twinkled as her nephew checked the time once again before greeting her with a quick peck on her up-tilted cheek.

“You’re early, and that’s the second time you’ve checked your watch since you walked into the room,” the stout woman observed, taking a leisurely drag from her ever present cigarette. “You feeling a little nervous, Roy-Boy?”
“No, not really,” Roy drawled as he settled on a stool next to his aunt. “Just a bit preoccupied. Work’s a little busy at the moment.”

The older woman snorted at the understatement.

Despite the ongoing border dispute between her northern and western neighbours, Amestris’ Führer had accepted an invitation to visit the Cretian Union’s titular capital in hopes of initiating the negotiation of a non-aggression pact. Constantine IV had extended the invitation the previous week, his most trusted advisors in close contact with Roy’s for months prior, and it appeared that the King of the Hellenese ready to form an accord. Roy hoped to arrive in Athēnai by the end of the week, and Roy’s staff was very busy making the arrangements, which included more than the usual tight security due to General Hawkeye’s current level of over protectiveness.

Riza had finally admitted that while no outright threats had been made concerning her Führer, the Intelligence Division had picked up intel on an undefined plot against him. The allusions were cryptic and quite vague, but reliable sources were sure something was looming on the horizon, and that was enough for Riza. As more and more hints came from more and more informants, she had slowly been closing ranks around her superior, placing strict limits on the Führer’s public appearances and surrounding him with an almost impenetrable wall of security.

Roy had finally put his foot down, refusing to hide from or behind his people any longer. The argument between Amestris’ leader and his stalwart protector had been epic, but Roy had stuck to his guns, pointing out that for all they knew, keeping the Führer hobbled behind barricaded doors might be the true goal of this conspiracy. Führer Mustang had a reputation as a hands-on leader, and all this sneaking around in the name of personal safety was cramping his style. As a public figure Roy liked to be out in public. He liked to attend functions both formal and casual, to meet with cream and commoner and every station in between. That was who he was, and he insisted that until Riza could substantiate the threat, Roy would continue to do things his way. The Hawk had reluctantly backed down, and though security was still more strict than usual, Roy felt he could breathe again.

On top of all this, Roy’s office was dealing with the aftermath of a major weapons smuggling operation uncovered in the north. General Armstrong’s command had intercepted an arms shipment headed for Drachma almost by accident, and then traced it back to an expatriate Drachmann in North City. In her own inimitable style, Olivier had eliminated the problem in the most brutal manner possible. Unfortunately, she had left no one in any condition to answer questions about contacts and other possible members of the smuggler’s ring, making loose ends difficult to tie up. And to add insult to injury, Drachma was complaining that their citizen had been executed without due process. Once again, Roy was left holding the diplomatic bag. And once again, he had been forced to explain to Olivier, as patiently as possible, that diplomacy was not for pussies. Her condescending smirk had made it quite clear that she did not agree.

Lifting the small glass of bourbon that the bartender had slid precisely in front of him, Roy resisted the urge to check his watch for a third time in what seemed like an hour, but was likely only five minutes. Chris was already eyeing him in appraising consideration over the salted rim of her margarita, and he didn’t think he could deflect her speculations so easily a second time.

“So.” The older woman lowered her glass and leaned an elbow on the bar. “Are you and Edward Elric just friends with benefits, or something more?” she asked.

Roy came very close to snorting high-end single malt whiskey out his nose, a public humiliation the Führer of Amestris certainly did not need. He cast a disgruntled glare at his aunt. “The friendship is steadily developing. The benefits are incredible. And as for something more . . . that remains to be seen.”
“But something more is what you want.”

“I won’t deny it,” Roy admitted.

“And what does he want?”

Roy had to admit that his Aunt had cut directly to the crux of his uneasy concern. The fact of the matter was that Roy had no idea what Edward might want from him. As his superior officer, Roy had always been easily able to read what the young alchemist was thinking directly from the play of emotion across his face. Edward had been a refreshingly guileless open book, his sense of honor and moral compass making his motivation easy to establish and his actions easy to predict. Now however, the young man had learned to protect himself. Still refreshingly open and honest, he did a much better job of hiding his vulnerabilities safely out of sight.

Roy was saved from responding to Chris’ astute line of questioning by the arrival of his date.

Edward walked into the room and cast about for a moment, zeroing in on Roy and his Aunt at the bar. With a purposeful stride he approached the pair, eyes sparkling, smile confident. Roy rose to greet him, well aware of Chris’ critical observation of his undisguised pleasure at Edward’s arrival. And what the hell. He was happy to see the younger man. Sue him.

Edward appeared pleased to see Roy as well, treating him to the dazzling smile that so entranced the older man. It had been just over a week since they had been able to get together, though they had spoken on the phone twice during that period, and Roy felt it had been far too long. Oh, he was in deep, that was for sure. But was that bad, or good? Each phone call, every meeting, every single one of their interactions had been initiated by Roy, and although Ed looked as if he was content to spend time with him, Roy couldn’t help but wonder if he was investing far too much of himself in a lover who only saw him as a casual indulgence.

And if that was the case, it would certainly be ironic.

Chris Mustang’s garishly painted lips tilted into a lopsided grin as the young blond approached, her dark beady eyes almost glittering with concentrated curiosity. Undaunted, Edward’s own smile broadened as he stepped into close proximity of that intimidating gaze.

“Edward, this is my aunt, Chris Mustang,” Roy formally introduced them. “Aunt Chris, meet Edward Elric.”

Chris thrust out a pudgy, rhinestone adorned hand which Ed clasped firmly. “Nice to meet you, Fullmetal Alchemist,” the older woman said.

“Likewise, Miz Mustang, but that Fullmetal business is over,” Edward replied with an easy grin. “I’m just Ed.”

“Just Ed it is,” Chris said. She tilted her head to one side as she patted the barstool next to hers, appraising the young man with a half smile that Roy was very familiar with. Her eyes gleamed like gunmetal. “So, what are your intentions with regard to my nephew?” the older woman enquired bluntly.

“Do you mean later this evening, or in general?” Ed asked as he took the indicated seat, eyebrows raised, the picture of innocence.

The woman pursed her lips in thought. “Later this evening,” she decided.

Ed frowned in serious contemplation for a moment, tipping his chin up and staring thoughtfully at the
ceiling before replying. “My intentions are totally dishonorable,” he said, looking the older woman straight in the eye. “I plan to take full and complete advantage of him. I guess how far I get depends on how drunk I can get him.”

“Why don’t we get you a drink?” Chris suggested. A coyly smiling barmaid approached to set a tall, frosted glass of pale ale on a coaster by Ed’s elbow. “We have Green Lion on tap. Your preferred brand.” The older woman’s grin suggested that Ed was quite out of his league when it came to tangling with Madam Christmas.

“Thank you,” Ed said unperturbed, raising his glass to salute his hostess before taking a sip.

“You’re welcome,” she returned. “So Ed, tell me a little about yourself.”

“Not much to tell,” Ed said.

The older woman waited, sipping from salted crystal, eyes expectant.

The young man shrugged. “I used to be an alchemist. I used to be a dog of the military. I used to be . . .” he thought about it for a moment before one side of his mouth twitched up, “. . . a lot busier. Now I’m just Ed.” He tilted his head and smiled. “How about you?”

Roy watched his aunt watch Ed and resisted the urge to interfere. With her blasé courtesan’s mask firmly in place, anyone who did not know her intimately would not notice the keen intensity of her observation, a predator poised, ready to gauge her hapless prey’s reaction.

“I used to be a working girl. I used to run a brothel. I took in my nephew when he lost his parents and raised him like he was my own son. Now I’m the Führer’s aunt. Not bad for an old whore, wouldn’t you say?” she replied with a cockeyed grin.

Ed laughed, eyes sparkling. “Yeah, that’s life for you. You never know just how it’s going to scramble your plans,” he said, and raised his glass to his lips.

Chris just sat there for a moment. Then she tilted a look at Roy. “I like him,” she said, and turned back to Ed.

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The mood lightened considerably after that, and the evening became positively genial. Drinks in hand the trio moved their conversation to a private salon, and soon old stories were being told and traded, tales of ill fortune bandied and trumped, insights offered and considered. A late supper was proposed. Roy excused himself for a moment just before dinner was served and returned to find his aunt and Edward talking about Roy’s brief adventure with facial hair.

“He looked like a damn pimp,” Chris was saying, “and you can trust me to know what a pimp looks like.”

Edward turned a critical eye on the current Führer of Amestris, trying to visualize the offending moustache. Roy rolled his eyes as he slid into his chair, sighing a long suffering sigh.

“Facial hair lends a certain maturity to the masculine countenance,” Roy opined. “I thought I looked rather distinguished.”
“You thought wrong,” Chris told him. “Riza Hawkeye was ready to get the rest of your team together so they could hold you down and shave you by force. You were foolishly jeopardizing your political career. No way they’d have made you Führer with those waxed pubic hairs on your face.”

“Anyway, you’re manly enough just the way you are,” Ed assured him, giving Roy’s hand a conciliatory pat as their waiter arrived with dinner. “You don’t need a cheesy moustache.”

“Thank you Edward,” Roy said. “Coming from a man who believes that even the most humble of structures deserves a few gargoyles and winged dragons for embellishment, I’ll accept that compliment in the spirit that it was given.”

“Are you trying to tell me that I have bad taste?” the blond asked, a challenging eyebrow raised.

“Not at all,” the Führer said as he sampled the wine their server had poured. “In fact, I was just wondering if you might be interested in a position on my staff as a fashion advisor. Perhaps it’s time to update my personal image.”

“Shut up and eat, Mustang,” Ed advised without rancor.

“You looking for work, kid?” Chris asked, shooting Roy a smirk. “Can’t the Führer come up with a few odd jobs to keep you occupied?”

“I don’t want to work for this guy,” Ed told her. “Tried it. It sucked.”

“You could work for me,” Chris offered, an impish grin spreading on her heavy jawed face.

“Bussing tables? Tending bar?” Ed asked, eyes twinkling.

“Sure,” the older woman said, “but quite frankly, that’s not where the real money is.” She arched a brow and smirked.

“Like anyone would actually pay for me,” Edward stated unequivocally.

The Madam took her time to look him over very carefully from head to toe, and Roy admired the younger man’s lack of self-conscious squirming.

“Anyone would,” was finally Chris’ verdict. “Quite a high price, too.”

“I have a shit-ton of scars. My left leg’s automail.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Chris said, slapping a palm to her forehead. “I forgot. I’ll have to revise my estimate. Upward.”

Ed laughed. “I can see where your nephew learned to bullshit like a master and still maintain that air of sincerity.”

“I’m being perfectly honest with you,” Chris assured the younger man. “I never pull punches when it comes to the business. You glow, kid. From the inside. People would pay good money to touch you.”

Edward snorted, but before he could comment, Roy beat him to it.

“But they won’t.” Nephew turned a half serious glare on his aunt. “He’s not for sale.”

Chris Mustang brought her infuriating smirk to bear on the Führer.
“Down boy,” she murmured.

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Light banter saw the party through the rest of dinner, and as the hour grew late, Whispers’ proprietress walked her two personal guests downstairs to the private foyer to see them on their way.

“It’s been a real pleasure to meet you, Ed.” Chris said at the bottom of the curved stairway, taking his right hand in both of her. “Stop by any time you’re in town. I always like to get fresh news from the outcountry. No one can churn up gossip like country folks. I’ve never been completely sure why that is.”

“I’ll be sure to drop in when I can,” Ed said with a grin. “It’s been my pleasure, too.”

The young man moved to the front doors as Roy stepped close to his aunt. Chris gave her nephew a light peck on the cheek, managing to leave a bright red smudge, but did not pull immediately away. Her lips close to his ear, she said, “Do you remember what I told you when you started stepping out with Riza Hawkeye?”

Roy felt a cold chill. He remembered only too well his aunt’s warning that he was making a mistake, that friendship was as far as he should take a relationship with his most trusted friend and colleague. He had not listened to that warning, and had deeply regretted it when he had come close to damaging his and Riza’s closeness after their brief romance fell apart. Roy loved Riza still, and that love was returned, but it wasn’t a romantic love and they should never have tried to force it to become one. He felt fortunate indeed that they had been able to move past that disaster, their friendship stronger now than ever.

“I remember,” Roy replied with trepidation. “Are you going to tell me the same thing now?”

“No.” The woman leaned away. Smiling fondly, she raised a hand to wipe the garish lipstick from her relieved nephew’s cheek with a stubby thumb. “Just ask him what he wants.”

Easier said than done. Edward stood by the exit, looking curiously back at the Mustangs, and with a quick smile just for his aunt Roy went to join him, one bodyguard moving to flank his charge, one proceeding outside ahead of his Führer to check the street.

“Where are you off to from here, Edward?” Roy asked. “Do you have plans, or can I interest you in a midnight snack at the Manor?”

“Midnight snack?” Edward snorted. “Is that some kind of code for wall shaking, headboard cracking sex?”

“Why don’t you join me and find out?” Roy suggested. “I know I’m in the mood sink my teeth into a tasty little late evening treat.”

“Tasty little . . . you bastard!” the younger man snarled, causing the bodyguards to glare. “We’re the same damn height! Keep it up, and the only snack you’ll be getting tonight is a knuckle sandwich.”

The Führer was not at all intimidated by the warning. He smiled charmingly. “Mmm, excellent. It’s been a while since I’ve indulged my rough side. I’m definitely in the mood,” he purred. “You do wonders for my appetite, Edward.” Grinning, Roy offered the younger man his arm. “Shall we?”
Ed glared at the proffered appendage with a look that conveyed his complete and utter disdain as he brushed past Roy to step out onto the sidewalk. The frown remained on his face all the way to the limousine, and Roy was just about to make a teasing comment about the blond’s sense of humor, or lack thereof, when Edward suddenly grabbed the older man’s arm and lunged past the startled lead guard to wrench the car door open. Roy was shoved unceremoniously inside just as the tinted glass of the rear door window exploded into a spray of sparkling crystal.

Time slowed to a crawl. The Führer found himself face down on the limo’s floor. Twisting onto his back was difficult with Edward on hands and knees above him, coiled tight as a spring. He watched the younger man reach up to his collar and then fling his hand forward toward the driver’s seat, silver flashing across the short distance. Roy’s eyes followed the trajectory to the unfamiliar driver, military cap askew, the gun he had aimed at Roy dropping from his hand as he clawed at the short wooden handle sticking out of his wrist. Edward lunged to grapple with the man just as bullets began to punch through the limo’s roof. The sniper’s callous disregarding his accomplice’s safety proved fatal for the traitorous limo driver; Edward recoiled as a round caught his opponent in the side of the head, snapping it around and slamming his suddenly limp body into the steering wheel.

Roy surged to his knees, trying to push his way out from under Edward, catching a glimpse of his two bodyguards sprawled motionless on the sidewalk, of sparks as a bullet ricocheted off the pavement, of people on the street fleeing in all directions. The younger man pushed back, then reached out into the line of fire to pull the car door closed. He pinned Roy against the front seat’s back, his wild-eyed, clench jawed face inches away from the older man’s as bullets continued to punch through the limo’s roof. The rear window collapsed in a glittering shower, followed a split second later by the front passenger window. Ed rose to peer into the driver’s seat as Roy reached to pull futilely at the driver’s side rear door handle.

“We’re not driving out of here. No keys,” Ed snarled, then his left heel pistoned past Roy, kicking the door wide. Roy scrambled out to the road, pulling Ed along with him to take cover behind the rear fender.

The sniper had not given up. Bullets continued to poke random holes in the limo’s trunk lid. Roy and Ed crouched low behind the car’s rear quarterpanel while Roy strained to hear the welcome sound of return gun fire in vain. Ed glanced at Roy’s hands, and the older man realised that he had slipped on his gloves automatically. Roy shifted to a squat, broken glass grinding under his heels, bracing to risk a quick glance over the back of the car in hopes of locating and targeting the gunman.

Ed clamped a hand down on Roy’s shoulder. “Stay down, Mustang!” he growled.

“We’re pinned down!” Roy snapped back. “If the fuel tank takes a hit, we’re finished! I need to know where he is! Unlike you, I prefer not to just destroy the entire block!”

“I know where he is,” Ed said, shoving Roy roughly behind him. “I’m going to point right at him. Sight straight down my arm.”

Before Roy could protest, Ed popped head and shoulders from behind the car and thrust his arm out straight. In one smooth motion Roy lunged forward to rest his jaw on the younger man’s tense shoulder, aimed, and snapped. The thin streak of fire arrowed into the shadows to suddenly reveal the fire escape and crouching assassin in the split second before the sniper was set aflame.

After that, the writhing, screaming man was horrifyingly easy to see.

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Twenty minutes after the nearly successful assassination attempt, Roy was still running hot on adrenalin in a state of high pisssoff. He and Ed were locked in Chris Mustang’s private office, waiting for the cavalry to arrive to escort the Führer to the safety of Central Headquarters. The club had been closed. All staff, except for Whispers’ in house security, had been given the rest of the night off. The building was eerily quiet.

Edward lounged on the large, comfortable chesterfield, feet stretched out toward the fireplace, head bowed and eyes closed, but in no way did he appeared truly relaxed. The younger man was likely conscious of his companion’s simmering anger and well aware that some of it was directed at him.

Roy paced behind the couch like a caged predator, hands clasped tensely behind his back. He considered himself very fortunate to have survived the attack unscathed, but his bodyguards hadn’t been so lucky. Both were dead, shot down by the sniper. Two civilians had also been injured in the resulting panic. And Roy’s much younger former subordinate had deliberately become a human shield so that Roy could take out their attacker.

The evening’s events were horrifically unacceptable.

The Führer’s thoughts were interrupted by the sharp rasp of the door’s lock. Both men turned to see Riza Hawkeye slip into the room followed closely by Chris Mustang, who quickly closed and locked the door once again. Roy lifted an eyebrow at his aunt’s unwarranted action. It was clear that her nephew’s close call had left her shaken, though she was hiding it well. The older woman gave Roy a reassuring wink, then turned her sharp gaze on Edward.

Riza came smartly to attention, lifting her hand in stiff salute. “Führer Mustang Sir!” Her voice was all business. “We have secured the street and surrounding buildings. We can leave whenever you’re ready.”

“At ease General,” Roy said, jaw tight. “Status report.”

The Hawk stood at parade rest, eyes locked to her commander’s. “Sir. Both assassins are confirmed dead. Brigadier General Breda is personally conducting the forensic investigation of the scene. He will meet us at Central Headquarters to debrief as soon as his preliminary examination is complete.” Riza’s steel eyed gaze wavered. “Sir . . .”

“How did you know?” Chris’ voice was low, but very forceful.

Roy turned to see the older woman still staring intently at Edward.

“I was watching as you walked to the limo. I saw you grab Roy and push him into the car before the first shot was fired.” Chris moved closer to the young man, a suspicious frown creasing her brow. “How did you know?”

Ed stood to face her. “I’ve been living in Xing the last two years,” he said quietly. “To keep myself from getting rusty, I started sparring with one of the Emperor’s elite guards. We became . . . well, not friends exactly, but we learned a lot of respect for each other.” Ed turned to Roy. “Do you remember what Ling Yao told you about Qi?” he asked.

It took the Führer a moment to think back to that dark time months before the Promised Day, Gluttony’s capture, the safe house, a monster on the rampage. “It had something to do with how he, Lan Fan, and her grandfather were able to sense the homunculi, didn’t it?”

“Yes,” Edward nodded. “Simply put, the conceptual base for Xingese Alkahestry recognizes that
there is a flow of life energy within the earth that nourishes the world, like blood circulating through a living body. They call this flow Lung Mei – the Dragon’s Pulse. The life energy is called Qi, and even those who don’t practice Alkahestry can learn to sense it. The Royal warriors of Xing’s fifty clans are taught to read the flow of the Dragon’s Pulse as part of their elite training, so they can tune in to their surroundings. They use it to sense the presence of living beings around them, reading the pulse of Qi within their bodies.”

Roy nodded his understanding, and Ed continued. “At first sparring with Lan Fan was pretty frustrating. I’m fast, but her blocks and strikes were always just a bit faster. It took me a while to notice that she was actually moving a fraction of a second before I did. I finally asked her about that, and she explained that my Qi was telegraphing my intentions.

“I talked to Ling about it, and he set me up with this old blind guy who trains the palace guard. Master Po taught me a deep meditation technique that helped me tap in to the Dragon’s Pulse. He was kind of surprised that someone my age was able to learn to do it. The Clans usually start training their warriors very young, around eight or nine years old.”

“It doesn’t surprise me that you could achieve such a deep level of concentration,” Roy contended. “I was always amazed at how completely you could become absorbed in your research.”

“So this Qi stuff warned you that something was wrong?” Chris asked with a frown.

“Yes.”

“And that’s how you knew exactly where the assassin was, even though you couldn’t actually see him,” Roy concluded.

Ed nodded.

“That’s an excellent ability for a personal body guard to have,” Riza observed thoughtfully. “I don’t suppose you’d be interested in . . .”

“No, he wouldn’t,” Roy said, beating Edward to his rejection of the job offer, surprising everyone else in the room. “There is, however, something important I’d like to say.”

Roy stepped over to the smaller man and leaned in slightly so that they were eye to eye. “Don’t you ever place yourself in the line of fire for me again,” he said, voice cold as ice.

“You’re welcome, asshole,” Ed replied cheerfully.

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Two o’clock in the morning had come and gone, and Heymans Breda still had not arrived to share what he had discovered about his Führer’s attackers. Roy continued to pace out his impatience, now in a windowless conference room at Central headquarters. Edward sat hunched over the large conference table, chin in his hand, following Roy with narrowed eyes. He had been offered a ride from Whispers to wherever he chose, but had elected to accompany Roy and his security contingent to Headquarters instead, and Roy had not been inclined to object. Riza stood at ease by the only door, watching as the Führer’s restless movements gradually increased Edward’s annoyance. The blonde woman had been very subdued, no doubt blaming herself for not being there to protect her old friend.
A quiet knock at the door proved not to be the awaited Investigations Division head, but the coffee brought by Colonel Falman was still much appreciated. The stoic older man stayed just long enough to sample the oppressive atmosphere and express his relief at the Führer’s narrow escape, then excused himself to go on about his business.

Riza left her post at the door, the soothing aroma of freshly brewed dark roast luring her to the conference table. She had just set out three mugs when Breda burst through the door and entered the room with a purposeful stride. Shooting Roy a sloppy salute, he passed a bulging file folder to his commander with a grim smile.

“That’s everything we have so far,” he said. “We know the one you took out was male, Sir, but that’s all we could tell from the remains. We think he got to the fire escape from the roof of the apartment building it’s attached to, but nobody saw him. The one that was in the limo was also male, about thirty years old, and we have confirmed that he was not attached to the Transportation Division, or the military in general. We found the sergeant originally assigned to chauffer duty in his downtown flat. It looks like he was killed earlier this evening, probably just before his scheduled shift. The assassin who took his place had letter perfect identification, and all the right answers. The sergeant who turned your car over to him never suspected a thing.”

“The drivers made a shift change while I was in Whispers,” Roy said, reading the report. “That’s unusual. How did the assassins know where I was going to be? I only made the date with Chris about three hours prior to heading over there.”

“We’re still trying to figure out how they were able to execute their plan on such short notice, and why they chose to go after you at Whispers.” Breda crossed his arms over his barrel chest. “Kain Furey is checking all telephone lines at the Manor and here at headquarters for bugs, but so far everything is clean. We’ll be checking the lines at Whispers and Chris Mustang’s place next. It’s too bad neither assassin survived.”

Roy continued to flip through the folder in his hands, scowling as he paged through the case file, briefly scanning witness statements and crime scene photos. The assassins’ blatant disregard for collateral damage appalled him. The number of shell casings collected at the scene proved that this security fiasco could have exacted a much higher toll from innocent bystanders.

“Have any known terrorist organizations taken credit for the attempt?” he asked.

“No,” Heymans stated, “and I don’t think this was a terrorist act. I’m afraid this mess is going to impact on our relations with Drachma.” Roy looked up for clarification, and the heavyset redhead continued. “We think we have a name for one of them. Ilia Kuryakin.” He flipped a tattered envelope onto the table in front of Edward. “That’s who this letter is addressed to. We found it in the jacket pocket of the assassin in the limo. I have a team sweeping the Central address. It’s a fleabag hotel in the Red Quarter. Two men checked in two weeks ago, speaking Amestrian with a slight Drachmann accent. The manager identified the limo driver as one of them. For the most part the two men stayed in their room. They received one letter, last week – identified by the hotel manager as the one we found on the assassin, and one phone call, this afternoon, after which they left the hotel.” The heavy set Intelligence Chief gestured toward the slim white packet. “The letter is written in Drachim. You want to read it Ed?”

Ed examined the envelope before removing the letter. He unfolded the dog-eared page and began reading, then huffed a small laugh.

“It’s a love letter,” he said, looking up. “From a girl named Alya Vetryak. Pretty explicit, too.” He continued to read, then looked over the envelope again and frowned. “According to the return address, it was posted in Роподке, but a Drachmann didn’t write this.”
Breda was suddenly alert, and moved to sit at the table across from Ed. “What do you mean?” He wanted to know. “My forensic team confirmed that Rope-keya, or however you pronounce it, is a small town in northern Drachma, and the postmarks are consistent with standard Drachmann protocols. The Amestrian border stamp is also authentic.”

“I’m not saying that the letter didn’t come from there, I’m saying no native Drachmann wrote this. It’s all fucked up.” Irritated at Breda’s continued scepticism, Edward’s frown deepened, and he and ran a searching finger down the page. “Like . . . this. She calls him Zhuchka. That’s a Drachmann name for a black dog. Whoever wrote this probably confused it with zhuchok, which is a masculine term of endearment. And here, pchyolka, ‘little bee’. That’s a feminine nickname that a parent would use for a little girl, not something a woman would call her male lover. This letter is full of screw-ups like that. My guess is that whoever ordered the hit wanted to make it look like Drachma was involved. Or maybe they are, and this is just a red herring.”

Breda stared at the blond man across the table for a moment, then briskly stated, “I want you on my team. Get reinstated.”

Edward’s jaw dropped, appalled. “Fuck off!” he said with great conviction.

“Do it,” the stout Redhead ordered. “I’ll promote you to Lt. Colonel on the spot.”

“Like I care. No. Way.”

Breda changed tactics, losing his stern military bearing and adopting one of friendly cajoling. “Good money. Great opportunities. National Library,” he said with a conspiratorial wiggle of his eyebrows.

Edward just looked at the man and quietly laughed a dark, dangerous laugh.

Scrubbing his face, the Brigadier General momentarily considered his options before trying again. “Okay then. How about this: independent investigator, under contract to the Intelligence Division, reporting exclusively to me.”

Edward snorted. “You couldn’t afford me.”

Roy and Riza froze, coffee mid pour, and their heads whipped around to stare at the two seated men. Edward’s response had been a very definite ‘maybe’.

And Breda knew it. He put both hands firmly on the table and pushed himself to standing. Then, palms flat on the polished wooden surface, arms straight, he leaned toward Edward. The portly redhead’s barbed wire grin was challenging, clearly stating that this punk kid was going down.

“Talk to me,” he rumbled in a low voice.

The room became very still. Ed slowly moved to match Breda’s stance, leaning in until their noses were a bare hand width apart, his cocky smirk answering the issued challenge, encouraging this old geezer to bring it on. He locked eyes with his opponent. “Hazard pay rates. Double if I have to go out of town. Triple if I have to work with some dipshit partner you think is necessary.”

“You got it.” No hesitation.

“I get injured on the job, you pay for my medical expenses, repairs to my automail, and full wages while I’m on medical leave.”

Breda snorted. “Obviously.”
“Per Diem allowance for travelling expenses.”

Breda’s beady grey eyes narrowed. “Again, obviously. Who do you think I am?” All eyes in the room shifted momentarily toward Roy, who pretended not to notice.

“The right to refuse assignments.”

Breda thought that one over for a few moments. “Conditionally. I want the corresponding right to a justifiable explanation for the refusal, and the right to try to convince you otherwise, verbally, monetarily, or both.”

“Done. Employment contract. One year term with an option for renewal. No offence, but I need this on paper.”

Breda grinned. “I would too, in your position. I’ll get it written up. You read it. If it needs to be modified, that happens. We both sign when it’s right.”

“Three month trial period, during which time the contract is dissolvable by either party, without penalty.”

Breda’s grin widened. “Nice touch. Fair enough.”

“No interrogations. I hate that shit.”

Breda lifted a hand to rub his chin, the sound of his fingers scraping against stubble clear in the quiet of the room. “I might occasionally need you to interpret. As a bystander. I might also need you as a covert observer on occasion.”

Edward considered this for a moment. “Done. No fucking uniform.”

The Brigadier General’s grin became predatory. The kid was caving, obviously just clutching at straws now. “Civies don’t wear uniforms, duh.”

“Is it me, or do you actually plan to agree to just about anything I ask for?” Edward asked testily.

Breda shrugged. “Within reason.”

Edward prepared to test that claim. “Unrestricted access to the National Library, including the First Branch.”

Breda shot a glance at the Führer, who nodded. “Check. Anything else?”

“When do I start?”

The redhead checked his watch. “About two hours ago.” He thrust out his hand. Ed gripped it for a single, firm shake. “Taking part in the investigation of this assassination attempt is your first assignment. Any objections?”

“None.”

“It’s all yours. My forensic team is on the scene right now. Check in with Colonel Carrella. I’ll expect a report tomorrow morning at 0800 hours. With recommendations. You need anything, you let me know.”

Edward grinned and headed for the door. “Fine with me. Sleep’s overrated anyway,” the blond shot over his shoulder as he walked out.
The tension in the room walked out with him, and Roy suddenly found he had been holding his breath. He exhaled. “What the hell just happened?” he asked.

“I think Heymans just hired Edward,” Riza said looking a little shell-shocked herself, eyes still on the door Edward had closed behind him. She turned to look at Roy as if for confirmation. “Heymans just hired Edward.” Roy nodded slowly, and the blonde woman resumed pouring coffee into the Führer’s cup, then filled another and brought it to a smugly posturing Breda. “Congratulations Heymans,” she said with a small bow.

“Thanks Riza,” the chubby Brigadier General said as he leaned cockily against the conference table. He savoured the aroma of his steaming coffee before taking a sip. “Got me an Elric under contract. Life is sweet.”

“Enjoy your victory, Heymans. You have every right to be proud.” Roy sipped his coffee as well. “I hope you still feel the same when the first building comes down.”

Riza hid her smile behind her cup as the redhead frowned.

“She’s not an alchemist anymore,” Breda pointed out. “How much damage can he possibly do?”

“I’m sure we’ll find out soon enough,” Hawkeye stated dryly. “And I don’t mind admitting that I’m quite looking forward to it.”

Roy just smiled. Considering that he had very nearly been assassinated earlier that evening, life was, indeed, sweet.
Dear Führer Mustang,

Thank you so much for the telephone call last Friday night. If we had heard about the attempted assassination on the radio first, we would have been terribly worried. Brother never realizes how upsetting it can be to get that kind of news second hand. Thanks to your timely phone call, we already knew both you and Edward had escaped injury and were safe and sound.

It’s unfortunate that you have been unable to find out who was behind the attack. I agree that it was all too carefully arranged to have been the work of those two assassins alone. Are you sure you shouldn’t delay your diplomatic mission to Creta for a little longer, perhaps just until you can resolve this threat on the home front? I realize that allowing terror tactics to force a change of plans is never a good policy. It would certainly be perceived as a sign of weakness. Still, would a simple delay really be so harmful? Throwing caution to the wind in a situation like this could be dangerously reckless. If these people are bold enough to attack you on home soil, how much more brazen might they be when you are in unfamiliar territory?

I suppose that I sound like a mother hen, but you are an old and dear friend. I enjoy our casual correspondence and would like it to continue for many years to come. The nature of your chosen position places you in harm’s way; it comes with the territory, and to be honest, all of us here in Resembool are very concerned for your safety. I know you have always done what you believe to be right regardless of the personal risk. That has been your way for as long as I have known you. But things are different now. You aren’t just a solitary man anymore. As a leader, you are the best hope this country has for a bright future. So if you won’t take extra precautions for your own sake, remember that as Führer you have an obligation to the people of this country, an obligation to carry us all into lasting peace and prosperity. You can’t do that from the grave.

That said, judging from what brother has told me over the phone, I’d have to say that his first week working for Brigadier General Breda has gone far better than any of us expected. He hasn’t revealed any details of the investigation over the phone, mainly because these rural party lines leak news like a rusty faucet leaks water, but he’s hinted that he has some vague ideas taking shape, and is clearly hell bent on finding answers. Please do mention that to Brigadier General Breda. Sometimes my brother forgets that he’s part of a team and tends to take the whole job upon himself, and while the leash you had him on back in the day was very long, as a civilian under contract that leash is even longer. The Brigadier General appears content to let Brother careen through Headquarters in his own inimitable style, shattering protocol and stomping military egos into the dust and I know that Edward won’t stop until he has the answers he seeks. I just hope he isn’t causing too much trouble for General Breda in the process.

As usual, I am enclosing a few photos of the family. I particularly like the one of Maes wearing brother’s old red duster. I didn’t know that Winry had it stored up in our attic, and it gave me quite a jolt to come upon the kids playing dress-up there one rainy afternoon. It brought back memories, both good and bad, of old friends and foes, old troubles and triumphs. It all seems such a long time ago. Still, there are new challenges for us to meet every day. Everything worthwhile, big or small, is worth fighting for I suppose. That old coat was like a flag for brother and I – and perhaps others as well – to rally around, a symbol of our strength and resolve. These days you are that symbol for this country.

Please be careful.

Sincerely,
Alphonse Elric
Travel by rail was the chief method of transportation in the modern age, and one of the perks that the Führer of Amestris enjoyed was the luxury of a private coach. While less prestigious travellers were forced to suffer the dubious comforts available in regular passenger cars, Roy and his retinue could instead enjoy their journey to Creta aboard the President’s personal railcar.

This particular finely appointed private varnish had been custom built for the Führer during the Bradley administration, and boasted all the modern conveniences necessary for business and pleasure away from home. To the casual observer, the car appeared to be a sixty-foot wood panel coach of standard construction. In actuality, it was a streamlined fortress of riveted, reinforced steel. The opulent Crystal Peak interior was a veritable work of art, innovatively sectioned to include a parlor, dining room, kitchen, and private sleeping quarters for the Führer that included every conceivable amenity, all handsomely decorated with furnishings imported from Aurego, Creta, and Xing. Richly upholstered furniture offered comfort for road weary travelers. Polished mahogany paneling enclosed each room and framed the parlor’s solid marble gas fireplace, a tasteful 18th century landscape dominating the space above the mantle. A single, intricately wrought crystal chandelier lit the sitting room. Gold silk draperies accented brass framed windows. Every possible allowance for comfort had been anticipated and made, with a state-of-the-art communications system completing this rolling testament to the trappings of power and influence.

And of course, Roy hated it with a passion. Yes, he understood that in the high stakes political environment he inhabited, a display of wealth could be just as important as a show of force. Perception was often a critical concern, the perceptions of political opponents in particular. When it came right down to it, politics was all about seduction, and nothing could teach the mechanics of seduction like spending your formative years in a brothel, watching and learning. Roy was a master at this game. He knew there was very little difference between a smile and a veil, or a luxurious private railcar and a suit of social armor. Distraction and deception were viable defensive strategies in vulnerable situations, and he made good use of them. He appreciated luxury as much as the next man, for what it was worth, so he gritted his teeth and endured. It still galled him to imagine the inhuman monster that had previously ruled this nation so ruthlessly, flaunting such extravagance while the country burned at its master’s whim. This private coach was filled with the restless specters of Amestris’ betrayed brothers in arms, standing side by side with their victims.

At the moment, however, the Führer’s private car was also teeming with living personnel, and anything but private. Guards stood at both the front and rear doors, and Roy wouldn’t have been at all surprised to discover a few on the roof. The Führer’s four chief mediators lounged in the parlor, hammering out the details of their planned negotiations, wondering who their leader might name as Ambassador when this historic treaty was ratified. Hawkeye, Hayoc, and Breda had commandeered the radio room, occupied with the business of running a country in absentia. Miles had been left behind to hold the fort, but kept in close contact with his commander’s staff, relaying news both local and international. As for Edward, Roy knew he had reboarded from their last stop with the rest of the Führer’s retinue, but to where he had since disappeared was anyone’s guess, and Roy envied the younger man’s freedom.

When the train was once again well underway and his staff was fully engaged with their various duties, Roy had unobtrusively slipped down the coach’s long, narrow hallway to the dining room, then through the bustling little kitchen to the back door - his ultimate goal. Stepping outside, he took a much needed breath of fresh, midsummer air, then lingered to watch the countryside recede beyond the rear observation platform’s ornate railing.
Their early morning halt in the small logging town of Ehring, three days out of West City, had mainly been for fuel and provisions, but had included the incidental massaging of local governmental egos as well. Despite the early hour, there had been a fair sized crowd on hand to greet the Führer, but that had been no real surprise. Country folk were used to rising before the sun, and it wasn’t every day that the leader of their country dropped by for a quick visit. The townsfolk had raised a hearty cheer, frantically waving small Amestrian flags when Roy had stepped out onto the tiny station’s platform. They appeared genuinely pleased to see him, and he savored the memory. It was times like those, interacting with honest, hard working people outside the precincts of political gamesmanship, buffeted by their approving cheers, when Roy came to the tentative conclusion that he must be doing something right.

The quaint logging town on the Muskwa River was now hours behind them, and had been the last stop before Creta’s border, scheduled for later that afternoon. The locomotive was winding its steady way through the mountains that defined the two countries’ borderlands, and the view was spectacular: lush green valleys skirting craggy peaks crowned by wispy clouds in a dazzling blue sky. The rhythmic clack of steel wheels over rail joints changed subtly as the train moved onto a high trestle, and Roy leaned forearms on the fantail’s polished banister to peer down between the wooden ties at the gleam of sparkling water in the gorge far below.

The train’s sombre whistle sounded, and Roy leaned out to glance up the track toward the engine as the short line of coaches wound a long turn around the edge of a low ridge. For this leg of the journey the four car section that carried the military was tacked on behind five regular passenger cars with a single dining car tucked in between. Though the enlisted men of Roy’s honor guard could enjoy their meals in the dining car if they so chose, most tended to stay in the troop carrier or sleeper car. As well, the numerous civilian passengers also sensibly chose not to intrude in military territory.

A quiet click of the door latch alerted Roy that his hiding place was discovered, but before he could turn, Edward was beside him. The younger man settled his palms on the banister and inhaled a deep, satisfying breath of clean mountain air. His tail of flaxen hair gleamed in the bright summer sunlight as it slipped over his shoulder, teased by the light breeze that eddied past the coach. As usual, he was casually dressed in dark denim slacks and a white button up, tan jacket left open. It set him apart from the rest of Roy’s staff in their perfectly tailored dress blues, but that was par for the course where Edward was concerned, and always had been.

Neither man spoke, comfortable with the silence.

Hawkeye had been the one to suggest that Edward be invited along on this diplomatic mission to Creta. The former alchemist had casually mentioned that he’d spent over a year in the west, ‘checking shit out’, and she had argued that his fluency with the Aerugoan language and familiarity with the culture would be invaluable. Roy had known full well, however, that she also counted Ed’s unique talents and experience as a body guard among his chief qualifications for the job. Roy had not objected for his own reasons. There was no telling how long it would take to successfully conclude this endeavour, and having Ed along in a professional capacity was definitely a better option than being without him indefinitely, though that wasn’t working out quite the way Roy had hoped. Edward’s reasons for agreeing to attach himself to this mission remained a mystery, particularly given that he was technically under Roy’s direct command - a position that Ed had previously, and most strenuously, refused to entertain.

Roy glanced towards his companion, noting the slight frown creasing his brow. Before he could ask about it, Edward spoke up.

“This train is full of pompous assholes, and most of them work for you,” he said, eyes still on the landscape.
“Most? Not all?”

“You heard me.” Edward squinted up at the sky.

“Have you been relaxing up front with the regular passengers again, Edward?” Roy asked, though he already knew that was the case, as it had been for most of their week-long journey.

“The regular passengers are more interesting company,” the blond returned. “Don’t pretend you’re not wishing you could too.”

Roy couldn’t actually deny it, but did anyway. “I’m perfectly comfortable in the company of my staff,” he stated confidently. “Did you have a run in with someone in particular?”

“Some dumbass General. I forget his name.” Ed waved a hand dismissively. “One of the negotiators. You’d think a guy in that line of work would be more diplomatic.”

“Which reminds me,” Roy said, schooling his expression to neutrality. “Heymans has asked me to request on his behalf that you stop referring to Major General Olverson as ‘that fucktard’, particularly to his face, if you don’t mind.”

“Hey, I calls ‘em as I sees ‘em,” Ed said. “I have trouble remembering names sometimes, okay? So I catalogue people by intellectual characteristics. It’s a mnemonic technique.”

Roy raised a skeptical eyebrow, holding Ed’s gaze unflinchingly. The younger man kept his air of indifference, but finally shrugged.

“Okay,” he relented, though unapologetically. “I’ll keep that nickname to myself if it makes Breda happy.”

“I’m sure it will,” Roy told him. “Despite having to smooth a lot of ruffled feathers around headquarters, he’s still very pleased to have you on his team. Your contribution to the investigation has been invaluable.”

It was a fact. Although the investigation was currently at a standstill, Edward had thrown himself into the process with his typical, single-minded determination. From the minute he had accepted the assignment, he had been engaged in every conceivable aspect of the case, including the international connection. Thanks to his nomadic lifestyle, the former alchemist appeared to have amassed a considerable network of friends in neighboring countries, of which he made efficient use. Within hours, the blond had confirmed that there was indeed an Alya Vetryak living in the small, north Drachma town of Рородке. She was an eighty-seven year old babushka, half blind and missing all but three teeth, and had laughingly assured her questioner that she was not in the habit of penning racy letters to young men she didn’t know.

The team’s examination of the deceased assassins’ hotel room had uncovered even more conflicting particulars. Much like the Drachmann letter, the personal effects in the room were rife with cultural miscues. The clothing was a mix of styles common to Creta and Aerugo, but a few of the Aerugoan shirts were actually styled for women. Both suitcases were battered from rough use but yielded no useful clues when they and their jumbled contents proved to have been purchased from a local thrift shop just hours before the two assassins checked in to the hotel. The recently issued passports discovered in the otherwise empty dresser were legitimate, but had originally been issued to Drachmann nationals who had been deceased for over a decade. The two gunmen were definitely not locals, but they had covered their tracks very well. How they had arrived in Central and where they had come from remained a mystery. There was no way to trace exactly who these men were, or who sent them. The investigation had run straight into a wall.
“‘Invaluable.’ Yeah, right.” Edward was rolling his eyes. “Say that after we figure out who was actually behind the shooting,” he said, frustration evident.

Roy took the opening he had been looking for. “Do you have any personal thoughts on that?” he asked.

“Not really,” Ed told him.

“Oh?” Roy examined his fingernails. “Alphonse seems to believe otherwise.”

“Little brothers should learn to keep their mouths shut,” Ed muttered. “I do have a theory, but it’s pretty vague.”

“Care to share it?”

“When I firm up the details.” Ed looked at Mustang, resolute. “I promise; you’ll be the first to know.”

“I will hold you to that,” Roy warned. “In the mean time, have lunch with me.”

“You’re having lunch with that staff you’re so comfortable with,” Ed said, casting Roy a disdainful sideward glance. “Besides, I think I make your stewards nervous. I’m heading for the dining car with the rest of the grunts.”

“Dinner then.”

Ed shook his head. “No thanks,” he said, tone sour. “Hawkeye wants to go over security protocols for our arrival in the capital.”

“Again?” Roy came as close to pouting as a senior dignitary can manage without sacrificing his dignity. “The woman is relentless! Come on, Ed. We haven’t spent more than handful of moments alone together since we boarded this train in Central a week ago. You always have something else to do. How can you be busier than everyone else on the train, including me? And why do you insist on kitting out in the troop sleeper when you could be sharing my bed?” Roy reached out a hand and ran gentle fingers over the blond’s smooth cheek, then cupped it in his palm. “Why do I miss you, when you’re right here?”

Edward’s scowl softened as his face nestled into his lover’s touch, just for a moment, before easing away. “I . . . don’t know,” he murmured. “It’s . . . complicated. I don’t want to make you . . . make things . . . difficult for you.”

Before Roy could question that confusing statement, a steward appeared in the doorway behind them to announce that lunch was served, and the pimply faced young private did indeed cast a nervous glance Edward’s way. With a wry smile Ed disappeared into the depths of the coach, out of sight and away. Roy had no choice but to follow the steward to the dining room.

Führer Mustang’s lunch guests, the four senior members of his negotiating team, were already assembled around the elegantly appointed dining table, leaving the seat at its head for him. They snapped sharp salutes in unison, and he lifted his hand smartly in return, setting them at their ease.

Colonel Fay Rudland, as the only woman present, took her seat first, to the left of her Führer. The youngest of the team, she had earned her place as one of its leaders through sheer determination. Her track record included successful negotiations with the Ishballan legation under conditions of extreme duress. She had kept her head in intense situations when tempers ran hot, never wavering in her commitment to a peaceful conclusion to her mission of conciliation, and had proved herself to be a
fair and honorable individual. The petite redhead had earned the respect of the Ishballans and her Amestrian colleagues alike. Her only fault, as far as Roy was concerned, was her all too obvious infatuation with her Führer.

Taking his seat to Rudland’s left, Lieutenant General Alton Dearth settled his substantial girth comfortably into the well upholstered dining chair and waved the steward over to refill his wine glass, running a hand through thinning grey hair. Although he was the oldest member of the negotiating team, he was not the ranking officer. The older man had earned his place at the table by virtue of his many years of experience in situations requiring tact and diplomacy of the highest caliber. Dearth had been an exemplary officer under Führer Bradley, but Roy didn’t hold that against him. Indeed, the man had proven his loyalty to Amestris when he ordered the unit under his command to join the rebel forces under General Grumann on the Promised Day.

Colonel Phillip Overholt was not quite as old as Alton Dearth, but it was difficult to estimate his age. The man’s boyish good looks and affable nature made him a very popular officer – something that Roy Mustang certainly identified with. Overholt had worked his way up the ranks at a much more casual pace than the current Führer however, the advancement of his career taking a back seat to his familial obligations. Given half a chance, the man could wax eloquent about his wife and adult children endlessly, though he had nothing on Maes Hughes. Roy knew the man would much rather have been seated across the table from Mrs. Overholt instead of Major General Dearth, but his sense of duty had compelled him to volunteer for this mission, and Roy could not refuse him. Overholt had a talent for thinking on his feet, often coming up with unique solutions to complex problems, and Roy knew that talent would certainly be called upon many times over the course of these negotiations.

The man seated to his Führer’s immediate right held the honor of being this mission’s ranking officer, and was therefore the delegation’s chief commander. Lieutenant General Jerald Ethan’s steely grey eyes swept over his assembled team with pride, then turned a pleasant smile to Roy. A few years Roy’s senior, the man’s confident manner and noble bearing expose his aristocratic lineage, but much like Mustang himself, he had risen through the ranks on merit alone. Ethan was an old acquaintance of the current Führer. The two men had worked together quite often while stationed at East Headquarters under General Grumman, though Ethan had outranked Mustang at the time. He was a level headed commander, an astute negotiator, and an exceptional soldier. Roy had appointed him as lead negotiator for the diplomatic mission in Aerugo, and hadn’t regretted it for a moment. The man knew when to take the reins, and when to give his trusted staff their heads – the mark of a good leader. It was largely due to Ethan’s efforts that the Aerugoan negotiations had gone so smoothly. Roy had awarded him a promotion to Lieutenant General when the delegation had returned triumphant to Central, and could think of no one more qualified to take command of the current mission to Creta.

The stewards promptly served a light salad, and the party quietly sampled the fresh romaine lettuce, artichoke hearts, tomatoes, golden Aerugoan peppers, and red onions drizzled with a sweet vinaigrette, their appetites initially taking priority over their need to make conversation, aside from voicing approval for the appetizer. That changed as the attentive servers cleared empty plates.

“I understand we will be arriving in the Cretian capital two days from now, sometime in the evening.” Rudland leaned back, wine glass in hand.

“Yes,” Roy confirmed. “I trust you have your strategies in place? All reasonable contingencies anticipated?”

“Of course,” Ethan stated with a confident grin. “The fine tuning will naturally follow when the battle is joined,” he joked.
Roy returned the smile easily. “I suggest that you take the opportunity to relax on this last leg of our journey,” he said, addressing the team. “You likely won’t see much down time once we meet with Constantine IV and his staff.”

Dearth waved his empty wine glass at a passing steward – his second refill Roy observed. “It would be much easier to relax without having to deal with insubordinate brats who waltz in and out of the coach like they own the place,” the older man grumbled.

Uh oh. “To whom might you be referring?” Roy asked, though it was becoming clear to which General Ed had been alluding with his ‘pompous asshole’ remark.

“Edward Elric,” Overholt stated with a grimace. “The young man can be terribly rude.”

“Hmm.” Roy remained noncommittal.

“He barged right through a private conference we were having in the parlor this morning.” Dearth stated, lip curled. “He should know better than to interrupt the discussion of serious matters of state. And if he doesn’t, he should be instructed.” The man was clearly outraged.

Rudland’s eyes were wide at the contempt in her colleague’s tone. “Well, to be fair, the parlor is the only way into and out of the coach,” she reasoned. “We can’t expect everyone to defer to our needs. Other personnel have a right to come and go as necessary.”

“He’s a civilian,” Dearth said dismissively. “He has no business in here in the first place. The other civilians on staff know better than to intrude. Elric should keep to himself until summoned to his duties, whatever they might be.” The man glanced at Roy with a studiously bland expression. His wine glass was empty again.

The stewards had arrived with the main course, a broiled chicken cutlet on a bed of curried rice, and began to serve. Dearth signalled with his glass for another refill.

“Edward Elric is here on General Hawkeye’s recommendation, in an official capacity as cultural advisor, and as my personal interpreter,” Roy stated to the group at large. “His native fluency in a number of Creta’s dialects and his extensive knowledge of the many and various Cretian ethnic customs ensure that he will be a valuable asset to our team.”

Dearth snorted his opinion of that claim.

“Your personal interpreter? Are you sure that’s wise, Excellency?” Overholt asked. “There’s a very good chance that he could prove to be an embarrassment to you. If you had heard how he spoke to Major General Dearth . . .”

Roy wondered how Dearth had first spoken to Edward. “Mr. Elric came highly recommended by the Emperor of Xing.” Roy sipped his wine. “He served under Ling Yao as an interpreter in the Imperial court for two years before returning to Amestris. I am satisfied with his credentials, and trust he will conduct himself in a completely professional manner.”

Roy’s officers did not look convinced.

“You do realize that we are speaking about the former Fullmetal Alchemist,” Roy tried again. “He was known as the Alchemist for the People for very good reasons. He proved himself countless times not only in battle, but as an envoy of good will to the people of Amestris, Ishbal, and beyond. And it is no exaggeration to say that he was instrumental in the ultimate defeat of the monster that nearly succeeded in absorbing the life essence of every man, woman, and child in this country.”
“And lost his ability to do alchemy in the process, I understand. Pity,” Dearth said as he sliced into his cutlet. “Without it, his state certification was gone, his glory days done. It must have been quite a blow. A shame that the boy should crash and burn so completely in his prime, to become nothing more than a worthless has-been of no consequence at such a young age. All he can do now is cling desperately to the coattails of men with real power.”

Roy heard Rudland’s dismayed gasp, noted Ethan’s incredulous stare, saw Overholt’s slack jawed shock, as cold rage overtook him in reaction to Dearth’s brutal and completely inaccurate assessment of Edward’s character. It was fortunate that the Führer was rendered momentarily speechless, as it gave General Ethan the opportunity to cut in and save his high commander from saying something he, or more likely Dearth, would regret.

“And tell me, Alton, where were you on the Promised Day when Elric was fighting that abomination with his bare hands, hm?” The Lieutenant General asked, steel in his tone. “I don’t recall seeing you out there, rallying the troops with the rest of us.”

“I took charge of communications that day!” the older man sputtered. “We all had a hand in that victory, regardless of what duty demanded of us!”

“Indeed,” Ethan mused, “though some hands were busier than others. Still, it’s a pity you weren’t there to witness that battle. If you had, you wouldn’t be so quick to scorn young Edward’s worth so carelessly. The Fullmetal Alchemist is still a hero in the eyes of many, and rightly so. They will not be so quick to forget him, despite your callous disregard.”

His anger under control, Roy was finally able to speak. “Well said, Jerald,” he stated quietly, leveling a cold gaze at Dearth. “This nation has come through terrible times. The healing process has really only begun, and the people who saw us through that final conflict will be a crucial part of that healing. There were many heroes who made victory possible that day. It would be inexcusable to dismiss their value now, simply because you believe that they are no longer of use to us.”

Dearth had the good grace to look abashed. “My apologies, Excellency,” he said, head bowed. “You’re right of course. Please excuse this old man’s folly.”

“Apology accepted, Dearth,” Roy said with an easy smile, keeping his lingering anger well hidden. He would henceforth be keeping a close eye on the old Major General. Such blatantly insensitive attitudes in responsible positions were political incidents waiting to happen.

The diners settled into their luncheon once again with polite small talk, and soon coffee and pastry were before them, the meal at an end. Roy excused himself as soon as graciously possible to go in search of Edward. He was beginning to understand the younger man’s standoffish behaviour of late. Moving through the narrow hallway toward the parlor, the Führer was pleased to hear Edward’s voice.

“Just eat it, Brosh,” he was saying, rather exasperated.

Roy peeked into the parlor to see Ed pressing an orange into the hands of Second Lieutenant Denny Brosh, on guard at the door leading to the train proper. The nervous older blond handled the fruit gingerly, as if it might explode.

“I’m not supposed to eat in here,” he said. “General Hawkeye’s orders. And I’m on duty. She’ll kill me dead if she finds out.”

“She’ll kill you deader if you pass out from low blood sugar and leave the Führer unprotected because you were too nervous about this duty to eat lunch or breakfast,” Ed pointed out. He took the
orange from the anxious Lieutenant’s hand, quickly peeled it, and broke it into sections. “Open up,” he commanded.

Brosh reluctantly complied and Ed popped a section into his mouth. The orange disappeared in a few short moments. And none too soon. The door at Brosh’s back suddenly opened to a frowning Jean Havoc. The orange peel vanished into Edward’s pants pocket.

“What the hell, Ed,” Havoc said. “Don’t go distracting the guard. He’s supposed to be watching the door, and he never even saw me coming. What were you doing?” The Lieutenant General scowled at his blanching subordinate.

“Sorry about that, Havoc,” Edward said. “He told me to stop bugging him, but you know how stubborn I can be.” The blond grinned.

Havoc was about to reply, but stopped to sniff the air. “What’s that smell?”

Edward eyed him speculatively and said, “That was me. Sorry, I farted.”

Jean frowned. “No, it smells like oranges.”

“Yeah, like I said, I farted,” Ed told him, straight faced. “My ass is a miracle. What flavor would you like next?”

Roy chose that moment to step into the parlor and put Brosh and Havoc out of Ed’s misery. This was far more entertaining than dining with Generals. Both soldiers snapped to attention and saluted their smirking leader.

“At ease, gentlemen,” Roy said as he returned the salute. “Is there a problem?”

“No Sir,” Havoc said. “I have a message from General Hawkeye. She sends word that we will be at the Cretian frontier in approximately fifteen minutes.”

“Thank you, Major General,” Roy responded. It appeared that his talk with Edward would have to be delayed. Again. Damn. “Inform the officers in the dining room as well, if you please.”

By the time Roy finished issuing that order, Edward was once again out of sight.

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They had cleared the border without incident and were an hour closer to their destination when Roy finally found the time to go looking for Edward again. The late afternoon sun tracked his search through the various coaches, startling soldiers to attention and civilians to wide-eyed staring.

Roy had hoped that having Edward along on this mission might be a turning point of sorts; the prospect of spending an extended period together had been very appealing. He had greatly anticipated working with Edward, getting to know him from this new perspective, learning what it was like to work with him now. The young man was an intriguing mix of the familiar, brash adolescence Roy had had under his command, and a vibrant, complex adulthood. The time he had been spending with the young man up until now, an evening here and there, the odd weekend afternoon, just wasn’t enough. Roy wanted more, but still hadn’t worked up the courage to find out what Ed’s expectations were. The idea that the younger man might be content to continue as they were sent a small shiver through Roy’s soul. How much he wanted this odd and evolving friendship to become something deeper continued to astonish him. Had he felt this way in all his romantic affairs?
It had been so long since he had risked intimacy with another that Roy had forgotten what it was like to be in a new relationship. The almost obsessive longing, the warmth from a simple touch, the day dreams; he was rediscovering a peculiar and oddly pleasant sort of madness. It was a good thing the Führer hadn’t managed to hire Edward to his personal staff; nothing would ever get done. As it was, the past few months had been a dizzying series of highs and lows: highs when Edward was with him and lows when Edward was away, ranging around the country.

Since Breda had hired him, Ed had been occupied with the investigation in Central almost constantly, and even though the press of duty had kept them from spending much time together of late, Roy found a strange comfort in knowing he was close at hand. As the Führer had expected, Edward was an excellent addition to his inner circle, fitting almost seamlessly into established routines. He worked well with Roy’s close staff, renewing old ties and forging new ones, and aside from abrading military egos from time to time, had impressed many with his quick wit and razor sharp insights.

Edward had even managed to work his way under the skin of Roy’s house staff. The naturally impassive Winston was always genuinely pleased to see the young man whenever Roy brought him home. Shy Isa, the manor’s chef, had taken to whipping up delectable treats that she knew would catch Edward’s fancy. Everyone in the house had a warm greeting for Ed. The manor felt like home when Edward was there. Roy hadn’t had that feeling anywhere in many long years, and he found that he had missed it.

He wanted to keep it. Build on it. Which meant that he had to get to the bottom of Edward’s distance and put an end to it.

Roy found him in the dining car, playing cards with Riza and Heymans.

He stepped up to the table. “We need to talk,” Roy said without preamble.

The two senior officers knew exactly who their friend was speaking to. They immediately folded their cards and stood, Riza giving Roy’s shoulder a pat as she moved to the door. Edward watched as Roy slid into the seat across from him, face unreadable, and folded his cards as well. Roy studied the younger man for a moment, his guarded expression, his hands folded tensely on the table, his completely captivating golden eyes locked to Roy’s.

“My bed is too lonely to sleep in,” Roy said, his own figurative cards now on the table.

“So? What do I look like, a teddy bear?”

“No, you look like my lover. Or at least you did last week.”

Edward looked uncomfortable. “Last week we weren’t under a fucking microscope.”

Ah. “Welcome to my world. Funny, you never struck me as the shy type.”

“I’m not! It’s just . . .” Edward bit his lower lip hard, and Roy wanted to drag him across the table and run his tongue over it.

He didn’t. “Tell me.”

Edward squared his shoulders. “People talk,” he said. “And I couldn’t care less what they say about me, but when it comes to you, that’s different.” The blond held up a hand when Roy tried to interrupt. “No, let me finish. Rumor has it that I’m just here to warm your bed, and that makes you look . . . I don’t know. Bad. Like a pervert. People should look up to you. Respect you. In your position that’s important. I don’t want to screw that up for you, just because I . . . just by being
Roy was silent for a moment. “Do you believe that I only brought you along for sex?” he asked.

“No.” Flatly, with no hesitation. That was a relief.

“Good, because nothing could be farther from the truth.”

“Sometimes the truth doesn’t matter.”

“Edward,” Roy reached across the table and placed his hands over the young man’s. Ed did not pull away. “This is what it means to be in the public eye. People watch. They speculate. Sometimes they get it right. More often they get it wrong, sometimes on purpose. That isn’t going to change. If we are going to continue to see each other, you will have to accept it. It won’t be easy. The question is, do you think it’s worth the effort and aggravation?”

“That’s . . . kind of a stupid question.” Ed looked around the coach, taking in the covert glances other diners cast their way. “It is for me. But you have more to lose.”

“I’m the Führer of Amestris. I belong to the people.” Roy did not lower his voice. “But if I have to suffer travelling the countryside in this miserable gilded cage, I’ll damn well do it with my friend and lover by my side, thank you very much. I can at least have that for myself, can’t I?”

Edward shrugged, but his eyes were sparkling. “That’s kind of a stupid question, too. You want an early start on dinner? The corned beef hash is pretty good.”

“I am hungry. Just not for food.” Roy leaned in, letting the slow smolder reach his eyes, touch his voice. “Would you care to join me?” he purred, voice low, rough. “There are so many ways I want to show you how much I’ve missed you. So many ways I’d like to satisfy my appetite. And yours.”

His smile was silk.

Edward was still, pinned by the intensity of the older man’s smoky gaze, branded by his lover’s searing regard. “Holy fuck,” he breathed, quietly, a slight tremor in his voice.

“Exactly,” Roy murmured. Some animal part of him sparked to life, wanting to pull the younger man across the table and take his lips, his tongue, wanting to feel Edward respond, but there were other things he wanted more.

The only memories Roy had of getting from the dining car to his private sleeping quarters were of Edward’s eyes, gleaming honey, pupils blown wide; of his hair, shining like liquid gold in the late afternoon sun slanting into each carriage they passed through; of how Roy had never wanted to kiss anyone so badly.

Sliding the sleeping compartment’s door shut behind him, Roy paused to look at the younger man, really look at him, eyes following the curve of a smooth youthful cheek, the strong line of his jaw, the bow of parted lips, returning to probe the amber depths searching his in return. Reaching out, he touched the tips of his fingers to Edward’s cheek, skimming flushed skin to comb thick blond hair away from the man’s temple, rounding back to cradle the curve of his skull. Ed’s breath stuttered as Roy pulled him closer to lightly brush their lips together, and the blond’s patience finally ran out. Ed closed that last bit of distance between them and claimed Roy’s lips in a deep, almost desperate kiss.

There was nothing quite like kissing Edward Elric. Roy loved the intensity of Edward’s single minded purpose, how he devoted all of his considerable focus to kissing Roy. He loved the warmth of Ed’s hands when they came up to gently cup his face. He loved how Ed carded his fingers through Roy’s hair and carefully closed to tug him in tight. He loved how gentle fingers tracing the
hollow of his throat made Ed’s lips part and his eyes close. He loved how kissing Edward blurred their edges until they seemed to blend together, as if they were one person instead of two.

Ed’s sigh was soft as they parted, warm breath against his lips making Roy shiver. The double bed dominated the small compartment, and a single short step brought Roy to its side, holding Ed close. Roy eased down to sit on the plush surface and Ed shifted to straddled Roy's lap, grinning as hands gravitated to his hips as he settled. With one hand resting on Roy’s shoulder, the blond played absentmindedly with the collar of the man's uniform jacket, just looking, a familiar darkness in the young man’s gaze, there and quickly smoothed away. One of Roy's brows quirked.

"Are you just going to stare?" Roy asked with a touch of challenge.

"Why not?" Ed shot back, surprising the older man. Ed slid his hands to cup his lover’s face, leaning until their foreheads just touched. "You're well worth staring at."

One corner of Roy's mouth twitched up, and it was too much for Edward to resist. Tilting the older man’s head back, he brushed his lips across Roy's. Edward’s lips parted; a tongue-tip flicked out to tease Roy closer. Roy hummed appreciatively as Ed traced his lower lip, nipping gently, and purred, content, when Ed pressed for entry. Edward followed as Roy leaned back on his elbows, finally breaking away, and Roy moaned when he licked his lips and tasted Edward. How could he have known when this started that he’d end up so completely captivated?

Ed leaned in again, hands pressing Roy's shoulders to the bed. Roy's fingers slipped up under his lover’s shirt, skimming over heated skin.

"Take off my shirt," Ed whispered, tempting Roy with the promise of skin, and Roy made short work of the buttons.

Ed's long tail fanned spun gold over his shoulder as the shirt dropped to the floor, and grinning, the young man rose up on his knees to take hold of Roy's hands, guiding them to his belt.

"Come on," he said, watching Roy's face as the man's fingers deftly worked at buckle and zipper, unfastening tight denim and tugging it aside.

Roy reached for him, heard Ed’s breath hitch as searching fingers slid on his hardened length, but before Roy's hand could curl around him, his wrists were caught and pulled away. "Not yet." Roy's brows arched, but the man relented as Ed let him go.

"Don't move," Ed said softly. “Close your eyes.”

Roy’s eyes drifted closed as his jacket was slipped from his shoulders, down his arms and away, his white dress shirt following close behind. A shift of the mattress and the younger man lifted himself from Roy’s lap. Boots were pulled off, and socks. Sure hands slipped the noose of Roy’s belt, then worked the button and zip of his uniform pants. Hands ran down the long, lean muscles of Roy’s thighs to slip off his pants and boxers. Roy couldn’t resist a peek, and caught Ed admiring his handiwork, grin wide with appreciation for his lover’s physique laid bare before him. Roy did not have much time for the gym due to the demands of his position, but he managed as often as he could in the interest of keeping fit, and he was glad for it now, with Edward’s lustful gaze upon him.

Ed ran his hands up Roy’s thighs and over his hips to pause at the man's waist, staring keenly at the man's impressive erection. The heat of Edward’s desire, the pure want in his eyes, unfurled a hot and aching reply in the pit of Roy’s stomach. Roy closed his eyes once more and reached blind to find Edward’s arms, pulling him back to straddle his lap. Slow hands moved to glide up the outsides of Edward’s thighs, palms skidding on soft denim, searching. He felt his way to the younger man’s
unfastened zipper and slipped a hand inside the tight confines, his palm meeting slick hardness.

A gasp. "Roy...."

"Edward," Roy murmured back huskily, hands pressing pants down as far as Ed’s spread legs would allow, then curving further back to cup his ass.

Ed arched helplessly when Roy's fingers flexed, urging him closer, and his knees shifted wider apart until he was astride Roy’s waist, his groin pressed to the hard muscle of Roy's midriff, Roy’s arousal trapped beneath him.

"Oh." Ed said, a breathless moan as he rocked in place, and Roy pulled Ed down against him, Ed’s cock gliding slickly between them, leaking his excitement.

The younger man thrust again, craving friction, then leaned to seal his mouth to Roy's for a fast, desperate kiss. He pushed away a moment later, grinning at the faint sound Roy made as their lips parted. Amused, Ed bent to plant a wet, sucking bite low on Roy's throat. Roy swallowed, arching his head back silently for more, firm hands holding him in place.

But Roy was not content to remain passive any longer. Eyes open now, a lazy smirk on his lips, the older man circled an arm around the younger’s waist and sat slowly up. Chest to chest he eased backward to the bed’s center. A graceful tilt of hips guided Edward to recline beneath him. Roy quickly rid his lover of his remaining clothing, stripping it off to admire his compact, powerful body. Long, graceful hands stroked over Ed’s chest and stomach, tracing the thin line of fine golden hair down to the man’s sex, lifting just shy of the goal. Roy’s mouth made the skin of Edward’s midriff twitch as lips followed the trail hands had mapped, the smaller man’s hips jerking in anticipation for what was to come. The blond was stretched taut, teeth clenched, eyes shut tight, head turned to the side, frozen on the sheer edge of desire. The sight was incredible, and arousal pulsed hotter through Roy’s veins.

Curved over the man, Roy reached up and pressed two fingers to Edward’s lips, purring when they were sucked inside. Ed's appreciative moan was muffled when Roy flicked his tongue out to lick up the side of Ed's shaft. Ed sucked harder at his fingers as Roy wrapped his lips around the head of the man's cock, darting the tip of his tongue across the slit and circling the crown. The younger man convulsed under him, then gasped when he did it again, but his mouth never left Roy’s fingers, taking them in deep, and Roy took the hint, swallowing him to the hilt.

Hitched moans vibrated his fingers as Ed thrust helplessly up into his mouth, and Roy's own breath caught as sensations sparked up his spine. He had one knee planted between Ed's legs, and Ed shifted his trapped thigh up until it pressed against Roy's cock. Roy’s whole body jerked with reaction; he was so close, but it was too soon to let go. He forced himself to move away, settling with Ed's legs drawn up on either side of him - exactly where he wanted to be.

His fingers were wet and slick when he pulled them from Ed's lips. Ed didn't even pause, still thrusting up slowly into Roy's mouth, when Roy's fingers found his opening. He caressed the puckered skin, teasing as Ed rocked down on his fingers, his cock deep in Roy’s mouth, Roy sucking hard. Roy glanced up to catch Ed's open-mouthed gasp at his first intrusion, saw Ed's fists curl into the sheets, but Ed didn’t draw away, didn't ask him to stop, so he slowly pushed deeper. Crooking his fingers just slightly, he changed the angle, watching as Ed arched off the bed with a moan, and only then did he lift his mouth from the man's cock.

"Holy shit," Ed breathed, high praise indeed.

Roy wasn’t finished teasing his young lover yet. He dragged his tongue over the man's balls, a hand
slipping under one of Ed's knees and pushing until Ed got the hint. He lifted his legs, hooking them over the older man's shoulders as Roy licked steadily downward. Ed's breath stuttered as Roy circled his tongue lightly around his own fingers, saliva making it easier. He got his fingers as wet as he could, pulling them out almost completely and then thrusting back in deep. Part of him didn't want to stop because of the sounds Edward was making, low in his throat, raw and hungry. He could have listened to that all day, but instead he dragged his tongue up the sensitive skin behind Ed's balls and sat up.

More than spit was required for what Roy intended to do next. His free hand reached for the night table to fumble in the drawer, quickly finding the small tube of lubricant. Eyes locked to a panting Edward's, Roy popped the cap and slicked himself with the cool oil, then replaced his fingers with his cock in one long, slow thrust.

Ed's hoarse shout made Roy look up sharply, but Ed wasn't in pain; he was coming without a hand on him, back arched off the bed, cock pulsing, milky come painting his chest and stomach, and Roy almost came right there himself, feeling Ed's body clench rhythmically around him as he thrust into him. There was no way he was going to last very long, not after watching that. He wasn't slow, and was as careful as possible, but with Ed hissing breathless encouragement, legs wrapped tight around Roy's back as Roy pounded him hard and fast, in almost no time at all the older man was coming so hard he felt as if he had been struck by lightning.

Collapsed in a tangle of limbs, Roy almost didn't have the energy to move as he gradually caught his breath. He had an odd, overwhelming urge to see Ed's face however, so he levered himself up on one elbow. Edward's eyes were closed. Roy kissed them, and when they opened they were as contentedly satisfied as Roy felt.

"Are you alright?" Roy asked.

"You're just full of stupid questions today," Ed murmured.

Roy grinned as he settled, relaxing once again. He supposed they ought to get something to eat, but he just couldn't bring himself to move. It was comfortable to lie here like this, wrapped up in each other and boneless with contentment, the gentle rocking of the train soothing. In all honesty, he wouldn't mind staying right where he was until morning, except that Edward smelled amazing, and Roy was far too aware of the body he was pressed against. It wasn't long before he nuzzled his face deeper into the hollow between Ed's shoulder and neck, licking sweat-salted skin.

"Edward?"

"Mm?"

Roy smiled. "I'm still hungry." Ed was smiling as well when Roy rolled over him and pinned him with a kiss.

It looked like Major General Dearth was going to have to get used to seeing Edward in the Presidential coach more often. If the old man thought that the former Fullmetal Alchemist was nothing more than a bed warmer, he was a fool.

Because while Edward might not own the Führer's private coach, he was well on his way to owning the Führer.
The discomfort of his position woke him, head pounding, dizzy. It took a few moments for Roy to understand that he was slung over the shoulder of someone jogging steadily through a dense forest. Looking up toward the uneven ground flashing by, he was treated to a bird’s eye view of his own hands dangling near a tantalizingly flexing ass. An ass that Roy was intimately familiar with, though he had never seen it from quite this perspective before. And being very confused and disoriented, Roy did what any red blooded Amestrian would do in his position.

He reached out and gave one tight cheek a squeeze.

Ed stumbled in surprise, but was fortunately able to catch himself. “What the hell are you doing back there, you pervert?” he snapped, voice tight and breathless with exertion.

“What are you doing Edward?” Roy asked calmly. “Kidnapping a head of state is a capital offence.”

The younger man continued to run, not even pausing to explain. “This isn’t a kidnapping. It’s a rescue,” he said.

Unhelpful, Roy decided. The last thing he remembered before waking up slung over the younger man’s shoulder was making his way to dinner in his warm, comfortable, private train carriage with a warm, comfortable, highly amenable blond. He was definitely neither warm nor comfortable now, though the blond was still at hand. His gradually darkening surroundings were just on the unpleasant side of cool, and dangling upside down over Edward’s shoulder was making his stomach churn and his head throb.

“Put me down,” the Führer commanded, and when Edward did not immediately comply, he began to twist and kick. One booted foot connected, and the younger man doubled over, dumping his struggling burden to the ground.

“What the serious fuck, Mustang?” Ed snarled, rubbing his hip.

“What the hell is going on?” Mustang snarled back, scrambling to stand on unsteady legs. He was slowly coming out of his mental fog, taking note of the ache in his side, the sharp pain in his knee, the dull throb in his back, the uncomfortable dampness of his clothes. He registered Ed’s dishevelled appearance, his soot smudged face, the blood crusted below his ear. “Where are we?”

Edward studied Roy’s face for a moment before answering. “You don’t remember the crash?” Roy shook his head, which made the pounding even worse. Ed continued. “The train went off the tracks about four hours after we crossed the border into Creta.”

Roy didn’t even realize he was falling until two strong arms caught him, then settled him to the ground. Edward knelt on the damp loam beside him.

“Easy Mustang,” Ed said evenly. “You’ve been pretty much out of it, on and off for a few hours. Scared the crap out of me.”

Roy shook his head, then regretted it, wincing at the pain. “Tell me what happened,” he said, rubbing at a crusty temple, earning a sharp sting of pain. His hand came away wet, and he stared at the dark fluid on his fingers.

Edward tilted the older man’s chin up to peer into dark eyes, frowning as he pulled out a handkerchief to press against Roy’s head wound. “Scab rubbed off. You’re a mess,” he observed,
then held two fingers up in front of Roy’s face. “How many fingers do you see?”

“Two. And yes, I am dizzy. And yes, I feel nauseous. And yes, I am probably concussed.” Roy said testily as he took over the task of keeping pressure on his temple. “Tell me.”

“I will, but we have to keep moving. It’s getting dark, and I want to get to higher ground before the sun goes down. Can you stand?”

Roy proved it by staggering to his feet. Ed kept a careful hand under the older man’s forearm, and Mustang wasn’t foolish enough to object. Roy swayed for a moment before Ed ducked under his arm, draping it across his shoulders for support. He slipped his other arm around the older man’s waist and urged him forward. Soon the pair were moving as quickly as they could manage. The pace Edward set was taxing and made conversation difficult, so Roy was forced to keep his questions to himself.

The terrain was rough and rocky, made even more challenging by fading daylight. The Viridian Mountains were actually a vast system of mountain ranges that rose from the sea in southern Creta to cut a diagonal swath through much of northwestern Amestris. The weathered foothills in the vicinity of the Amestris-Creta border were not high, but the landscape was heavily forested and extremely rugged. It was slow going for the two men, but they managed to crest the ridge as the sun finally set.

Facing back the way they had come, Ed stood for a long moment, eyes closed, face tilted up as if scenting the air. Then, satisfied, he moved to the shelter of a few stunted pines. Carefully settling the older man against one burled trunk, he sat down cross-legged beside him as the stars slowly came out of hiding.

“There’s no one nearby,” the blond said, “but I don’t think a fire would be a good idea.”

“It’s cold,” Roy said, and shifted closer to his companion, slinging an arm around the younger man’s waist. His short uniform jacket wasn’t doing very much to keep him warm. “Tell me what happened. I still don’t remember anything.”

“What’s the last thing you do remember?”

Roy thought about that for a long moment. “Deciding to have dinner with you in the dining car.”

“Okay.” Ed scrubbed his face with a hand. “We were walking through the parlor when you stopped and said something about the train slowing down. There was an explosion, and the next thing I knew the coach was tilting over on its side.” Ed put an arm around Roy’s waist as well and pulled him in tighter. “It is pretty cold. I didn’t notice while I was running.” He was in shirtsleeves.

“Go on,” Roy prompted. “What happened?”

“The car rolled a couple of times, and when it stopped it was upside down. I could hear a lot of yelling and screaming outside, and then the shooting started. It took me a couple of minutes to find you in the wreck of the parlor. You wouldn’t wake up.”

“I’m awake now,” Roy said quietly. “How did we get here?”

“I dragged you out the rear door and took off for the woods using the dust and smoke for cover. It looked to me like your coach and the two ahead of it had separated from the rest of the train and derailed. We were lucky. The train was right on the edge of a steep ridge, but the cars got hung up in the big pines and didn’t slide over. There were people up on the high side shooting at us, and our soldiers were returning fire.”
Roy was silent for a few moments, digesting this. “You ran away.”

“Hawkeye told me to get you out of there, and I did.”

“Riza? She’s alright?”

“She was fine the last time I saw her.” Ed pulled away to look Roy in the eye. “She wanted you safe. It was an ambush. Guess who the target was.”

“I’m more concerned about who is responsible,” Roy said, pulling his knees up to wrap his free arm around them. “Was the attack related to the one in Central? Were our attackers Cretian military? Drachmann guerillas? Amestrian traitors? Little orange men from the moon? We’re lost in the middle of nowhere, Ed. We could use some help. Who do we trust?”

Edward shrugged. “We trust us.” He pointed directly away from where the sun had just set. “Amestris is over there, about fifty or sixty miles. We’re not lost. We know where we’re going.”

Roy rested his chin on his knees. “I admire your optimism,” he said dryly. “But you know as well as I do that getting back there won’t be a stroll in the park. No food, weapons, protection from the elements, miles from safety in hostile territory, with no way to tell friend from foe – we’re in an extremely desperate situation. Completely vulnerable.”

“Vulnerable?” Ed snorted. “Please. I’ve been in worse situations, and so have you. We’re not helpless. Oh. Yeah.” Edward reached into his pocket and pressed rough white cloth into Roy’s hands. “Your gloves. I took them from your coat.”

The older man looked at the gloves in momentary confusion. “Where’s my coat?”

“Hawkeye took it.” Ed shifted uncomfortably.

“Hawkeye took it?” Roy peered around at the darkening forest. “Why? What did she want it for? Where is she?”

Ed’s uneasiness was growing. “She’s . . . I don’t know where she is. We split up.”

“Split up?” That was incomprehensible to Roy, particularly in his current, slightly addled state. His most dedicated protector leaving his side in the midst of a deadly crisis? Unbelievable. Unless . . . “What did she want with my coat?”

“She . . . needed it.” Edward wouldn’t meet his eyes now.

“She . . . needed it.” Edward wouldn’t meet his eyes now.

“For what?”

“The . . . dogs.”

“Dogs?” Roy was beginning to think that perhaps he wasn’t actually conscious. This had to be some bizarre dream.

“That we think were probably . . . tracking us,” Ed said resignedly.

I took Roy a few moments to digest this information. Then his eyes narrowed, and he glared with lethal intensity at his former subordinate. “So let me get this straight,” he started, his voice cold. “Riza took my coat so she could lead the dogs that were tracking us away.” Ed nodded reluctantly. “I only have one other question, Edward. What the hell were you thinking?”

“We had no choice, Mustang!” The blond’s temper flared to life. “They were catching up, and when
we came to the river, she figured it was our best chance to get them off your trail. Hawkeye took off with your coat, and I waded upstream for a few miles to throw the trackers off our scent.”

Roy’s cold glare matched the younger man’s heated glower. “And you just let her go?”

“What the hell else could I do? Drop you and give chase? Fuck sake, Mustang! We’re talking about Hawkeye!” Edward’s eyes were blazing. “She didn’t open it up for discussion. She told me what she was going to do, told me what I was going to do, and then she took off.”

“Oh.” Roy’s tone was edged with frost. “And as we all know, you have a solid reputation for following orders without question. How could you let her do that? You should have stopped her!”

“Oh yeah?” Ed snarled, then held his middle finger up in front of Roy’s face. “How many fingers do you see now?”

Roy shoved the offending hand out of his face with a growl and grabbed a fistful of Ed’s collar, pulling his snarling face in close.

And crashed their mouths together. Hard.

Edward froze for a second, then grabbed the older man’s shoulders to shove him away. It took some doing. Roy fought for every inch, wrapping his arms tightly around Ed’s shoulders, clutching fistfuls of the younger’s hair and clothing to hold him in place. Edward finally managed space enough for speech.

“What the fuck, Mustang!” The blond was incredulous. “We’ve just survived a train wreck! You’ve got a concussion! We’re on the run!”

Roy’s only answer was an attempt to crush the younger man back into closer embrace. “We need to keep warm,” he purred.

“The kind of warm you have in mind could give you an aneurism!” Edward snapped, pushing back.

“But what a way to go,” Roy murmured, tightening his grip and attempting to use his greater mass to bear the younger man down, onto his back.

Ed twisted onto his side and straight-armed the older man, gaining some manoeuvring room – until Roy winced, a groan slipping past his gritted teeth. Edward froze, and Roy quickly pressed the advantage his deception had earned him. He lunged to pin Ed’s arms to his sides and flattened him down underneath him.

“Shit!” The younger man yelped as his head thumped back against the ground. “You devious bastard! Knock it off! I don’t want to hurt you!”

“Mmmm, warm,” Roy breathed. He pressed his face to his lover’s throat. “And you smell amazing.” The nip under Ed’s ear earned him another startled bark. “Taste amazing too,” Roy observed with a contented purr.

“Asshole,” Edward growled, and suddenly the ground and sky were swapping places. Roy found himself flat on his back, looking up at the scowling blond straddling his midriff, wrists held firmly down beside his head, tables turned. “What the hell, Mustang! Head injuries make you horny?”

“You make me horny, though the pinecone digging into my backside is a bit of a turnoff.”

“So I guessing a good, solid kick in the ass won’t do much for your libido either.” Roy wasn’t
listening anymore. He was marvelling at how incredible Ed looked crowned with twilight. “Hey Führer! You still with me?” No response. “Mustang? Roy?”

“Edward?” Roy looked around, confused. “Where are we?”

The amber eyes peered anxiously into onyx. “The train crashed. We’re on the run. Remember?”

Roy slowly shook his head, eyes wide.

Edward sighed. “Concussion. It’s going to be a long night.”

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By the time the sun rose the next morning, Roy was feeling more like himself, much to both men’s relief. His aches and pains were still present, and his joints and muscles had become rather stiff because of them, but his head was at last clear.

The two men had spent the night wrapped in each other’s arms for warmth alone. The long hours had been passed in disjointed conversation. Edward had not allowed Roy to sleep, worried about the severity of the older man’s head injury, and as a result, sunrise found both men completely exhausted.

And hungry. The two had never made it to the dining car for the proposed corned beef dinner the previous evening. The last meal Roy had eaten was lunch with his senior negotiation team and his stomach was complaining rather loudly. He was thirsty as well, and counted that as the greater concern. Going without food for an extended period would be uncomfortable. Going without water would quickly prove fatal.

With the sun hovering just above the horizon, Roy watched as Ed pulled the tie from his high tail, shook twigs and other vegetable detritus out of his luxurious mane, and then braided it back in a practical manner. Standing, he gave Roy a short nod, and without a word the tired pair faced into the rising sun and began to walk.

It was rough going. The mountains were not dauntingly high, but the grade was often steep, which made travel difficult both uphill and down. While Amestris might be fifty or sixth miles east as the crow flew, Roy and Ed were not crows. They had to traverse the hilly terrain on foot, over ridges and through valleys, sometimes skirting along rocky outcroppings, sometimes backtracking to find safer routes. Roy’s already bleak mood darkened further with the realization that the fifty mile estimate to the border was actually more than double that distance. And once the frontier was crossed, they still wouldn’t be out of the woods, literally or figuratively. They could still be many miles away from the nearest Amestrian town, with no idea in what direction it might be.

Pushing disheartening thoughts aside, Roy concentrated instead on putting one foot in front of the other. As the sun rose higher, so too did the temperature. The uncomfortable chill soon gave way to pleasant warmth. Roy shrugged out of his jacket, tying it around his waist by the sleeves to leave his hands free. It was a bothersome bulk, but he knew he couldn’t discard it. He would need the coat again that evening. The warmth of the day also brought out annoying flies, but not in any great quantity, so the annoyance was tolerable.

Sometime around midmorning the Amestrians chanced upon a sprawling bramble of sweet summer blackberries that cut the gnaw of their hunger to a reasonable level. Their foray into the prickly
bushes also flushed a fat rabbit, which Edward was fortunate enough to bag with a swiftly thrown blade – a tasty dinner to look forward to that evening. Later in the afternoon a sparkling stream satisfied their immediate need for water. They drank their fill, then washed dirt, grime, and dried blood away as best they could. Now all they needed was some way to carry the all-important necessity with them.

Casting around, Roy spotted a deadfall that contained materials suited to his needs. Edward watched with interest as the older man gathered a few sturdy branches and piled them on a bare stone by the stream. Eyes narrowed in concentration, Roy fixed the desired array in his mind, clapped, and touched his fingers to the wood. Blue tendrils of energy played about as the wood rearranged itself into two serviceable canteens. Smiling with satisfaction, he handed one to his grinning companion.

“I forgot you could do that,” Edward said as he accepted the container and began to fill it. “I was just about to draw an array.”

“I don’t have many opportunities to use that talent these days,” Roy said as he knelt down beside the younger man to fill his own canteen. “In a combat situation I still tend to use my gloves; it’s a conditioned reflex that has never failed me, and I’m not inclined to change.”

Ed shrugged as he plugged the cork into his canteen and slung it over his shoulder by the strap. “If it works, don’t fix it.” He hefted the rabbit by its hind legs. “Can you transmute some twine? I want to sling this over my shoulder too.”

Roy complied, and soon the pair were once again on the move. The water and berries had gone a long way toward improving his general mood, but by early afternoon the older man was nearly stumbling with exhaustion. Edward appeared unaffected, but little by little slowed their pace until they were barely making any progress at all. The sun was still high above the western horizon when he finally called a halt in a small rowan copse partway down a gentle slope, much to Roy’s great relief.

With the sun sinking behind it, the heavily wooded leeward rise was already cool, and Roy began to gather stones for a firepit as Edward collected wood, twigs, and dry grass for tinder. Working together their task was soon completed, and Roy pulled on a glove. In no time at all a small, nearly smokeless fire was warming the two tired travelers sitting beside it.

Edward pulled out a short blade and began to fashion a spit for their supper. When he finished, he laid the blade aside to set the wooden structure up over the fire. Roy picked up the familiar broad-bladed knife to examine it. T-shaped with a wooden handle, it was the same style as the ones Maes Hughes had been partial to. The haft was polished smooth from wear, the blade honed to razor sharpness. Roy tested the edge with a thumb, then balanced it across the back of his hand.

“Gracia gave that to me.” Ed expertly secured the struts of his cooking frame with twine, then glanced at his older companion.

Roy had nothing to say. He flipped the knife neatly over his left hand to lie flat across his fingers.

Ed finished with the spit, then picked up the rabbit and moved a short distance away from their little camp to dress it. Roy followed with his eyes, watching as the younger man pulled a thin blade from his boot to deftly skin the gutted animal. He skewered it with a cleanly stripped branch and returned to the fire, setting the rabbit over it to roast.

“Why don’t you lie down for a while?” Ed suggested. “I’ll wake you up when our supper is ready.”

Roy nodded and unwrapped his jacket from around his waist. Folding it neatly, he placed it on the
ground, put Maes’ knife beneath it, and then lay down to rest his head upon it, facing the fire. The quiet snap and crackle of the flames soothed him, as did the sounds of Edward moving around their small camp. It only took him a few minutes to drift into a deep, dreamless sleep.

And it seemed as if he had only been asleep for a few brief moments before a hand on his shoulder was gently shaking him awake. The sun was close to setting now, and the thick aroma of roasted meat suddenly had Roy’s appetite roaring for satisfaction.

Edward had been busy. The tender, juicy rabbit was sectioned on a slab of wood, ready to eat. Their feast now included an assortment of roasted roots and wild onion shoots, arranged around the meat. Roy just barely kept himself from drooling. He reached under his jacket-turned-pillow for Maes knife and dug in. The two men wasted little time, making short work of the food. When it was all gone, every wild vegetable eaten, each rabbit bone sucked spotlessly clean, Roy was still hungry, but no longer uncomfortably so.

“Thank you Edward,” Roy said. “That was by far the best meal I have ever eaten.”

Edward smiled. “Get hungry enough and roast rabbit tastes better than filet mignon.” The young man unsuccessfully attempted to stifle a yawn.

“You need to get some sleep,” Roy observed. “Lie down. I’ll take the first watch.”

For a moment the Führer thought that Edward was going to argue, but then the young man nodded, lay down on his back close to the low burning fire, and folded his arms behind his head. “Wake me up in a couple of hours,” he said.

Roy set about clearing the campsite, followed by Edward’s amber gaze. He buried the bones, placed their makeshift platter into the fire, gathered more wood to keep the warming flame fed through the night, then noticed that Edward’s eyes had finally closed. Edging closer, Roy saw that the younger man’s breathing had become slow and deep. He was asleep.

Roy fetched his jacket from the opposite side of the campfire and shook it out, then carefully settled it over his sleeping companion. Sitting beside the younger man, back to the fire, Roy settled in to keep watch.

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The following days of the Amestrians’ homeward journey went much the same as the first, though by the third Roy found that he had developed somewhat more stamina. Edward gradually increased their pace in accordance with his companion’s growing physical endurance, and Roy wondered what the younger man’s limits were, and if he might ever come close to matching him. He wasn’t sure how far they had travelled, or how much father they had to go, but it seemed to Roy that they were making steady progress. Four days into their trek Roy found that while he was still bone tired by day’s end, he was no longer sore down to the bone as well, and it pleased the older man that he was beginning to regain the robust physique he had been proud of in his youth.

Aside from the physical demands of traversing the rough terrain, the journey thus far had been uneventful. The two men had easily managed to steer clear of the few people Edward had sensed through the Dragon’s Pulse, preferring not to risk human contact under the circumstances. Regularly splashing along the course of randomly encountered streams and creeks left their footwear
uncomfortably wet, but hopefully served to make tracking more difficult for possible pursuers. The local wildlife had left them alone, apart from one close call with a startled skunk. The nights were uncomfortably cool, but the small cookfires held the cold at bay, and the two travelers were grateful for the warm, sunny days. They had been very fortunate in the lack of rain, which made camping without shelter no major hardship.

Hunger was not a pressing concern either. Edward had taken to setting snares near their evening campsites, and by morning his efforts were generally rewarded with one or two rabbits for that evening’s consumption. A wide variety of edible berries, shoots, and roots were easily foraged, and the two men gathered what they found as they hiked. The numerous creeks and brooks served to keep their canteens full. All things considered, the Amestrians’ straits were not as dire as they could be. There were far worse places to be stranded.

And as an added bonus, Roy found that he rather liked how Edward looked with a golden trim of stubble gracing his youthful features, and if walking through the mountains from dawn until dusk hadn’t left him sore and completely exhausted, he would have been happy to demonstrate just how much. For now, however, that was out of the question, though the Führer had plans to show his admiration at a later date.

In the early morning of the fourth day of their hike, the travelling pair walked out of the thick forest to find themselves in a wide, deep valley bound by steep granite cliffs. Although he and Edward had been following a twisting stream downhill all morning, Roy was somewhat surprised. Until that point, the terrain had been a long series of low rolling, thickly forested hills; a rumpled, leafy green bedsheet. The landscape here was almost barren compared to the heavily treed woods. The local flora consisted mostly of low shrubs and bushes, with only a few densely clustered conifers scattered along the valley floor. The stream the two men had been following ran ahead to join a wider brook that wound its way through the collection of rocks both large and small that littered the wide vale.

Roy stilled to admire the sheer rock face rising from tumbled talus slopes, marveling at the novelty of a view unrestricted by a thick growth of pine. He turned to note Edward’s troubled frown.

“No much cover,” the younger man said as he surveyed the valley. Then he squinted up at the surrounding rock walls. “The top is too far; I can’t tell if anyone is up there.”

Roy contemplated their dilemma for a few moments, examining the landscape with a critical eye. “It’s a chance we’ll have to take,” was his verdict. “The trees are thickest along the brook. That’s probably our safest route.”

Ed nodded his agreement. “At least we’re still heading in the right direction,” he noted.

Following the small stream down to join the meandering brook, Roy couldn’t help but glance uneasily up at the surrounding ridge. His eye traced up the cliffs towering above them, from the steep sloping base of sparsely forested, fractured rock, up to the wall of raw stone some five hundred feet in nearly vertical height. The trees along the upper edge appeared as nothing more than a distant green fur, but would serve to hide anyone who happened to be up there, keeping watch over the deep basin. Roy and Ed on the other hand were fully exposed.

Roy noticed that Edward was quite a distance ahead of him, and he hurried to catch up.

They soon gained the centre of the wide valley as defined by the small flow of sparkling water. Tense at first, as the morning wore on and nothing untoward happened to suggest that someone might have spotted the two fugitives, Roy began to relax and enjoy the sunshine. Sheltered for days under the thick green canopy of the highland forest, it had been quite a while since the sun had warmed his skin.
The brook they followed grew larger as they advanced, joined by smaller streams making their way down from the mountains, some spilling in sparkling plumes from the high cliffs. The two travellers made frequent stops to refill their canteens as the morning chill gave way to noonday heat. Roy moved ahead as Edward lingered to splash his face in the cool running water, mind on not much at all as he picked his way among the rocks and stones that littered their course.

High above on top of the ridge, a flock of birds suddenly took flight. Then the quiet of the sheltered valley was broken by a loud crack, very much like a clap of thunder, incongruous under a clear blue sky. Startled, Roy’s eyes once again shot up the towering canyon wall, drawn to the source of the sharp report, and saw a huge slab of rock, at least fifty feet wide and twice as long, falling away from the steep northern wall. Frozen in fascination, he watched as the massive rock slid toward the ground, seemingly in slow motion. It hit the talus slope and exploded with a deafening crash, sending a shower of boulders high into the air. It wasn’t until a rock the size of his favorite armchair slammed into the brook not thirty feet in front of him that Roy was finally galvanized into action.

Spinning around, he saw Edward charging straight for him, and realized the man was yelling, though Roy couldn’t hear what he was shouting over the rumble of crashing rock. Without breaking stride, Edward grabbed Roy’s arm to haul him along at a dead run, away from the brook toward the opposite cliff face. A quick glance behind revealed that the impact of the gigantic chunk of cliff had triggered a debris avalanche that was racing their way, a chain reaction that flattened everything in its path as boulders continued to rain down around them.

Heavy dust, thick and choking, overtook them in their frantic run for safety. Roy tripped and fell to his knees, and Edward’s hand was wrenched from his arm. Springing back to his feet Roy continued his flat out run toward the other cliff face, eyes darting desperately for a glimpse of Edward through the swirling dust. He finally came to the talus slope and a copse of sturdy pines, but did not slow his pace. It wasn’t necessary to look behind to know that the crushing wave of stone was close on his heels. Roy scrambled without pause up the gentle incline of tightly packed gravel to the dubious shelter of the trees.

The avalanche was upon him. A rock the size of a small automobile thundered past, knocking down the smaller saplings in its path, until it ran into a large, sturdy conifer that deflected it to the side, fortunately away from Roy. Never pausing in his headlong flight, the Führer cast about for the largest tree he could find. An ancient red fir, massive in girth, caught his eye and he darted to put it between him and the rocky onslaught.

It seemed to go on forever; the ground shook, the tree Roy was crouched behind shuddered with each impact it absorbed, and the thick shroud of dust hid most of the surrounding destruction from clear view. At last however, the catastrophic event came to an end and silence descended on the valley like a shroud. The dust slowly cleared, blown thin by the gentle breeze.

Roy stood on shaky legs, only now noticing that his knees were scrapped and bloody, his uniform pants torn. Dust coated him from head to toe, gritty on his tongue and irritating his eyes. He took a moment to pull a handkerchief from his jacket pocket to wipe his face. Then he pushed away from the sheltering fir to search for his companion, adrenalin still surging though his veins as cold dread churned in the pit of his stomach.

He wasn’t two steps from the tree when he spotted Edward clambering up the scree slope, eyes wild, making a beeline for him. Roy’s relief was so great that he had to stop and place a hand on the fir to steady himself. The younger man was also covered in fine dust, and as he approached Roy was concerned to see a trickle of blood rimming the side of his face from forehead to chin.

Edward skidded to a stop in front of him, but before Roy could say a word he pulled Roy’s head
roughly down, devouring his mouth, clawing at his uniform pants to get inside them. Roy took him against the redwood hard and fast, Edward’s automail hooked around his waist, his arms around Roy’s neck, their tongues curled together. The bark grated rough into Roy’s arms as he thrust into tight heat, Edward’s cries flung free into the air. Their joining was dizzying, exhilarating, and when Edward’s cum spurted between their bodies, his body clamped around the older man’s cock in orgasm, Roy came in a convulsion so intense he thought he was going to black out.

He didn’t. With his lover still in his arms, he lowered himself to his knees, settling Edward on his lap. The younger man’s head fell forward to rest on Roy’s shoulder, the strong beat of his heart pressed to Roy’s chest, as the pair caught their breath.

“Thanks,” Edward quietly panted into Roy’s ear. “I needed that.”

Roy just laughed huskily, still too breathless to speak. It was only around noon, and it had already been one hell of a day.

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It was close to noon as well on the eighth day of their trek when the two men came to a deep gorge directly in their path. About fifty feet across, the chasm was much too wide to simply jump, and Roy’s attempt to transmute a crossing failed, the distance too great for an simple beam bridge to span. The sheer rock walls and swiftly flowing river far below eliminated the possibility of climbing down and back up on the other side.

“It might be less steep downstream,” Edward said, peering into the chasm at the rushing water. “The river might be less wild too.”

“Downstream it is,” Roy said, turning south.

Choosing not to remain exposed on the rocky lip of the ravine, the two men retreated into the sheltering brush that traced its edge. They had been relying on Edward’s connection with the Dragon’s Pulse to alert them to the presence of others, but his range was not unlimited. While hiking through the dense forest the fugitive pair had been hidden from sight by the cover of closely packed trees and thick undergrowth. Out in the open by the gorge, the mountainous terrain was such that they could be spotted from a distance, well before the Dragon’s Pulse might warn Edward that they had company.

Miles to the south and hours later the gorge still showed no sign of becoming less of an obstacle. It was just as wide, and just as deep. The frustrating detour had eaten up an entire afternoon, and there was no end in sight. To make matters worse, the late afternoon sunshine was muted in a sallow, hazy sky, and the gentle southerly breeze had become an unsettled western bluster. It appeared that their providential run of good weather was coming to an end.

As the afternoon wore into early evening, clouds gathered, and darkened, and soon a low rumble of distant thunder made it impossible to ignore the changing weather any longer.

“I think we should call it a day,” Edward said as he eyed the wind driven clouds. “It looks like we’re going to need more than just a fire to keep us warm tonight.”

Roy was about to agree when a train’s whistle sounded. Both men looked to the south.
“That didn’t sound too far away,” Roy noted. “Maybe there’s a trestle ahead that crosses the gorge.”

“If there is, it’ll still be there in the morning,” Ed pointed out, distrustful eyes still on the sky.

“True,” Roy conceded, “but I’d rest a whole lot easier on the other side of this ravine.”

By tacit agreement the two men pushed on, peering ahead from the shelter of the trees, hoping to catch sight of a bridge across the obstruction hindering their progress. The wind gusted fitfully, sighing through swaying branches, and Roy hesitated, wondering briefly if stopping to make camp was the better option, before increasing his pace and striding purposefully ahead. The narrow valley curved gently to the southwest, and just beyond the curve Roy sighted what he had been eager to find: a trestle, not fifty yards further on. Elated, he was turning to point it out to his companion when the younger man grabbed his arm and pulled him to a crouch.

“We’ve got company,” Ed said quietly. “Two men. Two horses. On the other side of the ravine, under cover near the trestle. They haven’t seen us.”

“Friends or foes?”

Edward growled. “I don’t read minds, Mustang,” he told him. “They’re not moving. They’re very focused. Hunters, maybe.”

Roy wondered what they could be hunting by a train trestle over a steep gorge high in the mountains with foul weather looming, and was pretty sure he wouldn’t like the answer. The men lying in wait might be about some perfectly innocent undertaking, but it was also very possible that Roy and Ed were their quarry – for good or ill. Either way, the fugitives were left with two options: retreat and find some other way across the gorge, or advance and attempt to cross the trestle.

A quick glance at the younger man confirmed that his intention matched Roy’s. Without another word the Amestrians began to creep slowly and carefully toward the bridge.

The rails approached the gorge from around a low grade to the west, and curved out of sight on the far side beyond a sharp ridge. The trestle was of standard construction. Tall wooden bents rose from the depths of the gorge; sturdy, interconnected posts and crossed sway braces supported solid caps and stringers. Were it not for the two strangers hidden on the far side, it would be ridiculously easy for the two weary travellers to cross and continue on their way.

Which was what worried Roy the most. The bridge was like tantalizing bait in a trap. If he and Edward were being hunted, and it was reasonable to assume that they were, their pursuers would be sure to stake out the most likely routes the fleeing Amestrians might take. The gorge was a major obstacle between the two fugitives and their ultimate destination, and there were undoubtedly only a limited number of ways across. It certainly appeared that this particular bridge was under covert surveillance, but thanks to Ed its sentries had lost the element of surprise. The question was whether these men were intent upon rescue, or making sure that the missing Führer of Amestris stayed missing, never to be found. Roy’s gut suggested the latter, and he always trusted his instincts.

Daylight was fading fast and the wind was steadily rising, but Roy counted that as an advantage. It had helped to cover their approach to the bridge, and would mask their identity for a time when they reached it.

“Okay,” Ed said as they settled down in the undergrowth close to the trestle. “I’m going to go across alone. If they’re not after us, I’ll strike up a conversation, distract them until you get across, and meet up with you farther down the tracks.”
“It’s always bad strategy to separate in hostile territory.” Roy registered his objection. “And it’s much more likely that these men are looking for us.”

“That’s why you’re going to be out of sight, covering me,” Edward said. “If they’re hostile, they’ll probably target me while I’m on the bridge with no place to run. That will get them out in the open.”

“They could just shoot you from cover.”

“Their Qi will give me some warning if they try, and I’ll just slip over the edge of the bridge onto the bents,” Ed said. “Then they’ll have to break cover to try and shoot me from the edge of the ravine, and you can pick them off. No problem.”

Big problem. Ed’s plan was full of holes, and Roy’s skeptical frown said so.

“What else can we do?” Edward wanted to know. “Your talents are long range. I’m better in tight. So you hang back, I move in. Our only other option is to back off completely and look for another way across.”

The prospect of retracing their steps was daunting, but Roy considered doing just that, though not for long. The major drawback to a retreat was that the two fugitives would then have to put substantial distance between themselves and the bridge; spending the night so close to potential enemies was a poor alternative to attempting a crossing. As a consequence, the Amestrians would be forced to backtrack through the woods in the dark, through treacherous, bolder strewn terrain complicated by pitted, broken ground and numerous expanses of deadfall, and the approaching storm would make travel over such rough ground an even riskier proposition. And finally, to make matters worse, there was absolutely no guarantee that their next opportunity to cross the gorge would not also be watched, presenting them with the same problem as this one. A short grumble of thunder punctuated Roy’s decision to stay and attempt a crossing.

Edward had been sitting silently, waiting for the older man to weigh the options, and grinned barbed wire at Roy’s short nod.

“Let’s do this before it starts to rain,” Roy said grimly, tugging down the cuffs of his gloves to seat them firmly.

Judging from the gathering darkness, the sun had almost fully set and thunder was rumbling more frequently as Edward stepped out of the woods and onto the tracks. He walked cautiously between the rails, steadily making his way across the trestle. This was the moment of Truth. If the men on the other side were simply hunters or woodsmen, they would be unlikely to engage the young man in anything beyond a friendly greeting, but if the two lurkers had more malevolent intentions, they would shortly reveal them.

Ed was about halfway across when a horse’s soft snort brought his progress up short.

Standing on the trestle’s far end, the dark silhouette of a man on horseback blocked Edward’s path. A glowing ember flared, briefly illuminating the man’s bearded face before tracing a red arch into the gorge. The man said nothing, motionless astride his mount.

Edward called a cheerful greeting in Cretian, walking casually toward the shadowed man, closing the distance between them, and Roy dared to hope that this encounter might not be as sinister as he had supposed. Then the dark silhouette shifted, hunching a shoulder, and pulled free what could only be a long rifle slung behind his saddle.

Ed moved faster than Roy could track, disappearing over the edge of the bridge before the mounted
man could shoulder his weapon, leaving Roy a clear shot. The sound of the assassin’s futile gunshot
ripped through the rising wind, and as the man spurred his horse closer to the edge of the ravine, the
Flame Alchemist snapped. A thin red streak spanned the distance to his target in an instant;
unfortunately, the storm’s first close flash of lightning chose that moment to split the sky, spooking
the gunman’s horse. The animal shied back and caught Roy’s attack full in the face. Its scream was
indescribable as it reared and bucked, throwing its rider before bolting blindly into the woods.

It was difficult to see the gunman on the ground until another lightning flash exposed his wild
scramble, either for cover or his weapon. It didn’t matter. Roy’s next attack caught him, putting a
stop to his efforts and an end to his threat.

Ed clambered up over the far edge of the ravine and raced past the flailing, screaming blaze straight
into the trees behind him, going for the other man hidden there Roy realized. The Flame lunged out
of the underbrush to run across the trestle just as a pale blue streak hissed past him to thump into a
sturdy spruce, blasting out a sizable portion of its trunk. Roy kept moving, staying low, weaving
erratically as he ran, boosted by the crackle of an alchemic reaction. He made it to the other side of
the bridge just in time to dodge a barrage of iridescent projectiles, throwing himself flat to the ground
and rolling behind a low bolder. The projectiles exploded on impact with surprising force.

And suddenly, without a single warning drop, the rain came, a heavy downpour, driven by the wind,
pounding down with great force and reducing visibility to a few scant feet. Roy was drenched to the
skin in seconds. He couldn’t see much of anything, but he could hear the sounds of conflict over the
driving rain, a shout, a crash, a transmutation’s sizzle, Edward engaging the remaining assassin. The
Flame moved quickly to join the fight, peering into rain and darkness.

He followed the sounds of the clash through the woods, stumbling over the uneven ground. The
wind and rain eased slightly under the canopy of the trees, but the storm was far from over. The
almost total darkness was split erratically by ever more frequent lightning flashes. Roy moved as
quickly as he could, straining to hear above the wind and rain and thunder to find his way to
Edward.

Alchemy cracked nearby, and Roy caught sight of a pale blue flash blurring from the cover of a rock
outcropping. Crouching instinctively, his eyes followed the streak to his left. Lightning lit the
unfolding scene in a crazy, stop-action strobe: Edward, dodging the attack; the projectile exploding
into the ground at the base of a withered pine; the tree toppling toward Edward.

Roy’s shouted warning was lost in the storm. Intent on his attacker, the young man never sensed the
danger until it was nearly on top of him. Edward sprang to the side at the last second, but stumbled
on the slippery, rock-strewn ground. And then it was too late. The tree caught him as it crashed
down, smashing him to the ground.

Pure, blinding rage surged through Roy as he clapped his hands and slammed them into the wet soil.

The transmutation came without thought, completely unlike anything Roy had experienced before.
Moving as an extension of himself, the ground jumped up in a sinuous, twisting coil to dart toward
the other alchemist’s hiding place. A clawed hand unfurled from its leading end, ready to grab and
rend Roy’s unlucky target. Lightning revealed the assassin as he rose from behind the dubious safety
of a mossy boulder to fire a barrage of blue streaks at the fast approaching appendage. They
exploded against Roy’s impending retribution, knocking out chunks but doing very little to slow its
progress.

As the hand loomed over him, the man broke and ran, dodging as claws slashed. Roy followed, one
hand on his fearsome creation, feeding it with his rage, controlling its attack. The assassin splashed
blindly through the rain and dense underbrush, launching attacks wildly behind him as he ran,
ducking behind trees and bushes for cover. To no avail. Nothing could deter the assassin’s alchemy-driven pursuer. Trees were toppled. Boulders were uprooted. Against Roy’s unrelenting offensive, the assassin never had a chance. In a brilliant lightning flicker Roy saw the man’s final, frantic backward glare turn to shocked surprise, just as he disappeared over the edge of the gorge. His dwindling scream was cut short by a distant, meaty crunch.

Roy stood panting for a moment, heart beating an adrenalized rhythm in his chest, then turned to run back the way he had come, his transmuted construct wilting to the ground.

Finding Edward in the heavy, wind whipped rain proved difficult. Roy backtracked along the trail of destruction his transmuted weapon had traced, searching for some sign of the younger man, the storm worsening by the minute. Roy had hoped that Edward would also be searching for him, following the Dragon’s Pulse straight to him, but as the minutes ticked by and Edward did not appear, Roy realized that his hopes were not going to be realized. With dread creeping up his spine, the Flame wondered if the young man was simply pinned under the felled tree, or if he might be injured. He flatly refused to consider the other possible explanation for Edward’s failure to materialize.

It was nearly pitch dark by the time the Flame found himself once again at the railroad tracks, realizing that he had come too far. He turned to retrace his steps more carefully, fighting down growing alarm. After many long minutes of fruitless searching, Roy was distressed to discover that he had arrived back at the gorge’s edge. Slamming his palm against the nearest tree trunk with an inarticulate snarl, the Führer turned to splash back into the woods, peering desperately into the gloom. It was a daunting task, blindly searching for a blond needle in this haystack whipped by a violent storm, but he couldn’t give up.

“Edward!” he called, voice cracking, carried away by the wind.

Roy strained to hear an answering call. None came.

Walking slowly through the downpour, soaked to the skin, mud sucking at his boots, the Flame once again retraced his steps, pausing every few moments to call out. Face grim, he pushed aside his frustration and firmed his stubborn resolve. He didn’t care if he had to slog around in this damnable storm examining every miserable, muddy inch of this stinking patch of woods. He didn’t give a damn if he was at it until dawn; he wasn’t going to stop until he found Edward. And Edward was going to be just fine, damn it!

He walked, shouting into the storm until he was hoarse, scanning his surroundings with every lightning flash, hoping for some sign of his companion.

He called, yelled, howled. And finally, at long last, he heard a faint shout in response.

Adrenaline sharpened his senses and spurred him in Edward’s direction, calling out all the way, elated as he drew closer to the answering shouts. Roy caught sight of the freshly downed tree in another bright flash and closed the distance, almost afraid to discover just how badly his former subordinate might be injured.

It was hard to even see Edward at first, the tree’s withered branches entangled around him, but it was easy enough to hear his curses as he struggled against the big conifer pinning him down.

“Holy shit, Mustang!” he said, voice strained. “I was starting to wonder if you’d ever find me.”

Roy didn’t answer, moving in to assess the situation.

In the frequent lightning flashes Roy could see that the tree trunk was lying across Edward’s legs, the
twisted branches caging the blond man against the ground. The deadwood pine was large, the trunk about a foot in diameter, and far too heavy to lift. It appeared that Ed had been attempting to dig himself out from under it, but hadn’t made much progress. The rain was still coming down hard, pounding in a torrent of thundering drops, turning the hard-packed soil to thick, unmanageable mud.

Roy clapped, trying for the smooth, almost effortless transmutation he had experienced in attacking the second assassin, but after an initial, energetic crackle the transmutation stalled. Frustrated, Roy fixed an all-purpose array in his mind’s eye and clapped again. Slapping his hands to the knarled trunk, he transmuted it into a small, domed shelter around Edward and himself, freeing Edward in the process.

It was certainly a relief to be out of the wind and rain. Not exactly sure of their line-of-sight position relative to the railroad tracks, Roy had kept the structure to a low profile, about eight feet around and five feet high at the centre point, marked with a small hole shielded by a curl of bark to keep most of the rain out. The arched entryway faced away from the tracks, and leeward.

Concentrating once again on his mental array, this time the Flame slapped his hands to the mud. In the sporadic light flashing through the doorway, Roy formed a shallow depression under his hands, the wet clay drying and hardening. Scooping damp leaves and twigs into the hollow, he placed his sodden gloves on top, and with another clap dried the small mound of vegetable matter and his gloves at the same time. Testing the cloth between his fingers, the dark haired man nodded with satisfaction and pulled the gloves on. With a deft snap the small enclosure was instantly lit with a warming glow. Roy gradually fed larger twigs and branches into the small fire, nurturing the flames, and was soon confident that their source of heat and light would not gutter out.

But for his eyes following Roy as he worked, Ed had not moved. Roy shot glances at his companion while he prepared their shelter, noting shallow, panted breaths, blond strands plastered to an unnaturally pale face, jaw clenched tight. Edward was on his side, leaning awkwardly on his left elbow, his right leg crooked over his left. With his menial tasks completed, the Führer turned his full attention to the young blond.

“I think you’re going to have to go on without me,” Edward said, squarely meeting the other man’s eyes.

“Not a chance.”

Roy moved around the fire to the younger man’s side. Firmly holding a neutral expression, he knelt on the muddy ground to observe the unnatural way Edward’s right leg bent just below the knee.

Edward confirmed what Roy already knew. “It’s broken.”

“It needs to be splinted,” Roy said calmly. “Traction would probably be a good idea, too.”

“Shit.” Edward scowled, eyes casting bleakly around the small shelter, and then pounded a fist into the ground. “Fuck.”

Roy had seen frontline combat. He had witnessed many and varied injuries both minor and fatal. He knew it was always risky to move an injured person; that was best left to medical professionals. Unfortunately, there wasn’t a qualified medic for miles. In fact, they couldn’t expect help of any kind whatsoever. They were alone in hostile territory. And that left Roy only one option.

“I can do it,” Roy stated with far more confidence than he actually felt. “I’m not going to lie to you. It’s going to hurt like hell.”
“It already hurts like holy fuck,” Edward muttered, staring at his injured leg with dull resentment.

And for Edward to admit that much, he must have been in absolute agony.

“I won’t touch it until we’re ready,” Roy said, and then went out into the rain to find a couple of strong branches.

It didn’t take long. The old pine tree that had caused the problem provided the solution. Many large, sturdy limbs had snapped off on impact with the hard-packed ground. Selecting one that was relatively straight and roughly the right length, Roy pulled out Maes’ knife. He quickly stripped off scaly branchlets, cones, and needles, his hands becoming sticky with pine gum. Choosing another branch, he prepared it the same way, then crawled back into the shelter and put the branches by the fire.

The small refuge was now comfortably warm. Edward had removed his shirt to wring it out, and Roy made a mental note to search along the gorge in the morning for the fallen alchemist. Ed could put the dead man’s coat to good use. Roy stripped off his own soaked jacket and spread it on the ground beside the fire to dry.

Edward eyed the two branches Roy had brought into their shelter, then closed his eyes. “Doesn’t matter if you set my leg; I’m still not going anywhere. You can’t lug me through the bush. Face it Mustang. You’ll have to leave me behind.”

“Not happening.” Roy crouched beside the younger man. He reached for the branches and pulled them closer, noting with satisfaction that he had judged their length correctly.

“Be realistic, Roy,” Ed reasoned, eyes still closed. “You can’t stay here, and I can’t—”

“‘Two men. Two horses’. That’s what you said.”

Edward said nothing more.

Roy examined Ed’s leg for a few moments without touching it, considering his course of action in detail, thinking the process through. He sifted through his memories, trying to recall everything he could from the crash course in first aid he was given just before he was sent to the Ishbalan front, an eternity ago. From the extent of the deformity, it appeared likely that both the fibula and tibia were fractured, though Roy couldn’t tell if either bone had broken through the skin. Once he had the leg splinted he’d be in a better position to assess the damage.

“I want you on your back, both legs straight,” the Flame said finally, all business. “I’ll stabilize your right leg while you shift your left out from under it and straighten your hips. Then I’ll realign the bones. I’m going to use alchemy to splint it and apply traction.”

Edward’s eyes remained closed as he nodded.

The Flame slipped his hands under Edward’s calf, one below the break, one above, and lifted, doing his best to prevent any shift in the broken leg bones. Ed slowly moved his left leg out from under it and rolled onto his back. Roy followed the motion, carefully letting Ed’s knee straighten, then settled the wounded leg gently on the ground.

Ed never said a word; never opened his eyes. His short, shallow breaths never faltered. Had Edward’s jaw not been so tightly clenched, Roy would have thought the younger man had passed out.

Roy placed a branch on each side of Ed’s leg, ready for use. Then he grasped the ankle firmly to
slowly and steadily pull it straight, feeling the abused muscles spasm and seize in his grip. Clapping his hands, Roy pressed the two branches against Ed’s leg and concentrated. The wood, combined with the cloth of Edward’s pant leg and part of his boot, formed a brace around the injured limb nearly to the crotch, straightening it further and applying crucial traction.

Settling back on his heels, Roy looked over his work with a critical eye, making sure that the brace held the leg firm, but was not so tight as to cut off circulation. Now that Ed’s pant leg was out of the way, the Führer was relieved to see that the broken bones had not punctured the skin – one less worry. But Edward’s calf was badly swollen and deeply discoloured, a sign that he had also suffered damage to the soft tissue of his limb. The leg had been crushed between the tree trunk and Ed’s automail, and it was very likely that the bones weren’t just broken, but crushed as well. Ed was cold and clammy under Roy’s hands in the warmth of the fire’s glow, and that, coupled with the young man’s strained, panted breaths, caused the older man considerable concern.

Ed’s eyes slit open when Roy placed his palm on his brow, brushing damp strands of blond out of Edward’s pale face.

“How do you feel?” Roy asked quietly.

“Like crap.” Ed smiled faintly up at his companion. “But it’s better. Thanks.”

“Anytime,” Roy returned, a strange feeling in his chest.

He did not sleep that night. Roy spent those long hours alternately feeding the fire and lying beside the fitfully dozing blond, a diligent hand pressed above the steady beat of his lover’s heart.

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First light found Roy skirting the edge of the gorge in the lingering rain, searching its depths for the corpse of the alchemist assassin. The river below had swollen considerably from the previous evening’s heavy downpour and there was a very good chance that the man’s body had been carried away when the water rose, but Roy thought it worth the effort to check.

He had already buried the charred remains of the other assassin out of sight of the railroad tracks. There had been very little left of the man, but Roy thought it best not to leave him where he could be easily discovered. He had also scoured the site for the man’s rifle and disposed of it as well. The longer it took the assassins’ superiors to learn of their agents’ fate, the farther away Roy and Edward would be from the scene.

As luck would have it, Roy found the dead man he was searching for draped awkwardly over a rocky outcropping just out of reach of the rushing water. Considering his options, Roy clapped and then placed his hands on the ground, hoping for a repeat performance of the previous evening’s nearly effortless transmutation. Once again he was disappointed, and was forced to resort to more tedious methods. Basic array in mind, Roy concentrated on extending the rocky ledge up to the top of the gorge. Slowly but surely he moved the stone, not wanting his prize to topple into the fast moving water below. It took a while, but finally the body was within reach. Pulling the carcass into the concealing safety of the woods, Roy flipped it onto its back to unbutton the coat.

And got a disturbing surprise.

He knew this man.
Norris Ganzer. The Razor Wind Alchemist. His specialty was the fusing of oxygen into explosive ozone projectiles.

A State Alchemist.

Roy had known Ganzer for years, though they had never been stationed under the same command. The man had received his state certification a year before Roy, and as relative newcomers to the program, they had often gravitated together at official military functions. Roy remembered some very interesting discussions involving the technical similarities of their signature styles of alchemy. Razor Wind had served in Ishbal as well, in a combat unit under General Raven. After the war Ganzer was stationed at Western command. He had been an excellent field operative and had gradually risen to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in the Security Division. Since Roy became Führer he had spoken with Ganzer at quite a few State functions. The man was a very vocal advocate for a more representative form of government, which was the current Führer’s ultimate goal as well. Roy had considered Ganzer a kindred spirit.

This made no sense.

Roy knelt beside the body, noting the short wooden handle protruding from the left shoulder – Edward’s contribution to the battle. He pulled the knife free and stripped Ganzer of his long coat, laying it aside. Then he searched through the dead man’s pockets. All he found was a pack of cigarettes, half empty, and a battered silver lighter, which Roy pocketed. Next he checked the coat.

The silver watch was there, nestled safely in an inner pocket.

Roy clutched it in his hand, then popped it open. It was in perfect working order. Roy stared at it for a few moments as if it might reveal the reasons why its deceased owner would want him dead. Then, with a slow shake of his head, the Führer closed the timepiece’s cover and slipped it into his own pocket. A single clap resulted in the dead alchemist’s burial under a mound of muddy soil.

Trudging back to the domed shelter with Ganzer’s soggy coat over his shoulder, Roy pushed the mystery from his mind. He had more pressing concerns that took precedence over political plots orchestrated by nameless adversaries hoping to eliminate him with extreme prejudice. He had to get back to Amestris as quickly as possible, and he had to get Edward safely home as well. Whether the younger man liked it or not.

It was much easier to find his way back to the refuge now that the sun had risen to shine diffusely through the thick cloud cover. Roy ducked into the shelter and tossed the coat next to the low burning fire at its centre. Edward was awake, looking marginally better than he had hours earlier. His face had lost much of its sickly pallor, and he was breathing normally. Though the tightness around his eyes was evidence enough that he was still in pain, Roy no longer feared that the young man might go into shock from the physical trauma he had suffered.

“Can you tell me where the horses are?” Roy asked.

Edward thought for a few moments before answering. “One is over there, about thirty yards down slope,” he said, pointing the direction. “It’s been there all night, not moving. It’s injured.” He concentrated again, this time for so long that Roy was beginning to think that the other horse was beyond his range. “Ah, there it is,” Ed finally muttered. “The other one is over that way,” he jerked a thumb over his shoulder, “on the other side of the tracks, about a hundred yards in. It’s not moving much either, but it’s healthy.”

Roy nodded. “I’m going to find them,” he said. “Don’t wander off.”
“Smart ass,” Edward muttered.

Roy dodged back out into the drizzle and set off in the direction Edward had first indicated. The injured horse was likely the one Roy had accidentally burned the night before. He hoped the animal wasn’t too badly hurt and might still be useful.

It wasn’t. The Flame found the roan mare collapsed at the bottom of a narrow gully, forelegs broken, blind, keening and groaning in pain. Roy approached cautiously with soothing words, and with great regret used Maes knife to quickly end the hapless creature’s suffering. The horse did prove useful however, by virtue of the leather packs attached to its saddle. Roy had some difficulty loosening the strings from the saddle bags and pulling them free, but was finally successful. Slinging the heavy leather packs over his shoulder, he returned to the shelter.

Leaving the bags with Edward, Roy set off again, in search of the other horse.

He wasn’t long in finding it. As Roy approached, the grey stallion watched warily from the edge of a clearing, but it wasn’t going to bolt. It was tethered to a short sapling.

Right next to the military issue tent pitched in the assassins’ neatly arranged camp.

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It took Roy longer to search the assassins’ campsite than it did to assemble the various supplies he’d deemed useful. By the time he finished it was mid morning, but the time was well spent. The spare clothes, travel rations, and bedrolls would certainly come in very handy, but Roy had found other, more valuable treasures. A compass for one; a map for another.

The Führer took a few moments to check over the horse before preparing him for travel. The courser was on the small side – only about fourteen hands – but strong of build. Running a soothing hand over powerful hindquarters, Roy took note of the stallion’s short back, muscular loin, well-arched neck, full mane and tail of coarse black hair. The grey waited calmly and sensibly as Roy checked his eyes and feet, and nickered amiably when the man patted his withers.

Saddling the horse, Roy noticed that the tack was Amestrian military standard issue, lightweight and custom fit, which was no surprise. This horse had been assigned to a State Alchemist, though if Roy had not recognized Ganzer, he would not have discovered his identity from the contents of the camp. Not a single personal photograph or memento was to be found. No personal items, no letters, notes, books, or documents of any kind. There had not been a single clue or hint in or around the entire site to shed light on the assassins’ identities or motivation.

Roy packed up select items of the assassins’ equipment and loaded them onto the horse. He had been very careful in his choices, taking only what he deemed essential, not wanting to overburden the horse Ed needed for transportation. When he was satisfied that the load was balanced, the Flame took reins in hand and lead the way back to his own camp.

He was close when he caught the bittersweet aroma of fresh coffee. Hurrying through the dense brush toward the domed shelter, Roy took a moment to tether the horse to a sturdy tree before ducking through the doorway.

The Führer couldn’t decide which sight was more appealing: Edward’s wide smile, or the tin cup he was offering. Roy returned the smile and accepted the cup.
“Sorry, no cream or sugar,” Edward said with a grin. He had used Ganzer’s heavy coat to prop himself up to a more comfortable position, bundling it with the two saddlebags as a makeshift backrest.

“Cream and sugar are kid’s stuff,” the older man said, earning an eye-roll from the younger. Roy took a sip and sighed with satisfaction. It was liquid bliss despite the few stray grounds that had found their way into the cup. “Thank you Edward.”

The blond man accepted the thanks with a shrug. He had been busy. Along with the coffee, two steaming bowls of what could only be oatmeal sat by the fire, compliments no doubt of the saddle packs Roy had left behind earlier. The Flame settled cross-legged and reached for a bowl, then slipped the silver watch out of his pocket and tossed it to Edward. Roy attacked his oatmeal while the young man examined the watch.

“I thought I recognized his technique,” Edward said, laying the watch aside to pick up his own breakfast. “He was that ozone guy, right?”

“The Razor Wind Alchemist, yes,” Roy confirmed. “I don’t know who the other man was. I found their camp, but didn’t find anything in the way of identification.”

“Nothing like that in the saddlebags either.” Edward proceeded to inhale his oatmeal at an alarming rate.

“You’re feeling better,” Roy observed with a grin.

“I found a bottle of acetylsalicylate tablets in one of the bags, so I took a couple,” Ed told him. “It’s not much, but it’s better than nothing.”

As painkillers went, aspirin was very mild, but it was also useful as a blood thinner. Roy considered that very useful indeed, under the circumstances. He still worried about the extent of Edward’s leg injury. Swelling and blood clots hampering circulation were dangerous, and a legitimate cause for concern. Ed didn’t need to lose another leg. Ideally the injured limb should remain elevated to reduce swelling and other complications, but Roy didn’t think a travois would be practical for travel on the rocky slopes.

“Have you ridden a horse before?” the older man asked, still pondering his dilemma.

“Yeah.” Ed’s bowl was empty, and licked clean. “I’m a country boy, remember? Me and horses go ‘way back.”

“Good. I’ll have to transmute the saddle to support your leg.”

“Oh, that’s great. Because this whole fucked up situation doesn’t suck hard enough already.”

Ignoring the young man’s disgruntled griping, Roy packed away the now empty pot, cup, and bowls as Edward awkwardly shrugged into Ganzer’s trench coat, glaring at the too-long sleeves as he shook them up his forearms – Ganzer had been very tall. Then the older man transmuted their shelter away and moved to assist the younger to his feet. Amid a torrent of growled complaints, Roy heaved Edward up and supported him to the patiently waiting gray, Edward’s baleful glare promising retribution should Roy choose to comment on how Ganzer’s coat dragged along the muddy ground. Boosting Edward up to sit astride his mount was an adventure in itself. It was the first time in Roy’s recollection that he had ever seen Edward move in a less than graceful manner.

Though he would have preferred to remove the saddle from the horse to transmute it, Roy had to customize the seat to Ed, and that was best done with Edward sitting it. Hopefully the stallion would
not be spooked by the alchemic reaction, but it was safe to assume he would take it in stride. This was a military horse after all, accustomed to combat situations. A simple transmutation shouldn’t be cause for alarm. A few minutes and a couple of tree branches later, the saddle was suitable for travel. Ed’s leg was supported straight out in front of him with the back of the saddle raised and slightly reclined for comfort. Truth be told, Roy was rather proud of his work. He stood with reins in hand, waiting for Edward’s assessment.

If anything, Ed looked even more irritated as he examined Roy’s saddle modifications. He crossed his hands on the saddle horn and leaned forward at what had to be an uncomfortable angle, scowling.

“What’s wrong?” Roy asked, feeling somewhat put out at the lack of appreciation for his efforts.

Edward cast him a sideward glance before relaxing backward once again. He sighed and his expression softened. “Nothing. Everything’s fine. With the saddle. It’s great. Thanks.” He offered his companion a smile.

Roy suddenly realized that the broken leg wasn’t Ed’s only injury. The supremely confident, fiercely independent young man’s pride was taking a severe beating at the moment as well.

Distraction was the key, and the Flame reflected on how to proceed as he returned Ed’s smile. “You’re welcome. Shall we?”

Roy handed up the reins and started walking eastward. Ed urged the horse to follow.

With Ed restricted to traveling on horseback, a whole new range of problems served to slow the Amestrians’ progress, already complicated by foul weather and rain slicked soil. Though a sure-footed specimen, the horse couldn’t navigate steep slopes or thickly tangled brush. It was fortunate that the area sported numerous game trails that the travellers could safely follow, but this resulted in frequent detours along the way. Roy was relieved that they could continue their journey home despite Edward’s injury and took the slower pace in stride, but he could tell by the set of his jaw that Edward was frustrated with their slowed progress, for which he felt responsible. By mid-afternoon the young man had just about reached his boiling point. It was time for Roy to bring his planned distraction into play.

“Something happened last night when I was fighting Razor Wind,” Roy said, adjusting his pace to walk beside the gray. “I started a transmutation without really thinking about it, and it was . . . I’m not sure how to explain it. It was . . . amazing; like nothing I have ever experienced. It . . . flowed, smoothly, almost effortlessly, guided by my smallest whim, and . . . I’m not sure how I did it.” He looked up at Edward expectantly.

Edward frowned. “What’s it usually feel like for you, when you clap?” he asked.

Roy thought about it for a few moments. “Draining. It takes a lot of concentration to hold the array in my mind and manipulate the transmutation to suit my needs at the same time, so I try to stick to simple . . . “

“Wait a sec; you hold the array in your mind?” Ed’s frown deepened. “Why?”

“I need an array. Don’t I?”

“When you clap your hands together, palm to palm, your body becomes the circle. Your soul is linked to the Gate; it is inscribed with the runes. Your mind directs the transmutation. You are the array.” Edward’s smile was lopsided. “At least that’s what I remember. When we get back, you
should talk to Al or Izumi. They can help you get your shit together.”

Roy raised an eyebrow. “Why would I wait to talk with them when you’re right here, Mr. Youngest-State-Alchemist-in-Amestrian-History?”

“Because I’m retired, for a very good reason. I can’t do alchemy anymore.” A pure, impassive statement of fact.

The Führer smirked. “I seem to recall a fireside chat in Aerugo when someone told me very directly that just because he could no longer transmute didn’t mean he’d forgotten everything he knew.”

Edward mulled that over for a few moments, then nodded and reined in the horse. “Alright, if that’s the way you want it. Let’s see what you got. Grab a piece of rock.”

Apparently this ‘talk’ was going to involve some experiential learning. Roy bent down to scoop up a loose stone. Handing it to Edward, the older man waited for further direction.

“Close your eyes,” Edward instructed, holding out the stone. “I’m going to place the rock in your palm. You’re going to do a first stage transmutation.”

First stage. Comprehension. Understanding the molecular structure and properties of the material to be transmuted, including the flow and balance of potential and kinetic energy within.

Roy closed his eyes, clapped, and held out a hand. He felt the stone’s weight press into his palm as the transmutation took hold.

And immediately knew Edward had tricked him. This wasn’t a piece of rock. It was an intricate complication of different metals, mainly silver. It was a strictly defined balance of mechanical and kinetic energy driving a complex mechanism. It was a finely crafted precision timepiece, embossed with the national symbol of Amestris. This was Norris Ganzer’s watch.

“Very funny,” Roy said sourly. “Did you think I wouldn’t be able to tell the difference?”

“Which array did you use?” Ed wanted to know.

“A basic three point . . .” Roy’s words trailed off. He realized that the transmutation circle had slipped from his mind as soon as Edward’s deception had registered, but the transmutation hadn’t stopped. It had continued until Roy consciously interrupted it.

It appeared that the Flame Alchemist wasn’t the only one exploring the practical applications of distraction today.

“I think you’re getting the idea.” Ed grinned. “You choose the array and clap, then let it go. It slides naturally into the symmetry of your body, mind, and soul.”

“You make it sound easy,” Roy said, dubious.

“It is. You’re over-thinking this, Mustang. When you walk, do you have to control each individual muscle of your legs, or do you just walk? It’s the same thing.” Ed tossed the rock back to him. “Try it.”

Roy turned the rock over in his hand for a moment, then flipped it into the air and clapped. The stone landed in his palm and energy crackled around it, then died. The stone remained unchanged under a dark-eyed glare.
“That was a good start,” Edward said. “You initiated the transmutation, but it stalled. I think your perspective is too narrow; you’re focussed on trees instead of the forest. Look at the big picture. All is one. One is all. Your body is the circle; let it channel the energy. Your spirit describes the runes; let it refine the process. Your mind defines the goal; it is the guide. It’s very difficult for one part to do the work of three. Use them all.”

Roy again tossed the rock upward and clapped, the array there in his mind for a split second before he deliberately replaced it with his purpose. Energy flared blue-white when the stone hit his open palm, coursing through him like a warm current, and this time it felt right. The transmutation was a swirling vortex in his cupped palm, molding, shaping the object at his urging. It was over in a few brief moments, the small rock replaced by a polished stone figure - the horse Ed was riding, in miniature.

With a rush of exhilaration the Führer examined the small figurine. It was perfect in every detail, just as he had envisioned it. He passed the stone figure up to his companion, glowing with accomplishment.

“Hm.” Edward’s grin was cocky as he examined it. “I guess you can teach an old dog new tricks.”

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Spirits improved somewhat after Edward’s spontaneous clap-alchemy tutorial, though travel through the dense forest did not. It continued to rain, sometimes heavily, making the muddy trails slickly treacherous and the travelers soggily uncomfortable. Consulting the map, Roy estimated that the assassins’ camp was about twenty miles due west of the Amestrian border. The railroad tracks were probably the most direct route to the fugitives’ goal, but the pair had decided that that path was too risky. It was likely that others would be lying in wait along that easy road, which meant doing it the hard way was safer, through thick scrub on a frustrating, switchback course. Their progress was slow, and without the sun, Roy was very glad that they had the compass to ensure they were traveling in the right general direction on their winding course.

By early evening both men were sodden, dispirited, and more than ready to call it a day. The rain showed no signs of letting up, and the heavy cloud cover made for an early dusk. Arranging shelter was the first order of business.

Coming to a suitably level area, Roy made for a dense group of saplings. He was eager to attempt a more complex transmutation and had been contemplating how he would proceed for the better part of an hour. He knew exactly what he wanted to do; a basic transmutation circle was not on the agenda. This time Roy’s ambitious objective would require a fully augmented array, woven from esoteric knowledge gained through his forced encounter with the Gate.

His clap was sharp and confident, the surge of energy strong and pure. It flowed easily, and Roy bent it to his will as his hands connected with the first young tree. The sapling flexed smoothly to twine with those close around it, inducting them into the transmutation as well, arching as one up above the wet soil, then plaiting their trunks and slender limbs together in tight embrace.

The transmutation died, complete. Before the two tired travellers stood their accommodations for the evening: a conical shelter of gracefully coupled, living trees. Its gently arched opening revealed a smoothly polished clay floor. Neatly arranged deadwood and kindling in the central firepit awaited only a spark to light and warm the cozy space.
Edward urged his mount to slowly circle the sinuous structure, examining with a critical eye. Completing the circuit, he rendered his verdict with a wide smile.

“Very nice.”

With a pleased grin Roy accepted the compliment and reached to take the horse’s reins. He looped them around a handy branch and moved to assist his companion from the saddle. Ed manoeuvred himself over the modified seat, and with Roy supporting his injured leg, lowered himself to the ground.

Limping unsteadily towards their shelter with an arm around Ed’s waist and one of Ed’s over his shoulder, Roy was suddenly hyperaware of their closeness, the heat from Ed’s body seeping into his, the scent of pine and woodsmoke in Edward’s hair. It had been days since the train disaster, and aside from the frantic encounter after the avalanche, their circumstances had not allowed for much in the way of intimacy. Their marathon march through the mountains was a full body workout which left the two men exhausted by nightfall, and the need to keep constant watch for pursuers made mutual distractions unwise, so by unspoken agreement they had refrained. Edward’s injury was one more reason for self restraint, and one more reason for Roy to long for safety, if only to pursue his urge to lay the younger man gently down by the fire, fold him tight in his arms, and take his breath away.

Roy felt Edward go suddenly tense.

“Holy shit!” The younger man twisted in Roy’s grip to peer into the darkening woods. “Someone’s coming this way. Fast. Two . . . no, three . . . men? One of them is . . . different . . .” Ed’s brow furrowed in confusion.

Roy had already reversed course, half-carrying the blond to the tethered horse. “Let’s get you into the saddle,” Roy said tightly.

“No time,” Ed snapped, palming a swiftly drawn blade. “Put me down and get the hell out of here! I’ll stall them.”

Roy bit back a curse as he set Ed down, crouching beside him. Hiking through the rain all day had left him soaking wet, gloves and all, so he dug Ganzer’s lighter out of his pocket and waited for their pursuers to come into view. He could easily hear them now, crashing through the undergrowth, closer and closer, making absolutely no effort to be stealthy, and calm settled over him as he prepared to attack. Just out of sight, the approaching men suddenly stopped.

“Führer Mustang! Edward Elric!” A confident voice called from the rapidly descending gloom. “Hold your fire. We’re here by order of Lieutenant General Riza Hawkeye to assist you.”

What the hell? Roy looked at his frowning companion. The younger man’s golden eyes were narrow with suspicion, jaw tight.

“Step out into the open,” Roy called out, lighter still at the ready. “Keep your hands where we can see them.”

With a leafy rustle three burly men emerged from the bush one by one, hands raised and open, stopping well away from the two crouching men. In the deepening evening shadows their expressions were grave but not aggressive. The largest of the three stepped slowly forward, his hulking, muscular frame cloaked in waterproof canvas. Moving carefully but deliberately, he threw back his hood to reveal distinctly simian features, and Roy felt the tension drain out of Edward at once.
“Hey Mr. Gorilla,” Ed drawled. “Long time no see.”

Hands on hips, the big man looked the small blond over, eyes locking on the splinted leg. “Geez, kid! What the hell did you do to yourself this time?”

Edward ignored the question. “How’d you find us?”

“Both the Cretian militia and our people have teams out sweeping the countryside between the crash site and the border, searching for you,” the man said. “I caught your scent just after noon and tracked you. The rain helped; it’s always easier to do scent work in damp air.”

Roy had dropped his guard as soon as Edward acknowledged their pursuers as friendly, and he stood up as Edward’s friend came closer.

The tall, tanned, muscular man with short dark hair and thick bushy sideburns was vaguely familiar. Roy recalled that prior to the Promised Day the Elrics had travelled with human chimerae as allies, Zolf Kimblee’s former body guards, who had joined in the struggle to thwart Father’s master plan. This man was likely one of those altered humans, and since Edward seemed to trust him, then so would Roy, despite the recent, treacherous encounter with Norris Ganzer.

The big man’s military reflexes kicked into high gear as Roy stood. “Major Lucien Darius, retired, at your service, Führer Mustang,” he stated from under a crisp salute. He then motioned for his companions to come forward. “This is Lieutenant Lane Heckler, also retired from active military service,” Darius introduced a tall, well-muscled blond man, who snapped a perfect salute of his own, “and this is Warrant Officer Aldo Koch, honorably discharged as well.” The second man’s salute mirrored his companions’. “Brigadier General Hawkeye relayed to our commanding officer that the two of you would most likely be traveling together and requested our assistance to find you. We are here to escort you to safety.”

The Führer’s eyebrow twitched up at the mention of a commanding officer, but he made no comment. “At ease, gentleman. Your assistance is much appreciated,” he said.

Edward wasn’t inclined to diplomacy. “Commanding officer? You guys are retired.”


“You’re attached to the Intelligence Division,” Roy stated with certainty.

“Yes Sir,” Darius acknowledged. “And right now, we have to move out.” He stooped down to quickly and carefully scoop up a protesting Edward, then lifted him high to place him neatly on his broad shoulders. “This area is crawling with people searching for you, and we don’t know for sure what their intentions are.” He looked at the shelter Roy had so proudly transmuted only moments before, and frowned. “Can you get rid of that, Sir? We’ll have to ditch the horse, too,” he said apologetically.

As Roy transmuted the saplings back to their original state, Heckler and Koch removed the horse’s tack and with a solid slap to the rump, urged Ed’s former mount on its solitary way. The tack was disposed of under alchemically shifted mud, once again courtesy of the Führer.

Ed observed the process from his perch on Darius’ shoulders, scowling. “Don’t tell me you plan to carry me all the way back to Amestris,” he started, and then noticed the big man was setting out in the opposite direction to which Roy and Edward had long been traveling. “Where are we going?”

Darius beamed his alarmingly fierce grin. “A little detour. We can’t just march up to the border and waltz on over to our side. We want to play it safe, so you’ll both be joining our little stick and rag
show for a while.”

Edward glanced the question at Roy, who only shrugged. He focussed his attention on moving through the dark wet terrain as quickly as possible, content to let others take the lead for the moment. These men appeared to know what they were doing, and they’d reveal where they were going soon enough. Against all odds, it appeared that the cavalry had arrived to save the day.

For the first time since waking up over Edward’s shoulder, Roy felt the ground solidly under his feet.
“Line two, General,” the nervous aide said from the doorway.

Riza looked up from the report she was scanning and waited for the young man to state who was on the phone. He didn’t. “Who’s calling?”

The private flushed. “I, um, don’t know,” he stammered. “I’ll, just, find out?”

Hawkeye allowed herself a small sigh of frustration as her West Headquarters assigned assistant ducked out of the room. She desperately missed her Central aides, all highly trained professionals. Why West’s Base Commander allocated non-coms as temporary staff for visiting brass she had no clue. It was probably a punitive measure to exert his dominance, equivalent to a dog marking its territory. Well, she had better things to do than get into a pissing contest with West’s chief commanding officer over staffing. Roy and Ed were missing, and finding them was her first priority. Annoyed, she picked up the phone and jabbed the flashing button to take the call.

“Lieutenant General Riza Hawkeye,” she stated, all business.

“Riza?” The deep baritone of her husband’s voice was a soothing balm.

“Oh. Miles. My secretary didn’t tell me who was on the line.”

“Try to limit the emotional scarring when you speak to him about it,” Miles advised. “Your reputation is already enough to bring on uncontrollable sweating, and cause even the most battle hardened soldiers to flee the vicinity in a blind panic at the smallest hint of your displeasure.”

“I don’t know why everyone thinks you lack a sense of humor,” Riza remarked dryly.

“Perhaps my comedic skills are too subtle for the average audience,” he speculated. His voice softened as he asked, “How are you?”

“As well as can be expected, considering that I managed to misplace our Führer in the wildness of the Viridian Mountains on the wrong side of the border,” she said blandly.

As it had a thousand times since that day, the whole fiasco played through her mind: sitting in the dining car playing five card stud with Heymans and Jean; the explosion that rocked the train; running to the rear with her comrades to discover that the last three cars had been uncoupled to separate the Führer’s coach from the main part of the train; watching as the orphaned railcars slowly toppled over, rolling almost in slow motion.

She had jumped over the fantail just as the shriek of metal on metal signaled that the engineer had applied the brakes. She had hit the ground running, back toward the tumbling cars. She had watched with her heart in her throat as the cars rolled the short distance to the steep ridge the train had been skirting. When the ancient pines at its edge refused to give in and let the coaches slip over, she had suddenly been able to breathe again.

Then the shooting had started. Amid the smoke and dust, disoriented soldiers were staggering out of the overturned cars only to be gunned down by snipers hidden upslope in the dense forest. Riza began shouting orders to take cover and defend, the sound of stray rounds singing off the rails around her.

She had just gained the cover of the toppled rail cars when the Presidential coach blew up, knocking
everyone standing off their feet. The propane tanks that fueled the gas fireplace and kitchen had ignited, turning the rolling fortress into a high explosive.

Casting frantically around for any sign of the Führer, she rushed toward the smoldering remains of the Presidential coach. Soldiers from the train’s main section were charging up the tracks, some plunging into the woods upslope to engage their hidden attackers, when Riza finally spotted Edward crouched behind a weathered outcropping, an unconscious Roy limp in his arms.

“Hawkeye, holy shit!” the blond man rasped, eyes wild. “They’re all around us!”

The General dropped to the ground beside them, her gun in a two-handed grip poised at her shoulder. Roy was completely out, the thick flow of blood from his temple a garish contrast to his pale face, and her heart leaped into her throat.

She swallowed down her terror and looked down slope. “Where are they?”

“Fuck, where aren’t they is a better question,” Edward growled. He pointed with jerks of his chin, arms still holding Roy to his chest. “There, downhill to the south, and there, also downhill, a little way to the west and below the main part of the train. There, to the south, near the cliffs. Two more groups, there and there, waiting. They’re waiting. For us to run.”

She saw what he meant. The attack from upslope was meant to drive them into cover downhill where more attackers lay in wait. “Then we don’t run. Are our forces outnumbered?”

Edward concentrated. “No. The enemy are. Badly. But they are organized, using guerrilla tactics, and right now we . . . “

At that moment Jean Havoc charged out of the smoke and spotted them. He rushed to their position and crouched down to examine the Führer.

“He needs a medic,” Havoc said tersely.

“Thank you, Major General Obvious,” Edward snarled. Then his eyes widened. “They’re starting to move uphill,” he said, stricken.

Havoc looked between Edward and Riza, confused, but there was no time for explanations.

“If we can slip past them, we’ll be safely behind the attack. Without the element of surprise, our forces will be more than a match for them.” She turned to Jean. “You go with Edward and the Führer. I’ll marshal the troops.”

Havoc gave the woman a sharp salute. “With all due respect, Ma’am, you should stay with the Führer. You made it your sworn duty to protect him. I take it the enemy has us surrounded?”

Riza made the decision. “Yes. But we have the numbers. Rally the troops, General. You have a battle to win.”

She returned the salute, and Havoc rushed back toward the other derailed cars, already shouting orders. Edward stood to lift the Führer in a classic fireman’s carry and rapidly made his way down hill. Riza stayed close behind, her sidearm at the ready.

The slope on which the derailed cars had been caught by the trees was fairly gentle. Just beyond that the terrain dropped off into a very steep decline. Riza was finding it difficult to remain upright as she skidded her way down, and wondered how Edward managed it with the bulky weight of the Führer draped over his shoulders. The young man suddenly stopped and dropped to a crouch, pushing his
way into a dense cluster of cedar. Riza followed without a word, and moments later a number of
booted feet rushed past, heading uphill.

The sound of gunfire behind them intensified.

“The upslope company is charging,” Edward spared breath to whisper.

Riza nodded, face stern. After a moment Edward pushed out of the cedars and continued downhill.

They moved on, determined. Once again Edward stopped to find cover in the bush as more of the
enemy, not in any sort of uniform but soldiers by their bearing, hurried by to join the battle. When it
was safe they continued downward. Riza hoped her confidence in her comrades was not misplaced.
If they were unable to win the day, the fugitive trio would have nothing to go back to, and she did
not relish the idea of hiking for any great distance in these rugged hills.

They were nearly to the bottom of the slope when Edward dropped again, angling behind a small
stand of dwarf conifers. Unfortunately, he also flushed a startled grouse from its roost. It took off in a
rumbling flurry of feathers.

Edward gritted his teeth and shot Riza an apologetic glance. “Sorry,” he whispered. “They’re
coming to investigate. Five of them, that direction,” he indicated with a jerk of his chin.

Riza nodded without a word, listening for the sound of approaching soldiers, biding her time.

They came in a close group, rifles propped over shoulders, foolishly not expecting to encounter
danger this far from the battle, searching for the source of the noise nevertheless. They found it. Riza
stood and snapped off five shots. Four targets dropped where they stood. The fifth man dodged and
leveled his rifle as Riza continued to fire, emptying her pistol. He got off a single shot before he fell.

“We need to go! Now!” Edward was already skidding down the hill, more quickly than before.

They finally reached the bottom and relatively level ground, but they didn’t pause. Instead they
pressed deeper into the woods, wanting to put more distance between the Führer and the enemy.
After ten minutes with no sign of anyone close by or moving in their direction, Edward stopped,
panting heavily. He lay Roy gently on the ground and faced back the way they had come. Riza
crouched beside the Führer, winded as well. He was still unconscious. She checked her sidearm,
confirming it was empty, and felt at her belt for her extra clip. It wasn’t there, and she realized that
she must have lost it at some point while scrambling through the bush. Damn. She glanced up at
Edward.

“What’s going on up there?” Riza asked, the sound of gunfire muted by distance.

“Hard to say,” Edward returned. “There’s no way for me to tell who’s who.”

“We’ll wait here,” the General said. “When it settles down, I’ll go up and find out what happened.”

Edward didn’t appear too happy with that plan, but he kept his objections to himself. Instead he
focused his attention on the hillside. “A few people are gathering where you took out those soldiers,”
he said after a few moments. “I’m not sure wh. . . oh shit.” He scrambled to arrange Roy over his
shoulders again. “Dogs. They have dogs.”

Riza leaped to her feet and followed as the young man dashed deeper into the woods. Soon she
didn’t need Edward to tell her that they were being tracked; she could hear the barking dogs for
herself.
This was bad. They couldn’t outrun them forever. Their only alternative was to find a way to double back and hope that they could make it to the train before their pursuers caught up, and that the train was once again secure – two highly optimistic hopes.

Suddenly Riza found herself splashing into another option.

The wide, swiftly rushing brook was just what the fugitives needed. Riza grabbed Edward’s arm to stop him.

“Give me his coat,” she said, pulling at it before the blond man could respond.

Edward lowered the unconscious man and Riza pulled the long coat roughly off.

“What are you . . .”

“I’m going to lead them away from you,” she said.

“What the hell?” Edward was outraged. “No! Listen, that’s a terrible idea! We have to stick together!”

“If we do it will be easier for them to track us. We wade up or down stream, and sooner or later they will find our trail again when we set foot on the bank, even if it’s miles away. It might take time, but they are persistent and it will happen. On the other hand if we split up, you and Roy can head upstream while I lead them downstream on a wild goose chase. And before you suggest it, there’s no way I can carry him for any substantial distance. It has to be you.”

Edward was incensed, looking for some argument to change the General’s mind, and not finding one.

Finally he said, “Give me his gloves.”

She dug them out of the coat’s pockets. “Can you tell if the battle is ongoing?”

“No. It’s too far.”

“Then you need to go, and keep going. Get him out of here, as far away as possible.” She looked at Roy, so still, and hoped she was making the right decision.

“He’ll kick your ass for taking off on him,” Edward said grimly. “Mine too, for letting you go.”

“Tell him I didn’t give you a choice.”

“Are you giving me a choice?”

“No.”

“At least I won’t have to lie,” he muttered.

“Edward, believe me, if there was any other way, I would not ask this of you.” She quickly shrugged into Roy’s greatcoat, glancing at the scowling blond man. “Go, and don’t look back. We’ll find you. I have every confidence in your ability to keep him safe.”

And with that, she waded into the brook.

It took her less than a minute to cross the swiftly rushing water. Gaining the opposite bank, Riza glanced back. Edward was moving quickly upstream, waist deep in the center of the waterway. In
seconds he was around a sharp bend in the stream’s meandering course and hidden from view by
dense green foliage.

One less worry. Relieved, Riza devoted her full concentration to moving downstream as fast as
humanly possible without slipping or stumbling on the slick, loosely cobbled bank. Her goal now
was to trace an arcing path back toward the train, drawing her pursuers within reach of the Amestrian
soldiers she had left behind. She hoped that since they were relying on the dogs to lead them, the
hunters might not notice that their quarry had circled back to the embattled train. Even if they did,
they might pursue her anyway, believing that it was Roy they were tracking, hoping to catch him
before he could get to safety. Either way, if she could get them close enough to the train, at least one
of their mysterious enemies might be captured.

That, of course, depended on whether or not the Amestrian troops had defeated their attackers, and
Riza could avoid capture herself.

The baying of the hounds was definitely drawing closer, and while the blond woman took some
comfort knowing that it meant the enemy was on her trail and not Edward’s, she had to admit that the
speed at which they were closing was worrisome. At a hairpin bend in the stream Riza forded the
river again, taking the time to wade downstream a short distance in order to slow her pursuers. The
she oriented herself uphill, put her head down, and flat out ran.

Charging downhill had been a cakewalk compared to this. The slope was so steep that she was
slowed considerably, but fortunately the heavily wooded hillside offered plenty of cover, as well as
many hand and footholds. Struggling up the grade, Riza listened for the hounds; they had gone quiet,
likely trying to find her trail at the brook. Soon enough they would find it and take to barking their
enthusiasm for the chase once again, coming straight up the hill after their fleeing prey. Riza’s human
enemy would have just as much trouble scaling the steep slope as she, but her four legged pursuers
would not. They would be the first to overtake her.

She had just gained the summit when the dogs began barking, signaling that they were again on her
trail. The blond sharpshooter continued her headlong flight hoping that she wasn’t too far up the
tracks from the train. Ignoring the burn of exhausted muscles she skirted deadfalls and vaulted over
mossy logs, pushing through the treacherous terrain literally at breakneck speed.

The dogs were getting very close when Riza crashed through a stand of cedar into a small clearing, a
circle of Amestrian soldiers awaiting her arrival with rifles shouldered. Recognizing their commander
immediately, they lowered their weapons as she motioned them to silence. The blond General
scanned the clearing, zeroing in on a sturdy maple.

“The enemy are right behind me. Take cover. We want them alive.” She rushed over to the tree.

The soldiers faded back into the brush and Riza clambered up the maple to wait for the dogs and
their masters.

She didn’t have long to wait. A minute later the first dog burst into the clearing and made directly for
his treed prey, circling the trunk, leaping up to place scrabbling paws on rough bark. Soon three
more had joined him, and Riza knew their handlers would not be far behind.

Her first look at the men who were after her Führer was something of a letdown. She didn’t
recognize any of them. All three were ordinary, nondescript, their actions businesslike, though their
business was murder. They were not grotesque, swaggering monsters, smirking at her misfortune.
They were just ordinary men, two middle aged, one younger. The tallest of the older men walked up
to the tree, pistol in hand, and peered grimfaced through the foliage at the woman balanced on a high
limb wearing her Führer’s greatcoat. Disappointment creased his brow as he raised the gun.
The hidden soldiers stepped smartly into the clearing in a tight ring, rifles leveled at the enemy. Startled, the tall man’s shot went wide of his target. A brief firefight resulted in all three of Riza’s attackers on the ground, clutching non-lethal wounds to various limbs, their dogs either scattered or dead. Unfortunately, the two older men chose to immediately turn their weapons on themselves with lethal result. The youngest, a pale blond man roughly Edward’s age, hesitated with his pistol pressed up under his chin.

Riza climbed down from her refuge, mind racing. She dearly wanted to capture this man alive. They had to find out who was behind these deadly attacks, and dead men told no tales. She walked slowly towards him, arms away from her sides, palms up and nonthreatening, to stop just a handful of feet away.

“You don’t have to die,” she said calmly. “Your family, your friends, they don’t have to lose you this way.”

The young man looked at his fallen comrades. “I will die anyway.” His voice was barely a whisper. “I will be executed.” He spoke Amestrian with no trace of accent.

“Not necessarily,” Riza said, voice soothing. “You can help us. And then we can help you.”

A rustle of leaves signaled the arrival of more Amestrian soldiers, Generals Breda, Dearth, and Ethan among them. The three officers took in the scene and moved slowly to stand with Hawkeye.

“I, I will not betray my comrades,” the young man said, his eyes flashing between the new arrivals.

Dearth took up the intervention. “I’d think about that, young man,” the old General said evenly. “The people who you won’t betray have already betrayed you.” The young man quirked an eyebrow, and Dearth continued. “You are Amestrian. They have led you astray, made you a traitor to your country, and now will leave you to die in disgrace. You deserve better.”

“What do I deserve?” the young man’s voice was bitter. “I failed my mission. Should I further stain my honor with cowardice by turning on my comrades?” The pistol tightened in his grip.

General Ethan knelt to speak. “Is there honor in death?” he asked gently. “Not a single one of your comrades has survived this fiasco. Give it up, son. Surrender.”

“My cause is just, and duty calls,” the man said.

And with eyes locked defiantly to Ethan’s, he had pulled the trigger.

“Riza?”

Miles’ peaceful baritone broke the General from her thoughts. “I’m sorry,” she said. “Just, lost in thought.”

“You did everything in you power to keep him safe,” Miles assured her, not for the first time. “You left him in good hands. Edward and our Führer are two of the strongest people I know. Together they make a formidable team. We will find them, if they don’t find us first.”

But Roy had been unconscious when she’d left them. It had been a week since the train wreck, and so many unsettling what-ifs plagued her fitful slumber that she had given up on sleep altogether, passing out at her desk when her body’s needs finally overrode the command of her will. She had done what she thought was best, but guilt had a powerful logic all its own.

“I’m sure you’re right,” she said anyway. “Don’t worry. I’ll keep it together on this end. Give my
regards to Grandfather.”

Miles knew a goodbye when he heard one. “Take care of yourself. I’ll see you soon.”

Riza replaced the handset gently in its cradle and returned to the Intelligence report in front of her. As with all the others arranged neatly on her desk, it held nothing of significance. The Cretian military had teams out sweeping the hills between the crash site and the border, many with assigned Amestrian observers. Constantine IV had been sincere and very generous in his offer to allow Amestris to join with his own military in the search for Führer Mustang. He had even sent his eldest daughter to West City as a good will gesture to reinforce his claim that Creta had nothing to do with the attack in their territory. Riza had jumped at the chance to include as many eyes as possible in the search and rescue operation, though so far there was no sign of the lost men. While that could mean they were cautiously keeping their distance from anyone they might encounter in the wild, Edward’s Qi sense making that a very good possibility, there were many other, darker reasons why the two men were still missing.

The timid private stuck his head through the open door again and cleared his throat.

“General Hawkeye, Ma’am,” he said when she looked his way. “There’s a call for you on line one. Alphonse Elric.”

“Thank you, Private,” she said, pleased that this young man appeared trainable. She picked up the phone. “Hello Alphonse.”

“General,” was Al’s tense greeting. “Just calling to see if there’s any word.”

“There isn’t, I’m sorry to say,” the General told him.

She could hear the grating of his teeth over the line.

“And I’m sorry to hear it,” he said, dejected. “It’s been a week. I think it’s time I -”

“Don’t,” she cut him off. “If I thought there was anything you could do that isn’t already being done, believe me, I’d have you here in a minute.”

Alphonse laughed quietly. “Mind reader.”

“It’s easy when you make the same observation every day,” Riza said with her own quiet laugh. “You are a family man now, Alphonse. You can’t just take off without care anymore. Your wife and children need you there.”

“Winry’s fine with it. Granny too,” he said. “They’re just as worried as I am. As you no doubt are.”

“Understandably. But your presence is not necessary,” Riza argued. “Leave this to me, Alphonse. You are one man, alone. I am one woman, but with all the formidable resources of the Amestrian military at my command. I will find them.” And suddenly, she felt a bit better.


“They are together,” Riza said, passing along Miles’ reassurance. “They are both brave, and strong, and stubborn. And they have a habit of surpassing all our expectations.”

“Yes,” Alphonse agreed. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Unless I call you first,” Riza said, confident that good news was only a matter of time. She honestly
believed it. She had to. And Alphonse needed to hear it in her voice.

Alphonse hung up, and Riza turned back to the files on her desk. Coordinating the search was a major operation that required all her organizational skills, but she was more than up for the task. Like Alphonse however, she would have been much happier to be out in the field, physically searching for her lost comrades herself. Or better still, to be out there with them, never having separated from them in the first place. But Miles was right, and it was her consolation that Roy and Ed were indeed out there together. She knew without a doubt that each would use all of his formidable skills to protect the other.

A commotion in the outer office pulled her from her thoughts, and as Riza looked up, Colonel Rebecca Catalina burst into her inner office in a very undignified manner. The General’s old friend spun to firmly close the door on the curious Private at her heels. Then she stalked over to General Hawkeye’s desk and leaned over it, grinning from ear to ear.

“Riz!” Rebecca’s breathless voice was charged with elation. “We’ve found them!”
Kicking Sawdust

Sometime in the fog-misted early morning, the furtive band reached their destination. Even in the dim predawn light Roy had easily seen the round-top tent swelling above the pines well before they arrived. Colorful flags and streamers greeted them at the edge of the clearing, furling gracefully in the gentle breeze. At that hour, no clamorous welcome of side-show orators and ticket sellers disturbed the glade’s peace. Even the menagerie's collection of strange and ferocious beasts was still.

Stepping out onto a muddy, unpaved road Roy looked downhill. The steeply sloped roofs and clay chimneys of a nearby town peeked over the trees, shingles darkened by the lingering mist of rain, but that was not their destination. The travelers trudged uphill instead toward the festive standards, and passed under a gigantic banner suspended across the rutted dirt on two tall poles. Inscribed with three foot high, bright red letters, it welcomed all comers, and proclaimed that these grounds were currently occupied by Mauser Brothers Circus and Wild Animal Show.

The five road weary travellers entered the grounds and made their hurried way into the wide circle of brightly coloured bandwagons. The enormous big top dominated the far end of the enclosure, red and white canvas towering high above the smaller marquees that sheltered the side show and menagerie. No one else was present to observe the weary band crossing the soggy grounds. Roy was pleased to note that the midway had been spread with straw as a temporary control for mud, and he was grateful to walk without danger of his boots being sucked from his feet for the first time since the previous morning.

Darius, with Edward astride his shoulders, led the way to a squat red wagon nestled among the others. A quiet knock was acknowledged immediately. Roy was quickly ushered inside and the door was closed behind him.

Roy found himself in a small office, sparsely furnished with a desk, filing cabinet, and one overstuffed armchair, with a few rail back chairs arranged against the walls. A tatty oriental rug muffled Roy's sodden, muddy advance into the room. With curtained windows tightly shuttered, the wagon's dim interior was lit by a single Argand lamp on the scarred and battered desk. By the lantern's steady glow Roy was observed by two men. Identical twins. One leaned his lanky frame against the threadbare armchair in which the other was seated. Two pairs of sky blue eyes studied Roy from under matching auburn bangs, revealing nothing.

"Welcome to Mauser Brothers Circus, Führer Mustang," the seated man said. "I'm Merrill Mauser, and this is my brother Matthew. Please excuse my remaining seated."

"I'm pleased to meet you," Roy said, very sincerely. "You have my thanks for the efforts you have gone through to find and assist us to safety." His words did not dispel the odd tension in the small room. "My companion is injured. He needs medical attention."

"He will be tended to immediately, Führer Mustang," Matthew said solemnly. "We are very fortunate to have an Alkahestrist in our band. Mr. Elric is in good hands."

Roy felt a tension that he hadn't even realized flow out of him. "Thank you. Can you give me any information about the train wreck?"

The seated brother grimaced. "Very little I'm afraid. It was definitely an act of sabotage, but we still don't know who was responsible. Creta was quick to deny any involvement, and even went so far as to allow our search and rescue teams across the border to join in their recovery operation."
"And the train itself? The passengers? My guard?"

"There were many injuries, and a few casualties, but we have no details."

Roy could not keep the grief and anger from his face; the callousness of his adversary was appalling. "Injuries to civilians as well?"

"Only minor. We were lucky there." Matthew's tone was grave.

The Führer nodded his agreement. "What can you tell me about the situation in Amestris at the moment? How are my staff handling my absence?"

Merrill grimaced. "Initially the brass thought to keep the attack on the Presidential train and your subsequent disappearance under wraps until they had more information. Unfortunately, someone leaked the situation to the media. The newspapers and broadcast companies went into a frenzy, reporting every kind of worst case scenario from all-out war with Creta to alien invasion, based on rumor and speculation. They had the general public whipped into a near panic state until former Führer Grumman was asked to step in temporarily. He managed to calm the situation to a controllable degree, and is currently holding the reins until further notice."

"And now that you have been found, that won't be for much longer." Matthew crossed his arms over his chest. "The order to begin a search and rescue mission came from our contact at Western Command, Colonel Rebecca Catalina. We will be sending an encoded message as soon as possible to let her know you have been safely recovered. I suspect that she will keep that information confidential until you are back on Amestrian soil, since our search was conducted as a covert operation."

"Covert?" Roy questioned.

"We are a very successful intelligence unit," Merrill explained. "As entertainers, Mauser Brothers Circus is well known both nationally and internationally; our itinerary books both urban and rural performances. We're welcome just about everywhere, and that puts us in a position to gather information unavailable to more conventional sources."

"And you don't want to blow your cover," Roy concluded, realizing he had found the root of the Mausers' concerns.

"Exactly," Matthew confirmed. "We were able to locate you thanks to the efforts of two of our operatives in particular, both of whom are familiar with Mr. Elric's scent."

"Human chimeras."

Matthew frowned. "We prefer the term 'enhanced humans'. They have been taking small teams out daily, or nightly as the case may be, hoping to detect his sign. Fortunately, their efforts paid off."

"And now that you're here, we have a problem," Merrill said briskly, getting to the point. "We have to keep you and Mr. Elric hidden in order to maintain our cover."

Matthew rushed to elaborate. "This also works in your favor. Without knowing who is behind the attempts on your life, it's much safer for you to remain undercover as well, at least until we're back on home soil."

"Which might take a little more time than you may feel is necessary," Merrill put in. "We have a number of bookings remaining on our Cretian tour, and suddenly cutting it short for no apparent reason would raise suspicion."
"That's definitely something we wish to avoid. You're not safe quite yet, and by association, neither are we," the standing brother stated bluntly. "The nature of the attempt on your life suggests a group with extensive military resources. We are not a tactical unit. We're a band of travelling performers. We would be unable to withstand a full-on military assault."

The seated brother nodded his agreement. "The people who orchestrated the train wreck are as yet unidentified. That makes it difficult to know whom to trust. As a result, we can trust no one. That's why we must proceed with extreme caution."

Roy had been casting his attention back and forth between the brothers as they jointly made their urgent appeal, and now raised a placating hand. "I understand completely, and agree with your assessment of the situation. I bow to your extensive experience in the area of undercover operations, and trust that you will do everything in your power to get Mr. Elric and I safely back to Amestris."

The twins visibly relaxed at that declaration, and the seated man offered a small smile. "I'm relieved. To be honest, I expected you to insist that we defer to your leadership and break cover to head immediately back to the border."

It was Roy's turn to frown. "I am in your debt, and have no intention of doing anything to place you, your people, or your operation in jeopardy."

The twins exchanged glances, and Merrill rubbed a thoughtful hand through his shaggy mane. "Well," he said, smile tilting. "Speaking from experience, you are definitely not like the typical political big shots we've had to deal with from time to time."

"Thank you," Roy said with a small bow. "I'll take that as a compliment."

"I suspect that you may be too trusting, however," Matthew said with a shrug. "No offence."

"None taken," Roy granted. "To be honest, it's Mr. Elric's judgement I trust. If he hadn't vouched for Mr. Darius and his team, I would have shot first and taken names later. Furthermore, if you meant us harm, I seriously doubt you would have been foolish enough to have your team bring us to your base of operations. They would have been instructed to eliminate us as far away from this site as possible." Roy now offered a smile of his own. "They weren't."

Merrill's smile widened to a grin. "Indeed. But I fear we are being poor hosts." He gestured to a door behind the small desk. "I'm sure you are hungry and tired. You're welcome to make use of our quarters. We'll have breakfast sent in shortly, and then you can rest."

With those words, Roy suddenly realized that he couldn't remember the last time he had actually slept, and that his last meal had been a single bowl of oatmeal nearly twenty-four hours before. He was ravenously hungry and completely exhausted. "I'll take you up on that offer, and I appreciate your hospitality," he said.

"We have some plans to make at this point," Matthew confided as he conducted Roy to the indicated door. "There are eight weeks left in the Cretian portion of our tour, and we have to come up with a plausible explanation for canceling our remaining shows to make an early return to Amestris."

"Then I will leave you to it," Roy said. "Once again, you have my thanks." He stepped into the twins' private quarters as the door was closed behind him.

The small bedroom was much like the office before it: sparsely furnished with worn but serviceable furniture. Two beds each with a matching trunk at the foot occupied opposite sides of the room, separated by a modest armoire. A small safe occupied the corner on the left, serving as a makeshift
bedside nightstand. Corresponding valet frames stood facing each other from across the room, one empty, one sporting a black velvet riding jacket with tails. What caught and held Roy's attention, however, was the washstand to his right. A pitcher of clean water appealed to him from beside the porcelain basin; a bar of soap, a straight razor, and the clean white towels stored on the under shelf offered their own enticement. The only thing marring this personal hygiene perfection was the lack of a toothbrush.

Roy slid off his muddy boots and stood them by the door, then stripped out of his soaked jacket and shirt, hanging them on the empty valet. Standing in his wet undershirt and uniform pants, he eyed the stranger looking back at him from the mirror over the basin.

The stranger was familiar. Older, yes, but he resembled the man Roy had been years ago on the Ishbalan front, though this stranger lacked haunted, hollow eyes. Still, he was as gaunt, high cheek bones prominent under sun reddened skin. The week's worth of facial hair was new however, and unwelcome. Growing a full beard was one adventure Roy had never chosen to undertake, and as he was accustomed to being clean shaven, his face was uncomfortably itchy. Scraping fingers through the coarse hair, he prepared to dispose of it.

He had almost finished shaving when a quiet knock preceded the entrance of Lucien Darius carrying a serving tray obviously sent directly from paradise. Crispy bacon with just a hint of maple, fluffy scrambled eggs, perfectly browned and liberally buttered toast, strong black coffee – the mouth-watering aroma hit Roy like a slap to the face, and it took considerable willpower not to simply drop the razor and dive right in.

Darius placed the tray on a trunk and turned at Roy's thanks. "You're welcome, Sir," he responded as he headed back to the door.

"How is Edward?" Roy asked as the razor stroked away the last of his beard.

"Our doctor is checking him over, but she thinks he'll be fine," the big man said with a grin. "She also thinks your transmuted leg brace is pretty slick," he added as he left the room.

Roy smiled at that parting comment as he rinsed the residual soap from his face, then patted it dry with a clean, white towel, marvelling at the sudden novelty of such mundane luxuries. Breakfast called to him from its resting place by the bed, and he had no further reason to resist. He tucked in, surprised by the intense flavors, appreciating the simple fare as never before. After a single week of living rough, he could hardly believe how much he had missed clean towels and toast, and resolved never to take them for granted again.

With his stomach comfortably full for the first time in days, the Führer stripped off the last of his wet clothes and toweled himself dry. Then he lay down, mentally adding a soft bed to his list of favorite things as he slipped under the sheet. He lay on his back, hands locked behind his head, and stared at the plain white ceiling, waiting for sleep to claim him. As he drifted comfortably off, he wondered at the roller coaster ride his circumstances had taken.

And knew it wasn't over yet.

~0~

"Yo Roy! You awake?"

Maes Hughes was perched on the trunk at the bottom of the bed, peering into Roy's coffee mug, pouting to discover it empty. He was casually dressed in his favorite shirt – the pale violet button up Gracia had given him on his very last birthday – sleeves rolled past his elbows, and faded dungarees.
His feet were bare.

Roy levered himself up on his elbows and rubbed his bleary eyes, squinting at his old friend. "No. I'm dreaming."

"'fraid so." Maes put the mug back on the tray, then drew up one leg. He rested his chin on the knee and looked at Roy sideways. "You're looking well, considering you spent the last week hiking rough through the Viridian Mountains."

"Thank you. Is that all you came back from the dead to tell me?"

"It's called small talk Roy, and I'm kind of at a disadvantage here. I don't have any recent pictures of Elicia to show off. Breaking the ice is easier if you can put people at ease with something they're sure to enjoy, and who wouldn't enjoy looking at pictures of my perfect little pumpkin?" The specter sighed dramatically. "Being dead sucks. Being dead without a camera sucks more."

"Well, you know what they say. You can't take it with you," Roy soothed.

"That old saw is about money," Maes corrected. "I'm talking about something much more valuable."

"Photographs?"

"Memories," the dead man said, stabbing a finger into the bedspread for emphasis.

"Ah." Roy waited to see where this was going. Maes always got to the point, sooner or later.

"Memories are very important Roy," Maes insisted, though Roy hadn't argued the claim. "As long as we're talking about wise old sayings, think about this one: 'Those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it.' Don't lose sight of where you're going because you forgot why you're going there."

"I won't," Roy said softly.

"In some respects you already have." Maes picked a lint ball off the shabby comforter folded at the bottom of the bed. "There is one advantage to being dead. It gives you a whole new perspective to work with. All the petty little concerns of daily life fall away to reveal the things that really matter."

"And what, pray tell, might those be?" Roy couldn't resist asking.

"People." The word dropped from the ghost's lips, a solemn pronouncement.

It was Roy's turn to roll his eyes in exasperation. "Thank you, gracious spirit, for imparting that invaluable knowledge from the great beyond – which I already knew."

"Did you?" Maes raised a skeptical eyebrow. "You're isolated in an ivory tower, surrounded by your staff, relying on them for information. Oh, I'm sure the information is accurate. The problem is that you're getting dry facts alone. Sterile. Disconnected. Amputated from the source. It means you're out of touch with real people. You don't get to feel what they feel anymore. How can you, in good conscience, make decisions that will affect their lives without knowing what they really want?"

"Someone is trying to kill me, Maes," Roy pointed out. "I can't just wander into a tavern and cozy up to the bar for a pint and friendly chat. Hell, I was almost shot walking out of Whispers . . ."

"You needed a wife."

"Maes . . ."
"Or partner." Maes' hand waved off idle semantics to elaborate. "Someone who can keep you in touch with reality, to pull you out of your own head into the real world. Someone who isn't afraid to stand up to the Führer, and won't put up with Roy Mustang's bullshit. You need someone like that to keep you honest. Don't screw this up."

"Screw what up?"

Roll of eye, sigh of breath. For a construct of Roy's subconscious, Maes was frustratingly unforthcoming.

"Wake up, Roy," was all he said, softly, fondly.

And Roy did, to a cacophony of sounds muted by the heavy shutters closed over the bandwagon's window. Most notable was the unmistakable sound of a steam calliope, regaling circus patrons with lively music in oddly dissonant chords. Above that, a sideshow grinder pitched his hypnotic spiel, enticing patrons to buy tickets for a peek inside the sideshow tent. And underneath all, the low hum of many excited voices, drawn to the spectacle, eager to be entertained.

Mauser Brothers Circus and Wild Animal Show was open for business.

Lying boneless under the thin sheet, Roy let the dream fade until only warmth and familiar exasperation for Maes lingered. It wasn't often that the flights of fancy his sleeping mind took were so comfortable. Usually he found himself jerking awake in a cold sweat with the taste of greasy ash on his tongue.

Roy swung his feet to the floor and stood, stretching muscles logy from sleep. A low burning kerosene lamp had been left to light the small room, and Roy noted that it was comfortably warm despite his state of undress. A stack of neatly folded clothes occupied the trunk where Maes' ghost had lounged, Roy's travel worn shirt and uniform pants nowhere to be seen. Beside the clothes a pair of worn leather work boots stood. On top of the pile were the few things he'd had in his pockets: Maes knife, Ganzer's watch and lighter, the assassins' compass, and the small stone horse Roy had transmuted.

Moving his meager possessions aside, Roy shook out a well worn coulter shirt, then slipped it on, the roughspun fabric settling comfortably against his skin. Boxers next, and over them a pair of soft brushed, faded brown trousers that fit reasonably well. His stomach rumbled as he shouldered the suspenders, and he wondered how long he had been asleep. Quite some time, he estimated. No light seeped past the shutters, suggesting that the sun had set. And his bladder was distressingly full.

Unwilling to cast discretion to the winds and venture out into the public eye, Roy checked under the bed and was relieved to discover a convenient chamber pot, of which he made quick and efficient use. He was hungry, but that was a familiar state now, and he contented himself with a glass of water from the pitcher by the washstand. Glancing around the room his eyes lit on a well thumbed copy of Carl von Clausewitz' On War, resting on the small safe by the other bed. Roy picked it up and returned to his own bed. He straightened the sheets and then lay down, propping himself up against the headboard. Fierce amber eyes flashed through his thoughts, and he wondered how Edward was doing. Flipping open the book he settled in to wait.

He was most of the way through the second chapter when heavy footsteps in the outer room alerted him to the imminent arrival of a visitor. The door cracked open to a vaguely familiar face peering into the room. Seeing that Roy was awake, the man stepped in with a covered serving tray and nudged the door gently shut with his heel.

Late forties; heavy jawed, hook nosed, and beady eyed; badly receding hairline; thin, sharply pointed
mustache; ingratiating posture tending toward blatant groveling – Roy had only met Youswell's disgraced military overseer once, but even in civilian clothes, this was definitely the same man. Now if Roy could just recall his name . . .

"Führer Mustang, Sir!" the man said, placing the tray on the trunk at the foot of Roy's bed and then snapping to attention with a click of heels and a crisp salute. "Allow me to introduce myself. First Lieutenant Shiro Yoki, at your service."

Roy put the book aside and returned the salute. "At ease, Lieutenant," he said. "I believe we've met."

Yoki appeared pleased to be remembered. "Yes Sir," he acknowledged. "In Central Hospital, after you recovered your sight."

Which hadn't happened all at once. Tim Marcoh's course of treatment had spanned nearly two weeks, gradually returning Roy's sight from dismal darkness to perfect daylight, the exchange paid by Marcoh's Philosopher's Stone. As Roy left the hospital, grateful to step out into dazzling sunshine, Lieutenant Yoki had pounced. The man had latched on to Roy's arm and begged that his former rank be restored. Roy had taken the easy road and referred him to Führer-elect Grumman, and it seemed Yoki's request had been granted. And why not? He'd done his part, perhaps not proving himself in the physical conflict, but he'd had a hand in the events leading to the offensive against Father. Yoki was as much a hero as any of them.

The Lieutenant removed the serving tray's checkered cloth cover with a flourish revealing Roy's supper, and diplomatically ignored the needy growl of his Führer's stomach. The large, steaming bowl of beef stew and the fresh crusty bun couldn't have been more welcome.

Yoki watched as Roy moved to sit on the bed's edge to eat. "Our doctor said she would like to examine you, Sir," he announced. "If that's alright."

Roy nodded. "That's fine." Not that he thought it necessary, but it would give him the opportunity to find out how Edward was doing.

Yoki bowed. "I'll tell her she can see you as soon as she finishes her act."

"Her act?" Roy got up to fetch a glass of water from the washstand.

"Yes Sir," the man said. "She is our fire specialist."

The Flame Alchemist grinned widely. "I look forward to meeting her."

With a click of heels and another salute, Yoki left the Führer to his supper.

The bowl was soon mopped clean with the last bit of bun, and Roy settled in to wait. The sounds of the midway filtered into the wagon, oddly soothing, and he was not inclined to read any longer. Truth be told, after a week of hiking through the woods, sitting idle left him restless, and he wondered how long he might be confined to this small space.

His mind wandered, traveling the path that had led him to this unremarkable room in an unexpected place. Had things progress along their natural course, at this moment he would have been in Creta's capital city rubbing shoulders with Constantine IV and his elite negotiators. In the blink of an eye all that had changed thanks to the ruthless plotting of an unknown adversary. An adversary who would go to great lengths to get to the Führer, even at the expense of innocent bystanders.

Thanks to Darius and his team, Roy now knew that Riza Hawkeye was alive, and at least well enough to coordinate a search for her Führer. He wondered, as he often had over the course of his
enforced trek through the wilderness, what fate had befallen the rest of his entourage. From Edward's account it appeared that the last three coaches had separated from the rest of the train before derailing, and Roy realized that was how the civilians aboard the forward cars had escaped harm for the most part, pulled away from the attack by the engine. The subsequent exchange of gunfire that Edward had described all but guaranteed that Roy's Presidential guard had suffered injury, and worse. What of Havoc and Breda? How had Ethan, Dearth, Rudland, and Overholt fared? Had the nervous, pimple-faced steward survived?

And who was responsible for the attack?

Not for the first time Roy seriously considered the possibility that the attempts on his life were the work of a military insider. The attack at Whispers had planted that particular seed. Those assassins had been far too familiar with his movements that evening, suggesting that their intelligence came from a source close to the Führer's office, possibly an aide. Now that he had positively identified one of his recent attackers as a certified State Alchemist, the prospect of sedition became even more likely, the instigator almost certainly someone of high rank. Roy hated to admit it, but he had no choice. Someone on his staff was a traitor. Someone in the upper echelon. Someone he trusted.

Even being completely objective, Roy refused to entertain the notion that it might be someone from his old command. Hawkeye, Havoc, Breda, Furey, Falman — they had all been through so much together that it was impossible for Roy to conceive of betrayal by any one of them. His personal aides and secretaries? All were personally selected by Riza Hawkeye through rigorous security screening, and regardless, lacked the influence necessary to mount an offensive on the scale required to successfully attack a train on foreign soil. The Führer's elite Council of Generals? True, a few had held seats during the Bradley regime as well, but those men were carefully watched. The rest were new faces, handpicked by Grumman or Roy himself — good men and women all. After many long years of oppression under a ruthless, inhuman Führer, who among them would resort to cruel deception and violence to take power when democracy was so close at hand? Each face reeled through his mind's eye. Whose was the face of a traitor? Roy hadn't a single clue.

Norris Ganzer disturbed Roy the most. Like Roy himself, Ganzer had made no secret of his belief that Amestris would be better served by a more representative form of government. The gleam in his eyes when the subject was broached, the zeal he displayed in conversation around the mechanics of such a major political transformation — Roy could not believe the man's enthusiasm was anything but genuine. Very soon, when Amestris achieved relative economic and social equilibrium and a reasonably stable peace with her neighbors, the Führer would begin the process of establishing democracy. He would need men and women dedicated to the principles of political self-determination to map out that process, and up until that moment of discovery on a wet, grey morning by a steep gorge cut through foreign mountains, Roy had believed Norris Ganzer would play a key role on that panel. Instead, the man now rested in an unmarked grave, killed by his intended victim. Ganzer's hands-on involvement in a plot to assassinate the leader who not only shared his political ideals, but was poised to set them in motion, shook Roy's foundation with a sledgehammer blow. It was almost beyond comprehension.

And Ganzer hadn't been acting alone. It would take more than a State Alchemist with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel to organize a major coupe, just as Roy could not have managed to take on Bradley and the First Homunculus without recruiting Generals Grumman and Armstrong to the cause. Which begged the question: who among his trusted Generals was out for his blood and position? Was there just a single traitor on his council, or were more conspiring against him?

Were they all in on the plot?

Perhaps Matthew Mauser was right. Maybe Roy was too trusting, because he refused to give in to
the crippling suspicion intrinsic to this situation. He could not afford to let paranoia rule him. If he lost his balance on that slippery slope, how long would it be before he became just another military dictator whose only goal was to maintain his grip on power regardless of the means? How long before his grand dreams shrank to encompass nothing more than a drive to ensure his own safety, seeing enemies in every shadow and lashing out indiscriminately? How long before he was just another Bradley, puppet not to some inhuman master, but to his own arrogance instead, his visions of freedom and prosperity for Amestris vanished behind a haze of paranoid delusion?

With a sigh, Roy relaxed back against the headboard, hands clasped behind his head. It would do no good to dwell on this here, isolated in the middle of nowhere. Barring unforeseen complications, he would soon be back in Amestris finding what answers he could, relying on the people he knew he could trust with his life beyond the shadow of a doubt. Until then, it was pointless to torture himself with dark speculation. Still, it was hard to keep the vultures of doubt from ominously circling.

Roy was so lost in thought that his first indication of a visitor was the soft click of the closing door. The Führer looked up to see a tall, slim woman leaning back against it, gazing at him with sharp intensity.

In the dim lantern glow she was surreal. Her face was powdered a ghostly white, almond eyes kohl rimmed with a single glittering tear inked to her left cheek, lips a shimmering magenta pout. A wide black crinoline ruffle circled high about her throat above a pure white taffeta singlet. The smooth red satin of her flared skirt fell to mid thigh over stockings striped black and white. Bright red bows were fixed to her black leather combat boots, matched to the one adorning the miniature top hat perched askance on her upswept, ebony mane.

"Führer Mustang." Her voice was deep yet feminine, her words clipped and precise with a lilting accent. "Forgive the intrusion. I am Murata Arisaka, the practicing physician for this company. Yoki-san informed me that you have agreed to allow me to examine you. My performance is scheduled late in the program and I did not want to keep you waiting." Murata bowed low, hands folded to her chest.

"There was no need to rush," Roy said with a smile. "I believe I am in perfect health."

"Elric-san told me that you suffered a concussion when the train derailed. Please permit me to make sure that you have fully recovered."

Roy sat up and swung his legs over the bed's edge. "Be my guest."

The woman moved forward, shaking a sheer cloth from her fist with a magician's flourish. Her tone became briskly professional. "Please remove your shirt and lie down, flat upon your back." She displayed the wisp of translucent fabric, roughly six inches square, inscribed with an unfamiliar alkahestric array. "This is an hatore susakuru; it will enhance the current of Ki through your body, so that I may see if the flow is unnatural. I will place it on your stomach and activate it. You may experience a slight warming of your body, and perhaps a mild, tingling sensation. This is normal."

Roy shrugged off his suspenders and pulled his shirt over his head, then lay back down on the bed, curious. When Murata had first entered the room, he had assumed she was of Xingese descent. He had been mistaken.

His first indication was her accent. It did not follow the Xingese pattern he was familiar with. The unfamiliar words she used did not sound precisely Xingese either. As the woman leaned over him, he studied her face through the makeup. Her features were more angular than a typical Xingese woman's, her almond eyes larger, her nose more prominent. He also noted that she was older than he first estimated, as the fan of fine lines by her dark brown eyes revealed.
Roy was startled out of his study when Murata took hold of the waist band of his trousers and tugged them firmly down, low on his hips.

"Please excuse my boldness," she said. "I must place the array so that it is unobstructed over the centre of your Hara, here," she tapped a gentle finger just below Roy's navel. "This is the place where Ki flows from your essence."

The woman draped the thin cloth over Roy's midriff and carefully smoothed it into position, then pressed the thumb and index fingers of each hand to activate the circle. The array glowed to life with a vibrant green shimmer.

At first Roy felt only a mild tingle where the cloth met his skin. The tingle quickly faded as warmth blossomed in his stomach, spreading up his spine, cycling back down his torso to gradually fill his body from head to toe. A pleasant, peaceful sensation swelled from deep in his chest. His senses became keenly focused, perception honed to a fine edge, while conversely he felt light-headed.

"You have a strong current. Very powerful," Murata commented. She pressed cool fingers to Roy's temples, staring into his eyes. "Your Ki flows naturally, unhindered. You are well." She frowned. "Your reiki – spirit energy – has an unusually strong connection to the void."

"I am an alchemist," Roy said. "Perhaps that has something to do with it."

"I have examined many who practice the arts of alchemy and alkahestry, and never have I seen such a connection," the woman mused, almost to herself.

Roy was willing to bet serious money that Murata had never had the opportunity to examine someone who had been cast through their personal Gate to encounter a mocking Truth and receive its costly gifts, whether he'd wanted them or not. That was a story he had no desire to share, however, so he remained silent. The green light soon faded from the array, the warmth dissipated from Roy's body, and the woman lifted the delicate cloth away.

"Aside from the stress and strains of your travels, you are in perfect health," Murata said with a small bow.

"Thank you," Roy said, sitting up and swinging his legs over the side of the bed. "And if I may ask, what is Edward's condition?"

"His leg will heal without complication, provided he allows it to do so." An annoyed grimace followed that statement, quickly smoothed away. "I must compliment you on your first aid skills. The transmuted splint is very impressive. Multiple fractures of a single bone must be treated cautiously. The traction you applied was just enough to prevent serious damage from muscle spasms, without straining the fractures apart."

Roy accepted the praise with a modest grin. "What's your prognosis for his recovery?"

The woman sat down on the opposite bed. "I have begun a course of treatment on the crushed muscles of his leg and the comminuted fracture of his tibia, but rentanjutsu is not a magical cure-all. It is but a natural process that significantly speeds recovery. The soft tissue of the leg will heal quickly, but even with extensive treatment the damage to the bone will require substantial recovery time. I estimate at least two weeks before the splint can be removed, and even then he will require a crutch for support."

"Hmm, that will be hard on him," Roy said with a frown as he slipped on his shirt. "Being laid up will definitely rub rough against the grain of his independent nature."
"Yes, he is a difficult patient," Murata agreed, "though I am pleased to have an opportunity to speak with someone in my native tongue. It has been a long time."

"Forgive me if I'm mistaken, but you are not Xingese, are you." Roy jumped at the prospect of indulging his curiosity.

"You are quite correct," Murata confirmed. "I am Nihonese. Nihon is an island nation in the Great Sea east of Xing. I was raised in the capital city of Edo."

"You are a long way from home," Roy observed. He knew of the Nihonese, had read brief references to them in obscure Xingese texts, but to date had never met one. The small, isolated nation was indeed very far away.

"Quite the contrary," the woman said with a smile. "This is my home."

"Creta?"

The woman shook her head. "This traveling show." Her smile was soft and satisfied.

Roy nodded his understanding. He had learned long ago that a home didn't necessarily have to be a place. His years in the military had taught him that the special places in your life had more to do with the company you kept than a physical location.

Murata stood up and turned to the door. "And now, Führer Mustang, I must take my leave. I wish to check on Elric-san before my performance. He has a disturbing habit of leaving his bed whenever he is left unattended."

Roy stood as well, sensing an opportunity to leave his own confinement. "Perhaps I could be of service," he suggested. "Take me to your infirmary. I can keep an eye on him while you are otherwise occupied."

The Nihonese woman turned to him with a frown. "I think that would be unwise," she said apologetically. "It would be dangerous for you to go out into the midway while so many civilians are present. If you are recognized . . ."

"A large part of my official persona is my uniform," Roy said as he shrugged his suspenders over his shoulders and snapped them against his chest. "Dressed like this, with a suitable hat, I'm just another circus patron looking for some quality entertainment."

Murata was not convinced.

"Your face has been on the front page of every newspaper for a week, your name on every tongue," she reasoned. "All it would take is one person in that crowd of many to notice how much you resemble the missing Führer of Amestris, who is coincidentally somewhere in these very mountains . . ."

"But they would have to see my face first," Roy countered. "The sun has set; night has fallen. A wide-brimmed hat pulled low on my forehead would make my face virtually invisible to the casual observer." It did not appear that Murata was swayed by the Führer's argument, so he turned on the charm. "I also fear I am intruding, idling here in your masters' personal quarters. Won't you please indulge my need to feel useful, even if it's just by keeping my obstinate companion from injuring himself?"

Roy's easy smile and earnest manner were chipping away at Murata's resolve. The depth of sincerity in dark blue eyes wasn't hurting his cause either. "We would have to be very careful . . ."
"Of course," Roy said, bowing his head decorously.

The woman sighed resignedly. "Wait here," she said, and slipped out the door.

She was back in a few moments, a dark cloak hiding her costume and an old felt hat in her hand.

"Put this on," she directed, handing the hat to Roy.

He did, and then hunched his shoulders and shoved his hands deep into his pockets, bowing his head.

Murata walked slowly around him, examining the effect, and then sighed loudly again. "I suppose it will do," she allowed, though reluctantly. Then she flipped the hood of her wrap up over her head and gestured for Roy to follow.

Stepping out into the midway, Roy was immediately struck by a kaleidoscope of colors. The sun had long since set, but the circus grounds were far from dark. Dotted almost haphazardly around the large space were numerous wooden poles, each sporting a large clutch of brightly colored paper lanterns to light the area. A blend of odors both ordinary and unusual scented the warm evening air; wood smoke mingled with incense, fresh hay flirted with eastern spices. Quite a few local townsfolk wandered about, waiting for the big top performance to get under way, but as predicted, they paid no notice to Roy and his escort, distracted by sights more interesting than a man in nondescript clothing with a battered felt hat pulled low over his eyes and a woman in a dark hooded cloak hurrying him along.

Careful to keep his head lowered, Roy observed his surroundings. As the Führer had noticed earlier, the levelled circus lot was strewn with a layer of straw to keep mud and dust under control. One curved side of the wide area was lined with colorful, eye-catching banners depicting the strange and amazing acts and oddities that the sideshow had to offer. On a bally platform at the far end of the line a sideshow barker called attention to the wonders hidden just inside. The sideshow tent itself peaked above the banner line, the glow of lanterns inside casting a shifting shadow play on its canvas. The other side of the lot was ringed by a number of small concession stalls, enticing patrons with the promise of exotic food and drink, fortunes foretold, and midway games to test their mettle. It was in this direction that Roy was led.

Past the chanting showmen, behind the bank of concession booths and partially shielded from public view, the circus bandwagons stood ranked. By the glow of full moon and firelight, their elaborately carved and meticulously painted panels were a fantastic collage, each one unique. Wooden gargoyles, griffins, dragons. Mythical creatures and characters of old. Aerugoan gladiators. Cretian scholars. Ishbalan holy men. Legendary figures both real and fictional. Lions, elephants, and exotic birds. Mirrors winked from the sides of many. Landscapes adorned most. Each wagon was an extraordinary work of art.

The Nihonese woman's destination was a long wagon locked in the coils of two twisting dragons, their twined tails curved over the rear door. Murata's slim hand slid out from beneath her cloak to key open the lock. Turning, she motioned Roy forward, her eyes darting to pierce the shadows around them as he slipped quickly inside.

Murata's bandwagon was nothing like the Mauser brothers' humble lodgings. Roy stepped through the door into a spotlessly clean and well lit room that clearly took up over half of the wagon's interior. Gleaming stainless steel counters stretched along the two long walls with neatly labeled drawers below and organized cabinets above. An impressive collection of medical tools and supplies both familiar and mysterious was visible through wood-framed glass doors. Two hospital style beds occupied the space on either side of a door at the opposite end of the room. One was empty. The
other was occupied by a glaring Edward Elric. The recipient of that glare scowled back, brandishing a gleaming urinal. Both combatants turned toward Roy and Murata as the door closed behind them.

"Murata-san!" Yoki lowered the urinal and advanced, stabbing an accusing finger in Edward's direction. "He's trying to get out of bed again! Make him stop!"

The temperature in the room suddenly dropped, and the air became charged with a disquieting undercurrent. The Nihonese woman's face darkened despite her makeup as sinister clouds gathered behind her eyes. The swift transformation from demure to demonic caused Roy to take a cautious step back.

"Is that why you are wielding that urinal like a weapon?" she snarled as she advanced toward the cowering man. "I left you here to mind him, not maim him!" The woman turned her blistering glare to Edward. "And you! What have I told you about getting out of bed? Do you want to heal properly, or would you prefer to make your injury worse?"

Edward flinched from the glare. "I have to pee!" he said plaintively.

"That's what urinals are for," she snapped, then turned to a cringing Yoki and snatched the offending item from his hands. "They are not for beating patients about the head, regardless of how satisfying that might be." She thrust the jug into Edward's lap. "Do you need help?"

"No, Oneesan," the young man said, embarrassed as he fumbled the object under the sheet.

A few moments later his task was complete, and Murata flipped back the covers to retrieve the pot, shoving it into Yoki's reluctant hands. Examining Edward's discomfited flush, her demeanor softened.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" she said, tone still brisk but no longer menacing. Ed clenched his teeth and did not respond. "You must stop this childishness and stay quietly in your bed," Murata continued undaunted. "I brought someone to keep you company."

All eyes shifted to Roy, still standing by the door. He doffed his hat with a grand, sweeping gesture and treated the room to his smirk. Edward rewarded him with that enchanting smile Roy loved so well, warming him straight through.

Yoki snapped to immediate attention, right arm springing to salute. "Führer Mustang, Sir!" he exclaimed. "You shouldn't have been out and about! What if you were recognized?" The balding man shot an accusatory glance at the Nihonese alkahestris. "Our masters will not be pleased. Besides, Edward already has someone to keep him company. Me."

"And look how well that's working out," Ed muttered under his breath.

"You are relieved of that duty," Murata said, though not unkindly, "and are now free to perform for the townspeople."

Yoki did not look pleased. "I don't think I have enough time to prepare . . ."

"Nonsense," the woman reassured him. "There is plenty of time. Come." She beckoned to him as she moved back toward the door. "Thank you, Führer Mustang, for volunteering to watch over my patient."

"It is my pleasure to be of service, Murata-san," Roy replied with a smile.

The Nihonese woman slipped out the door, leaving a hesitant Yoki behind.
"Beat it, Yoki," Ed said, glowering.

With the urinal in hand and a final, regretful glance over his shoulder, the older man followed Murata out of the wagon.

"That guy's annoying as fuck," Edward muttered.

Roy agreed, though not out loud. He was also sure the balding Lieutenant's first stop would be Matthew or Merrill Mauser to tattle Murata's indiscretion, and he hoped she would not be in too much trouble for leading Roy to her wagon. He couldn't really regret his manipulation however, when he pulled a chair up to the bedside and Edward flashed that beguiling smile again.

With the door closed behind the two circus performers, Edward sighed with relief, laying back into his propped up pillows as the tension visibly drained out of him. "I think my teacher might have some Nihonese blood," Edward said, "Izumi might be scarier than Murata-san though. Just in a different way. I don't know. It's probably a toss-up."

"I found your teacher to be quite the intimidating woman," Roy begged to differ. "Murata-san doesn't even come close in my estimation."

"One word, Mustang: 'sponge bath'." Edward couldn't suppress a shudder.

"I think that's two words," Roy said, grinning.

"Even worse."

A quick survey of the younger man revealed freshly washed hair neatly braided, and a face scrubbed pink, bare of the week's worth of reddish-blond stubble - in short, a clean and comfortable patient on the road to recovery. Edward's injured limb rested above the sheets, and Roy noted that his transmuted brace remained, though it appeared to have been modified to eliminate the boot and enclose more of Edward's leg. A standard issue hospital gown tied loose in the back over a worn white tee-shirt and a sheet strategically draped over his hips served to preserve Edward's dubious modesty. The blond man was relaxed, his face no longer tight with concealed pain, and Roy wondered if the Nihonese alkahestris had given him something a little stronger than aspirin to ease his discomfort.

"She mentioned that you speak Nihonese," Roy said as he settled into the chair by the bed, hoping to satisfy his curiosity.

"I can read it fairly well too," Ed volunteered easily. "I picked it up in Xing, when I started researching Nihon's unique form of alkahestry. Sometimes important details get lost in translation; it's better to go to the original text."

"Your capacity for knowledge never ceases to amaze me."

Edward hummed contentedly in response, eyes closed, adding to Roy's conviction that he was under the influence of some kind of drug. He wondered how much the younger man's natural inhibitions might be lowered, and how he might make the most of the opportunity, feeling not the slightest bit guilty at the thought. Roy only had Ed's best interests in mind, after all. Satisfying his curiosity was of secondary importance.

Yeah, right.

Not that he didn't hold Edward's wellbeing in high regard. It was just that the need to know had always been a driving force in Roy's life, and he couldn't discount it now.
So, how to proceed. "How are you feeling, Edward?" Cautiously.

"Good." The young man's eyes remained contentedly closed.

"I'm glad to hear it." Quietly, warmly, so as to weave a reassuring spell. "I was worried." That was the absolute truth.

"No need to worry about me, old man," Edward said just as quietly. "I'm tough." Then, "Are you okay?"

"Of course." Roy's smile was audible. "I'm very resilient. Not quite a suit of armor, but still fairly sturdy. Speaking of which, we'll have to find a way to get word to Alphonse that you're alright. He must be terribly concerned."

Edward frowned, eyes still closed. "Yeah, I guess."

I guess? "You've been missing for a week. I'll guarantee he's anxious."

"He shouldn't worry about me." Ed's lips tipped into a lopsided grin. "I've been on my own for years. I can handle just about anything."

Roy quirked up an eyebrow. "All the same, right now you're his missing brother. I'd be worried if I had a brother and he was missing."

"Al knows I can look after myself."

"He also knows what a trouble magnet you are," Roy pointed out. "He was quite concerned when you disappeared into the east for two years."

"Mmm. Yeah. Maybe."

Maybe? "You don't think so? After two years without a word? Why wouldn't he be?" Keep it low key and careless, no pressure. They were discussing the weather.

"Well, he was . . ." Edward's eyes snapped open. Head laid back on the pillow, he tilted his frown at Roy.

Who kept his expression casually innocent.

"Do you always have to be such a nosey bastard?" Edward wanted to know.

So much for satisfying his curiosity. Oh well, it had been worth a try. Roy plastered on his patented 'Who, me?' expression, and the younger man scowled.

Edward muttered something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like 'manipulative prick', then closed his eyes again. The frown soon smoothed away, and Roy was beginning to wonder if the younger man had dozed off when he sighed and said, "So, I hear that Hawkeye and Havoc made it home safe."

"I heard about Hawkeye, but not Havoc. They tell me that Grumman is acting Führer at the moment."

Ed's frown was back. "How come? I thought Hawkeye was Deputy Führer."

"She is," Roy confirmed. "I assume she wanted to coordinate the recovery effort personally, without the distraction of having to run a country. I suppose she also thought her grandfather might have a
more stabilizing influence on the population in a crisis situation. He does have a lot of experience. He did an amazing job wrestling the public from the brink of all-out panic after the Promised Day."

The younger man mulled that over. "Yeah, he's good with people. They trust him. Even I kinda trust him."

High praise indeed, coming from an avowed antimilitarist and unrepentant loose cannon. Roy kept a close eye on the polls, so he was fairly confident of the response, but nevertheless he asked, "And what does the common man, or woman as the case may be, think of the current Führer?"

"I hate talking politics," Ed said, tone sour.

"Indulge me," Roy urged.

The young man considered the request for a moment before giving in with a one-shouldered shrug. "Most of the people I talk to think that Führer Mustang is too busy working out treaties with neighboring countries to care about domestic problems."

Roy blinked. "What?"

"I'm not saying I agree," Ed said apologetically. "That's just what I hear."

The current Führer of Amestris was taken aback. "According to our most recent public opinion poll, my foreign policy initiatives are very much supported by the general public," he defended.

"Yeah? You might want to check your polls for response bias. My guess is the accuracy might be suffering from the Bradley Effect*. " Roy's confused expression prompted Edward to elaborate. "You know, where instead of saying what they really think, respondents choose the safe answer that ensures they don't get pulled out of bed in the middle of the night to be executed in the street."

"What? But that doesn't happen anymore!" Roy sputtered in outrage. "This is the new Amestris! King Bradley is dead! His oppressive regime is over!"

Ed shrugged. "Old habits die hard," he observed, "and it's better to be safe than sorry."

It looked like Roy still had work to do in the way of gaining public trust. "I suppose I'll have to make a point of explaining why foreign policy is my main focus at the moment," he muttered. "Treaties with neighboring countries are important for a number of reasons. The main objective is peace, which is necessary for national stability, which then leads to social and economic stability, and eventually, growth. Amestris has been at war for most of its history. For us, peace is an unnatural state. That has to change if we want to prosper."

Ed held up a placating hand. "Hey, you don't have to justify yourself to me. I know you didn't want this job for the glitz and the glory. I've know you long enough to realize you'll work your ass off to make sure Amestris becomes a place where all her people can live in peace and prosperity."

Edward's eyes were closed as he spoke, and Roy found that strangely comforting. "I also realize that shit can't change overnight."

Somewhat mollified, Roy leaned forward in the chair to rest his elbows on Ed's bed. "So tell me, oh pulse of the people, what domestic problems are most pressing at the moment?"

Edward cracked a disgruntled eyelid to glower at his lover. "Unemployment, for the most part. When you cut back on military projects, civilian contractors lost their jobs."

And under the Bradley regime a lot of military contracts had been tendered to civilians; the most
productive had enjoyed lavish funding for many years. The nation's economy had been geared toward building and maintaining the ultimate army. The homunculi and their master had nurtured that goal by encouraging the development of more powerful weapons, training soldiers to be more capable killers, and turning alchemist into human weapons, among many, many other martial projects. Father's war machine was no longer needed to trace a blood-splattered transmutation circle through and around Amestris however, national defense being the current Führer's only concern. That meant downsizing. Which meant closing down scores of Bradley's pet projects. And that meant people out of work.

Central was the economic hub of Amestris, so it had been hardest hit when Roy had eliminated funding for a huge number of ongoing military projects from the budget, but the city had suffered massive structural damage on the Promised Day, and repairing the infrastructure had provided new job opportunities for those displaced from their livelihood. Even now that the city was restored, construction continued as the local economy improved thanks to investment initiatives made available by Führer Mustang's government. Central was Roy's proving ground for his plans for Amestris' future, and it appeared that he was moving in the right direction. Just not fast enough.

"Maybe we need to put people to work on National projects a little sooner than I anticipated," Roy mused. "There are so many things this country needs. Roads. Bridges. Hospitals. Schools. Better access to higher education. Improvements to our rail system." The Führer was warming up on one of his favorite topics. "I'd love to lay down railroad tracks in the tunnels cut by Sloth underneath Amestris. Imagine it Ed! A transportation system interconnecting every region of the country, and protected from the elements. Major snowstorm in the north? So what? Landslides in the west? Trains still on time."

"That would be a big job," Ed said, eyes distant. "You'd have to reinforce the tunnels, and figure out a way to circulate air down there. Trains pump out a lot of smoke and steam. Waterproofing would probably be a good idea too, and some kind of drainage system. You'd need a team of structural engineers to work out the details."

"I've been thinking about forming a committee. You could chair it," Roy offered.

Edward ignored him.

Roy didn't push it. "So what else is on the general public's collective mind?" he prompted after a moment.

"You sure you really want to know?"

Roy nodded, though with some trepidation.

"Fine," Ed said. "What's your stand on education? Do you have plans to help people living in poverty? How are you going to handle corruption? What about law enforcement? Do you think more government control is better than less? Are you big on local autonomy, or are you strictly a central government kind of guy? How do you plan to make sure that the little guys get what they really need, instead of what the big shots want them to have?"

"For someone who hates to talk politics, you ask a lot of good questions," Roy said, somewhat surprised.

Edward shrugged. "They're not my questions. People want to know where you stand on this shit, and they're not getting any answers."

Roy scowled. He prided himself on the transparency of his administration, and he didn't appreciate
Ed implying that he was standing on shit. "I keep people up to date with my policies as much as possible," he argued. "I hold press conferences when unexpected things come up. I have a dedicated liaison that is in constant contact with the media. I write my own speeches; I keep them as simple as possible to avoid confusion, and I say exactly what I mean to say. I believe I am very open with the people."

"I think you've been in politics too long; you're starting to believe your own hype," Edward said without rancor. "You're speeches are pretty, but they don't really tell people much of anything. They're a pat on the head with very little information, and that smells like bullshit. People don't like bullshit. They don't like to be treated like mental defectives who can't handle the facts."

"You've actually listened to my speeches?" Now it was Edward's turn to scowl as the Führer rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Shall I put you in charge of an anti-bullshit campaign when we get back to Central?"

"Shove it, Roy."

Roy did not shove it. "I'm not being facetious. I really need to find a way to connect with the people – all the people – and I can't think of a better person to help me accomplish that than the Alchemist for the People."

"Your idea sucks for a number of reasons. In the first place, I'm not your show pony. In the second, I'm not an alchemist anymore, for myself or the people. And in the third, I'm under exclusive contract. I work for Breda."

"You're missing the point. And Major General Breda works for me," Roy reminded him. "I could order him to transfer your bond to my office."

"That would effectively nullify the contract. I got that in writing first thing." Edward examined his fingernails, then gave them a quick polish on his shirt, smirking up at Roy.

Who was feeling a bit put out. "Technically you've been working for me for the last two weeks." he protested.

"Not really," Edward clarified. "Breda loaned me out to your head of Security, so I've been under her command since I stepped on the train in Central. Hawkeye's a great boss. Strict, but considerate. Organized and efficient. Demands your A-game, and always brings hers. Gets her paperwork done, too."

"Would working for me really be that much of a hardship for you?" Roy groused.

"Do you really have to ask that question?" Edward shot back. "We've been over this."

Roy was saved from responding when the caravan door burst open to reveal a glowering Mauser, either Matthew or Merrill, Roy could not tell.

As a presenter of horse acts, the Mauser Brothers Circus ringmaster wore a fanciful variation of a horseman's formal riding clothes that included a black velvet jacket with tails, blood red suit vest, white shirt with string bow tie, and a black top hat. Black, calf-length riding breeches flared at the thighs and black, polished leather boots cuffed at the knees completed his performance apparel ensemble.

Roy mentally battened down the hatches in response to the expression on the man's face. The ringmaster stormed straight up to the Führer, blue eyes sparking in anger.
"What the hell did you think you were doing, going for a stroll in a crowd of civilians? So much for your insistence that you would do nothing to put my company at risk!" the man snapped without preamble.

"I meant no harm. My face was hidden, and the risk was negligible," Roy said calmly. "In fact, I am performing a minor service for your lovely alkahestris."

If outright disbelief was lethal, Roy would have been dead on the spot. "Really. So Mr. Yoki told me. I heard that you were unashamedly manipulative. That's one rumor confirmed."

Roy ignored Edward's snorted laugh. "Last time I checked, being in possession of a charming personality was not a crime. Regardless, I have every intention of following through on my promise to babysit Murata-san's obstinate patient." That wiped the smirk off the little punk's face. Payback is a bitch, Edward. "But I'm curious. Had you planned to keep me locked up in your private quarters until we finally made it back to Amestris?"

Mauser blushed – a response Roy had not been expecting. He filed it away for future reference as the ringmaster replied. "Well, yes and no. We're actually not sure how to go about keeping your presence in the company a secret. We did consider hiding you inside for the duration, but I can see that that might be problematic."

"How long do you think it will be before we are back on home soil?"

"Difficult to say." Mauser rubbed his chin. "At least a week. We have a tentative plan for cutting our tour short, but we need to firm up the details. It could be longer."

"I don't believe I could realistically remain confined for an extended period. A shave and a quick wash are fine temporarily, but I could certainly use a shower and fresh air now and then. Even condemned criminals enjoy those simple amenities. Short of tying me to the bed, I don't think that plan is feasible."

Mauser's flush became even deeper, to Roy's satisfaction. No one blushed like a redhead. The ringmaster was doing his best to maintain his stern demeanor, and doing an admirable job under the circumstances, but in this clash of wills he was badly outmatched. There was no stopping Roy Mustang from cheerfully exploiting a discovered weakness, whether he needed to or not. As Mauser himself had pointed out, the Führer's manipulative nature was a rumor confirmed.

"I'm sorry Matthew. I guess I should have warned you earlier," Edward cut in with an apologetic grin, "but he's actually a complete bastard. Everything you say, do, or think can and will be used against you. And he always knows what you're thinking."

Cheeks still red, Mauser gave the Führer an unimpressed glare. "I've encountered worse," was his verdict.

"No, you haven't," Ed muttered.

"Be that as it may." Roy interrupted to direct the conversation back on course, wondering how Edward had determined which of the twins they were facing, "there must be a way that I can safely move about the grounds when necessary. I'm open to any suggestions you might offer."

Matthew rubbed his chin with a frown, no suggestions forthcoming.

"How about a disguise?" Edward said, and the twinkle in his eyes had Roy bracing himself for the worst. "Slap a wig, a skirt, and a pair of nylons on him. It would be poetic justice, really: a notorious skirt-chaser forced to wear one."
"We're not a burlesque show." Mauser stated unequivocally, not amused.

"Okay," Ed said, drawing the word out. "What about a bear suit? He's great at dancing around the truth. I bet he'd be a big draw."

"All our animal acts feature the genuine article." The ringmaster's tone was firm.

"The sideshow? He's probably got the world's biggest ego," the blond volunteered. "Oh wait – that's no good. With that billing he'd be recognized immediately."

"It's a shame you're restricted to bed rest, Edward," Roy interjected with his trademark smirk. "They might be in the market for a certified midget."

That earned the Führer a glare. "Fuck off you ass; we're the same height."

Before the irate blond could continue to fire his return salvo, Merrill suddenly snapped his fingers.

"I've got it! A clown!" the ringmaster said with a lopsided smirk of his own. "The makeup would obscure your overly famous features, and who would expect such an esteemed statesman to willingly play the fool? It's really the perfect camouflage for this particular environment."

Mauser was right, and Roy wondered why he hadn't thought of it himself. Edward was grinning again, amused at the prospect of the Führer in outlandish makeup with matching attire.

"You won't be expected to perform, of course," Matthew continued airily. "If anyone notices, I'm sure we can come up with a plausible explanation as to why we have a clown in our troop who isn't clowning, but I doubt your diverse skills as a senior statesman include anything we could –"

"I can juggle," Roy said, almost defensively.

Mauser snorted a surprised laugh. "I've never met a politician who couldn't," he noted with a wry smile.

*The Bradley Effect is a recognized theory proposed as a source of error in public opinion polls, though I've modified the definition to fit the FMA universe. ;-)
Send in the Clowns

The Mauser’s traveling show included five fulltime clowns, one of which was a reluctant Shiro Yoki, but as Performance Director, the details of Roy’s disguise were left to Merrill Mauser. After that evening’s show, with his head once again bowed under a battered felt hat, Roy was escorted through the sparsely peopled lot to the rear of the big top. Just inside behind a stiff canvas curtain he was greeted by a grinning Merrill seated at a long, lamp-lit counter cluttered with a wide assortment of makeup and accessories.

“Welcome to Clown Alley,” Mauser said cheerily, sweeping his hand in a graceful, welcoming flourish.

The dimly lit cloth enclosed space was not large, but it contained a startling variety of neatly arranged and wildly colourful costumes and props. The long table at which Mauser was seated dominated the room; a closer look revealed it to be a wide, sturdy plank supported by wooden crates. Rickety folding chairs were arranged at the counter before a mismatched collection of mirrors, spotted and cloudy with age. The counter itself was crowded with makeup and applicators of every conceivable type. Tubes and tins; patties and powers; sponges, brushes, powder puffs, and cotton balls – everything the up-and-coming clown about town might require to prepare for their grand entrance to the big top. Red, white, and black appeared to dominate the selection of greasepaints, but every other colour of the rainbow was also presented in many and varied cosmetic media.

Merrill motioned for Roy to take the seat by the counter facing his. The two men sat knee to knee in the lamplight, and Roy noted in passing how loosely the other man’s slacks hung on his legs.

“Before we can start on your face, we’ll have to get your hair out of the way,” Mauser said briskly, getting right down to business. He handed Roy a light beige bit of cloth, much like a very short nylon stocking. “This will do the trick, and will keep your hair under control if we decide to include a wig in your disguise.”

Roy noted the twinkle of amusement in Merrill’s eye as he pulled on the tight nylon cap and tucked loose hair neatly underneath. The ringmaster’s twin was clearly enjoying this. When Roy’s task was complete, the other man nodded his approval.

“Now for the face,” Merrill said, examining Roy’s features with a critical eye. “We don’t want anything too complicated. It has to be easy to apply, with maximum coverage. The design should be simple enough that you can do it yourself, but should still be eye-catching.” He leaned back, eyes narrowed. “Smile for me.”

Roy did so.

“Give me a frown,” Mauser instructed.

Roy complied.

“Now a pout.”

Roy pouted.

“Oh, those brooding, bedroom eyes,” Merrill sighed, his grin teasing. “A tramp, definitely.”

If the man was hoping to get a rise out of the Führer, he was in for a disappointment. Roy grinned, amused.
“You’re not the first person to suggest that,” he confided.

Merrill returned the smile, delighted.

“I knew it!” he said. “You may not be aware of this, but a clown’s appearance is designed to reveal their secret persona in a distinct and remarkable style. I will now attempt to coax your inner tramp out into the open. Shall we begin?”

Roy nodded his consent, intrigued by the process, and oddly excited.

“The main staple of professional clown makeup is greasepaint,” Mauser explained. “White, red, and black are the basic foundation, and we build on that depending on the clown’s personal preference.” He reached for an open tin of white makeup and a small, triangular sponge. “We’ll start with the white. It will cover your face entirely, including your eyebrows; you’ll find it makes quite an effective mask.”

Using the sponge, Merrill carefully smoothed the greasy substance over the plains and valleys of Roy’s face from chin to hairline, including his eyelids, then traced along the curve of his jaw, with a final swipe over his upper lip. Putting the sponge aside, he selected a small cotton swab to wipe excess paint from around Roy’s eyes, dabbing here and there to clean up the lines. When Mauser leaned back to examine his handiwork, Roy turned to the mirror, curious.

But for his bottom lip and a small round spot defining the tip of his nose, his face was completely white; a blank, featureless page. He lifted a hand reflexively.

“Don’t touch it,” Mauser cautioned. “It will smudge until it’s set with powder; that of course comes last.”

Roy turned back to face the other man, hands folded firmly in his lap. Merrill pushed the white paint aside and pulled another tin closer, along with a flat, soft bristled brush with a pointed tip. Popping the tin’s lid revealed gleaming black paint, into which the brush was neatly dabbed.

“I’ll draw your features boldly in black, as befits a tramp of your lofty standing,” Merrill stated. He proceeded to sketch thin eyebrows above Roy’s actual brows. That was followed by a careful tracing around Roy’s eyes, the brush stroking low onto his cheeks from the centre point of his lower lids. Mauser cocked his head to one side, examining his work critically, then trimmed a black outline all the way around Roy’s face.

“Almost there,” he murmured, reaching for a small tube of bright red, which he used to coat Roy’s lower lip.

Merrill ran a calculating finger along the row of colourful grease pencils, finally choosing a brilliant azure to paint the tip of Roy’s nose. He then picked up a powder puff and patted it into a pot of finely ground charcoal.

“No tramp would be complete without his charming five o’clock shadow,” Mauser mused as he lightly powdered Roy’s chin and cheeks, pausing after a few moments to examine his work. “That’s just right,” he said. “Now, the finishing touch.” He used a large puff to liberally dust a light, translucent powder over his subject’s face. “There. That will set the greasepaint without dulling the colour.” The makeup artist sat back, satisfied.

Roy turned once again to the mirror, marveling at the transformation reflected in clouded glass.

As a child, and even to some extent as an adult, clowns tended to creep Roy out. It was likely due to
the fact that even for an acknowledged master in the art of understanding human nature, it was very
difficult to gauge just what was going on behind that painted façade. The subtle shades of meaning
written in facial expressions were muted behind a colourful mask.

And mask it was, despite its thin, flexible veneer, because Roy now realized that it could also hide so
much more.

The whiteface alone had been enough to effectively obscure Roy’s features, but now, with a few
simple embellishments, the familiar characteristics of his face were changed to a surprising degree.

The black outlining his eyes made them appear larger, and cleverly changed their distinctive shape.
Thin black brows arched high in mock surprise, drawing the eye and lengthening Roy’s face.
Matching spikes pointed down below his eyes to change the contour of his cheeks, as the bright red,
exaggerated pout of his bottom lip shortened his jaw. The artful dusting of black powder over cheeks
and chin further obscured his features. Even the simple blue circle did its part, changing the natural
shape of Roy’s nose. He was quite sure that if Madam Christmas were to step into the tent at that
moment, even she would be hard pressed to recognize him.

Merrill sat quietly, waiting for Roy’s assessment.

“You sir, are an artist,” Roy said with great sincerity.

Mauser’s blue eyes sparkled with pleasure at the compliment. “And you sir, are too kind,” he
responded with a slight bow of his head. “Now for the hair. Please fetch down the orange crate from
the top of that wardrobe, if you don’t mind.” A pointing finger indicated the desired box.

Roy did as he was bid, placing the crate on the counter beside the other man. Merrill pulled it instead
into his lap and began to rummage through the contents – a multicolored jumble of wigs. He pulled
out one after the other, discarding them on the counter, until finally settling on a thick shock of bright
blue curls.

“This one I think,” he said softly, handing it over to Roy, who tugged it on over the nylon cap. “Yes,
and that old felt hat will fit nicely on top.”

The hat was snugged on. Roy once again examined his reflection, and had to admit that the hat was a
nice touch.

“Please do help yourself to a costume from the second rack over there,” Merrill instructed, pointing
the direction once again. “I suggest anything patched and baggy.”

Supervised by Merrill, Roy selected loose, baggy brown pants that fell to just above his ankles; a
faded shirt, yellow with large blue polka dots; and a shabby brown jacket patched in bright red at the
elbows. Mismatched socks, one orange, one purple, and overlarge scuffed brown shoes completed
Roy’s outfit.

Roy was giving his bright red suspenders a final adjustment when Matthew Mauser swept aside the
canvas partition to enter the dressing area. He gave the Führer’s outlandish attire a quick once over
before granting his approval with a short nod.

“What do you think?” Merrill asked his brother.

“It will do,” Matthew said.

Merrill gawked, outraged. “What do you mean, ‘It will do’? It will more than do! He’s perfect! We
haven’t had a convincing tramp in two years!”
“He’s not here to perform, Merry,” Matthew said with a frown. “This is just camouflage to make his stay with us more comfortable.”

Merrill’s face fell and he glanced at Roy, dejected.

Roy cleared his throat. “Well, I wouldn’t be averse to joining your performers in the ring,” he started slowly. “As an amateur, however, I feel I might just be in the way.”

Merrill perked up as Matthew’s frown deepened.

“Nonsense!” Merrill chirped happily. “You mentioned that you juggle. I’m sure that we can spin that into an act!”

Roy noted Matthew’s scowl. “I really wouldn’t mind, as long as you think it’s safe,” he told him. “Having a clown on the lot who doesn’t perform might look suspicious, but having someone recognize me in the ring would be much worse.”

Under Merrill’s hopeful gaze Matthew examined Roy’s disguise again, this time more carefully. Then his stern demeanor eased.

“As disguises go, this one is nearly perfect,” he said at last. “Especially since I’m sure no one would expect to find the high and mighty Führer of Amestris in such absurd attire performing slapstick routines in a road show. So if you want to give clowning a try, I won’t stop you. I think you could actually get away with working the audience on the come-in, but we won’t tempt fate any further than we already are,” Matthew said with a grim smile.

“Maybe we could use him in the clown stop between the second and third acts.” Merrill was all excitement. “And of course he can join the knockabout. We can come up with something firm tomorrow, but I have plenty of ideas!”

The indulgent smile Matthew gave his brother as Merrill listed his plans was pleased, and proud, and tender. Roy recognized it immediately. It was the same smile that graced Edward’s features when the topic of conversation was Alphonse. Of these two men, born at essentially the same time, the eldest was obviously Matthew.

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to return to Murata-san’s bandwagon.” Roy was finally able to break into Merrill’s enthusiastic monologue. “She has offered me the use of the second bed in her infirmary, and it appears I will have a very busy day tomorrow.”

The ringmaster turned to Roy, relaxed for the first time since Roy had met him. “Yes, by all means,” he said. “Can you find your way, or would you like me to lead you?”

“No, I’ll be fine,” Roy assured the two brothers as he turned to leave. “Goodnight gentlemen.”

The short walk back through the circus grounds was uneventful. No one gave the artfully disguised Führer a second glance, and Roy relished his anonymity. It had been quite some time since he had been able to step alone into the public eye without fear of being recognized, and then confronted by admirers and critics alike. Celebrity was just another price he paid to fulfill the promises he had made to atone for his crimes, and one of the least unpleasant, but it was nice to have this peaceful interlude to stroll about without care. He was reminded of his academy days, on leave with Maes, carefree as they wandered about Central, well before his life had been weighed down with extraordinary obligation. So many years later he found it hard to believe that he had ever been so free.

Roy entered Murata’s bandwagon as quietly as he could so as not to disturb the Nihonese woman or her patient at that late hour. He need not have bothered. Edward was sitting up in his bed, and
Murata was seated cross-legged on the other. The lighting had been dimmed to a single lantern on Edward’s nightstand, and the room’s two occupants peered expectantly at their visitor standing just beyond reach of its faint glow.

Murata without her makeup and costume was revealed to be an attractive woman a few years older than Roy himself. Her face was scrubbed clean, and Roy made a mental note to ask her how she had removed the greasepaint so thoroughly. Her long dark hair was caught back in an ebony tail and draped carelessly over her shoulder. A pale green dressing gown wrapped her slender frame.

“Come in so that we can see you, Führer Mustang,” Murata said, encouraging Roy closer with a beckoning hand.

Roy braced himself and stepped further into the room. The reaction was immediate.

The alkahestris’ hand flew to her mouth, eyes wide. “Oh my,” she said softly. “You have been transformed.”

Edward’s eyes were round with surprise as well, mouth frozen agape on some forgotten and probably impertinent remark. Then his eyelids slid to half mast over molten, glittering gold, and his lips tilted to an admiring grin. Roy was surprised at the younger man’s reaction; he had expected laughter and some good, old fashioned mockery. He had even looked forward to the teasing banter that would result, and the mutual exchange of innocuous insults.

But this was far more intriguing.

Edward finally found his voice. “Leave it to you, Mustang, to try for the absurd and still end up sexy as hell.”

“You do look remarkably good,” Murata agreed.

“Why thank you Murata-san, Edward,” Roy purred. “I can’t take credit for the creative aspects however. The charm of my disguise is due entirely to Merrill’s artistic talent. Why are you both still awake? I hope I haven’t interrupted a private conversation.”

“No, not at all. We waited up to see what form your disguise would take,” the Nihonese woman admitted.

“Ah,” Roy said, pleased. “I’m glad I did not disappoint.”

“Like you ever could,” Edward said, and the low timbre of his voice drew Roy to him like a moth to flame.

The Nihonese alkahestris glanced between the two men as the disguised Führer moved closer, mild amusement in her eyes. She slipped off the bed and turned to face Roy, hands on hips.

“He is not to do anything that might place undue strain on his healing injury,” she said, no nonsense. “We have an early rise tomorrow, and I need my rest, so I must insist that you keep the noise to a minimum.”

Edward instantly flushed a deep red. “Oneesan! What are you . . .”

“I will do my best to stay quiet,” Roy promised. “And as for doing him harm, I would sooner injure myself.”

Murata accepted Roy’s statement with a nod, and turned to the door between the two beds. “I bid
you both good night then,” she said primly, with just the hint of a smile.

“Just a moment,” Roy stopped her. “I wasn’t told how to remove this makeup, and I suspect that soap and water won’t be enough.”

“Quite true,” Murata confirmed.

Stepping around Roy she moved to one long side counter and opened a lower cabinet, reaching inside to remove a large ceramic whiskey jug, a wash basin, an ornate table mirror, and a mound of cotton cloths. Placing the items on the counter, Murata then fetched a heavy pitcher, a bar of soap, and a towel, and set them beside the first assortment of cleaning materials.

“Greasepaint is made to last on the skin, even through an energetic performance. It must stay in place even if the performer is sweating heavily,” the woman said. She gave the ceramic jug an affectionate pat. “This is mineral oil. Pour it on a clean, soft cloth to moisten it, then gently wipe your face to remove the makeup. Move to a clean portion of the cloth after each wipe to avoid smearing the makeup back onto your face. Change cloths as necessary.” Murata gave the water pitcher a pat next. “When you are done, clean the oil from your face with soap and water. Nothing could be simpler.”

“I could always help,” Ed volunteered.

Murata rounded on him with a glower. “You will stay in that bed.” She then turned back to Roy and wagged a finger. “Remember; nothing too strenuous. Nothing too loud.”

Roy bowed as the woman moved past him to open the door to her bedroom, casting one last warning glance at Edward. Then she slipped inside and closed the door quietly behind her.

The two men looked at each other.

“Well,” Edward started. Then he stalled on what to say next.

“Well,” Roy confirmed, gliding over to the bedside. “It appears we have . . . permission.”

“’Nothing too strenuous’ isn’t exactly permission,” Edward pointed out, crossing his arms over his chest.

“It’s close enough.” And it was much too tempting for Roy not to take advantage of the opportunity.

Roy leaned in slowly, giving Ed time to tell him no, to protest that the infirmary was too public, the walls were too thin, his leg was too sore, something. Ed didn't say a word. Encouraged, Roy brushed his painted lips across Ed's, lingering before he flicked out his tongue and traced the bowed line of Ed's mouth, nudging teasingly until lips parted for him. Roy loved this seduction, as fresh and enjoyable as a first time. He was immediately lost in Ed's taste, in the sounds he made and the way he leaned into Roy's touch.

Pulling back, Roy moved to brush parted lips lightly over that vulnerable place just behind Edward’s ear, warm breath teasing sensitive flesh. His tongue flicked out again, tracing a lingering path down his lover’s throat with only the lightest scrape of teeth. He felt Edward’s shiver through their only contact, Roy’s mouth against Edward’s skin, felt him jerk, felt the hitched moan of his breath as Roy opened his mouth wider and bit down, lightly, lips caressing as he pulled slowly away.

"You taste good," he purred, voice low.

“You’re a bastard,” Edward countered, voice husky. “Starting something like this when you know we can’t properly finish it.”
Roy leaned in and nuzzled under the blond’s ear. “We’ll see about that,” he breathed. “Just leave it to me.”

Edward’s attention shifted to the closed door between the two beds, calculation in his eyes, a small frown dipping his brows. Then his consideration returned to Roy, to Roy’s smoldering gaze from paint shadowed lids, to Roy’s roguish smile on vividly tinted lips.

"Alright," Ed managed with some reluctance, breaths already quickened.

Roy wasted no time, shifting closer to taste the hollow of Ed’s throat. His lips on Edward's smooth skin made Roy shiver, but it was nothing compared to the reaction he got, a low rumble of need as Edward’s head tipped back, throat bared in invitation. Accepting, Roy traced the long line from collarbone to chin with lips and tongue and then followed it back down with his teeth. Each tiny bite had to be soothed with kisses, and the clipped sounds Edward made urged him on. On he went, tuging cloth aside, nipping and soothing his way down Edward's chest and the taut muscles of his stomach, stopping at the line of Edward’s boxers. As he paused, Edward’s slightly trembling hands settled lightly on Roy’s nape, not pulling, not forcing, and Roy vowed to break that control before this was over. Roy began by easing Edward’s boxers down his hips, fingers drawing a lazy line down Ed’s half erect cock from tip to root, circling the base. Edward's breath hitched again, hands twitching in the curls of Roy’s wig, but Roy was just getting started. Leaning forward, he hesitated with his parted lips a hair away from Ed's cock and sighed out, hot breath a sharp contrast to the cool air of the room.

Ed’s hips bucked helplessly upward, but Roy was ready for it, grinning as he darted the tip of his tongue across the head of Edward's erection, then waiting for the man to settle again. Edward muffled his groan against the palm of his hand, and Roy waited, listening. The breath Edward took to regain his control was deep and shuddering, and the instant he paused before releasing it, Roy leaned in again and wrapped his lips around Ed's cock, sucking hard.

The sound that exploded from Edward wasn’t exactly a scream, but it was close; low and hoarse and strangled with the need to be quiet. Roy would have smirked at accomplishing his goal so quickly, but he had Ed's cock in his mouth, and was too caught up in what he was doing. There was nothing more satisfying than bending Ed to his will this way, about the way Ed shuddered when Roy curled his tongue to flick light and fast over his slit, then pressing hard over the vein all the way down. He liked the power it gave him, knowing that if he did this just right, Ed would forget that someone might hear, or perhaps forget to care that someone might hear, so Roy bent to his task with keen determination.

And moment by moment Edward was forgetting his caution, letting go bit by bit, hips rocking forward in an easy rhythm as Roy closed his eyes and concentrated on the sensation. It was amazing how much he could feel, the silken head of Ed's cock on his tongue, the salty taste leaking from the sensitive slit, the length and thickness of it, how focused and relaxed Roy felt leaning over the bed as his lover fucked his mouth.

It was that last thought that made his eyes open with some need to see Edward enjoying it. Roy looked up, eyes tracing a slow path over tight muscle beneath tan skin, over parted, panting lips, to catch on Edward’s low burning gaze locked to his, and he wondered what he looked like. The situation was so outlandish; did he look ridiculous, a tattered fool in gaudy greasepaint and a tousled blue wig? But then Edward’s lips parted on a soundless gasp that grew into a strangled moan as he came, sending tremors through the mattress.

Roy tried not to grin as Edward slumped back, hands falling from Roy’s shoulders to the bed. He focused instead on the finish, sucking gently until the last shudders faded, then giving Ed’s softening
cock a final, playful lick before pulling away. Ed reached for him as he moved back, and Roy felt tremendously smug.

“I’d better clean up,” Roy said, straightening. “I wouldn’t want to stain Murata-san’s pillow covers with clown paint.”

“Stain the ones in this bed,” Ed said, shifting over to make room for Roy to lie down. “You can transmute the greasepaint out tomorrow. I want to touch you.”

“I need to get this makeup off. And I’ll sleep over there,” Roy pointed to the other bed. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I don’t want to sleep. I want to . . . touch you.”

It was tempting, but . . . “Too strenuous. You need to rest.” Roy said in a no nonsense, end of story tone.

Edward huffed. “Then just sleep with me,” he said. “You won’t hurt me.”

“We’ll be in the same room.”

“I want to be in the same bed,” Edward said. “Sleep with me.”

It was a simple enough request and Roy found he couldn’t refuse. “Alright. I’ll just get cleaned up.”

Edward smiled, content, as Roy turned to the task of removing his makeup. When he was done, Edward was fast asleep.

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Roy Mustang was not at his best first thing in the morning. Particularly not first thing in the very early morning. A glance at the clock by the bed told him he was awake well before sunrise, but the fact that he had to check the time by peaking over a half ravelled blond plait told him that while it might be far too early to be getting out of bed, he was at least starting the day off right. Smiling, he relaxed to savour the moment, listening to the quiet tick of the clock timing Ed’s steady breaths. This tranquil warmth was something that had been missing from his life for many years. He could have had lovers when he wanted them, but the heavy demands of his position left him little time to indulge, even if he had been inclined toward meaningless, convenient trysts. More and more for Ed however, he found he wanted to make time.

Though he was reluctant to move, Roy eased out of the bed in the predawn light and made use once again of the soap and water for a quick wash, vowing to locate the nearest shower at his earliest convenience. Gathering his discarded clothing he quickly dressed, then lit a small lamp and placed it on the long side counter by a mirror where he discovered that Murata was already up and about. Neatly arranged by the looking glass he found all that he required to repaint his face. Pulling up a chair, he set about restoring his disguise.

Roy soon found out that it wasn’t as easy as it looked. The skill with which Merrill had applied the makeup the night before was obviously gained from long practice. It took the Führer nearly twice as long to get it right. But finally the job was done, and Roy was free to leave the confines of his refuge, safely in the light of day.

The cheerful sound of the steam calliope was evidence enough that someone else was up and about, but Roy saw no one on the midway. The latrine was easy to find behind the long line of circus bandwagons. Roy quickly did what he had to, then stepped back out into the bright morning sunrise.
to be met by Merrill, seated astride a sturdy grey pony, legs dangling loose just above the ground. It was a sight so bizarre, Roy had to blink. Twice.

“A gracious good morning to you, my fine Tramp,” Mauser said, grinning from ear to ear at Roy’s reaction. “I trust you slept well?”

“Very well, thank you,” Roy responded as he stared at the circus manager and his mount. The plump little animal examined Roy as well, then shook its shaggy mane and snorted. Apparently Roy passed inspection.

“Are you ready to begin your crash course in clowning?” Merrill asked, eyes bright with anticipation.

“I am,” Roy confirmed.

“Breakfast first. Step right this way to the cook shack,” Merrill said, reining his mount in the direction of the big top. “Your new colleagues eagerly await your arrival.”

“I can’t help but notice your unconventional mode of locomotion,” Roy ventured as he moved to walk beside Mauser.

“As well you should. This is a circus after all. People expect the absurd and outrageous. No, they demand it!” Merrill declared. “I am a man driven to satisfy that demand!”

“If you don’t mind my asking, how did you lose the use of your legs?” Roy asked quietly.

Merrill shot him an appraising, though amused glance. “It usually takes new acquaintances much longer to notice my infirmity,” he said, unoffended, “or perhaps they just require more time to work up the nerve to ask about it. You are indeed a bold and clever tramp.”

Roy waited, hoping for an account.

“It was an accident in the ring.” Merrill tilted his face to the sky. “Five years ago. I injured my spine. Life goes on.”

It appeared that that was all Mauser was inclined to say on the matter, and Roy accepted the man’s short and simple explanation. He turned his attention instead to his surroundings.

This was the first good look at the Mausers’ traveling show Roy had had in broad daylight. It was immediately obvious that this was no two-bit dog and pony operation, and if there was any lingering doubt, the steam calliope stationed by the tent’s main entrance was proof positive.

Bright red embellished with polished brass fittings, the show wagon bearing the Mauser Brothers’ massive pipe organ was huge. Designed to be pulled by a team of horses, the carriage was twenty feet long, eight feet wide, and stood twelve feet high with the gleaming brass chimney jutting three feet higher. The plate steel boiler, glazed jet black, was visible through the scroll patterned openings in the side panels, as were the brass pipes arranged in two rows along the wagon’s centre. Roy stepped closer to peek inside at the musician. Clever fingers dancing over burnished brass keys, she punctuated her musical phrasing with a flourish and a cheeky sideward wink at Roy.

Mauser had noted Roy’s interest. “We could hook a dynamo up to the boiler and use it to generate electrical power, but then Matt would probably want to invest in a steam carousel too, and I think we’re big enough as we are.” Merrill grinned up at the clear blue sky. “For now.”

The cook shack was a tent, but Roy was willing to forgive the misnomer if the food was even half as
good as it smelled. Brushing back the canvas flap, Merrill rode straight inside, Roy following behind. A few heads turned to note their entrance, then returned to their breakfast. No one gave them a second glance.

The pair approached the serving bench. A tall, dark skinned man observed them, piercing blue eyes lingering on Roy. Without acknowledging Merrill’s cheerful greeting, he efficiently dished out a hearty breakfast to each of them much like the one Roy had enjoyed the morning of his arrival, just twenty-four hours before. Roy thanked him with a short nod. The man made no response.

“That’s Ishapore, our Hindustani strongman. He’s very . . . stoic.” Merrill nudged his pony toward a long table where an assortment of circus personnel were enthusiastically chowing down.

Roy glanced back at Merrill’s ‘strongman’. That particular title brought to Roy’s mind someone who resembled Alex Armstrong or Sig Curtis: a towering mass of bulging, vein-shot muscle that strained and ripped through unfortunate clothing at every opportunity. Ishapore was as far from that image as humanly possible. Though very tall, the dark skinned man was also pencil thin. His bald head was small and perfectly round, with huge ears lying snug against his head, large sky-blue eyes, and a short flat nose. Perched on his long spindly neck, it looked very much like a polished mahogany ball cap topping a flimsy flag pole. His clothes hung from his lanky frame, baggy and loose. Over all, he looked more like an animated scarecrow than a circus strongman, an emaciated refugee from some famine plagued locality.

Idle chatter at the long rough-hewn table petered out as Roy and Merrill approached, all eyes examining the new arrivals, lingering on Roy curiously. The assembled troop certainly knew who he was. Roy hoped that they could get past his lofty position and relate to him naturally. Not only would it be easier for Roy to blend in, it would also make his stay more comfortable both for himself as well as his hosts. How they would work together for the duration of Roy’s stay largely depended on these next few minutes.

“Good morning, all,” Merrill greeted them cheerfully. “Allow me to introduce the latest addition to our company: the Tramp.”

“At your service,” Roy said quietly.

“Tramp, huh?” A large, chubby clown with winged out red hair frowned under his garishly painted smile, then slid over to make room for Roy. “Have a seat, then, Trampy. I’m Bossy. But you can call me Mr. Bossy, ‘cause I’m your new boss.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Roy said, unfazed as he sat beside the bigger man.

Bossy proceeded to introduce the other diners. “This here’s Lock,” he said, indicating the scraggly, balding clown beside him with a swat to the arm. “Next to him is Stock,” a clown with spiked up yellow hair raised a hand, “and over there’s Big Bertha,” a snicker ran around the table as an immensely overweight woman wearing a frilly pink dressing gown fluttered her eyelashes at Roy and blushed. “She’s in the sideshow.”

“Charmed,” Roy said with a grin.

The boss clown continued, pointing across the table at a slender, elderly man with a beard that dipped below the table. “That there’s Spider Webley, also a sideshow act. An’ beside him, that’s Barrel.” A short, green haired clown gave a self-conscious wave.

Merrill manoeuvred his pony around to the back of the bench on the side opposite Roy. Unfastening a belt that Roy hadn’t noticed, then helped by Barrel and Webley, he levered himself gracefully from
the saddle to sit between them. A pat to his small pony’s flank sent it sauntering out of the tent. With a contented sigh the ringmaster’s twin began to eat, leaving Bossy to finish the introductions.

“Down the end there,” Bossy pointed towards a striking young woman with a mass of short, curly brown hair and solemn grey eyes, “that’s Nikita, our trick rider.” That designation earned Bossy a grey-eyed scowl. “Beside her’s Glock, our resident Picture Gallery, also a sideshow attraction.” A rather bleary eyed middle aged man lifted a heavily tattooed arm in greeting as he continued to trowel up his breakfast. “You’ve met Heckler and Koch,” both men nodded at the Tramp, “and our Gorilla man, Darius,” the big man raised a hand. “Beside him’s his partner, Heinkel, the Lion man. They’re part of our menagerie.” The tall, muscular man with the bushy blond mustache and silver rimmed glasses waved a casual hand at Roy as well. “I’m sure you’ll get to meet the rest of the company as the day goes on,” Bossy predicted. “There’re kind of a lot of us.”

“Fifty-three and counting,” Merrill said, eyes sparkling. “You make us fifty-four strong.”

“I’m pleased to meet everyone,” Roy said. “Thank you for welcoming me into you company.”

A ripple of friendly acknowledgment rose and settled, and then everyone tucked into their breakfast, Roy included. As he had discovered the day before, the simple fare was tasty and filling. The circus folks were somewhat more subdued now, though the quiet was not uncomfortable. Roy pretended not to notice as the other diners stole covert glances at him as they ate. Soon enough his plate was empty and he pushed it aside. The Tramp leaned an elbow on the table and pulled his cup of uncommonly good coffee closer.

“So,” Big Bertha started timidly, “I hear you’d like to give clowning a try.”

“That’s true,” Roy said.

Bossy took control of the conversation once again. “Being in a circus isn’t just about performing,” he said. “Every one of us has other duties, too. Ishapore doesn’t just lie around on a bed of nails all day; he’s our cook. Nikita is our Boss Hostler. Murata’s our medic. Everyone pitches in, because there’s a lot of stuff to do around here. The horseshit doesn’t shovel itself, ya know.”

“I don’t want any special treatment,” Roy said. “As long as I can keep a low profile, I’m happy to help in any way I can.”

“Even with setup and break down?” Glock piped up, surprised.

“Oh course.” Roy assured him.

“It’s hard work. Newbies always get the crappiest jobs,” the tattooed man warned. “They gotta learn how a circus works from the ground up.”

“Perfectly understandable,” Roy granted.

“How about cleaning the grounds after a show?” Stock wanted to know. “Would you pitch in with that?”

“Oh course,” Roy said again.

“You sure? The patrons leave a lot of garbage around. Takes a long time, and after a show you’ll be pretty tired,” the yellow-haired clown cautioned.

“I’m sure we all will,” Roy observed. “An extra pair of hands will make the job quicker and easier for everyone, wouldn’t you agree?”
That statement was mulled over as Ishapore appeared with a fresh pot of coffee and proceeded to refill cups.

“How about shoveling horse shit?” Bossy asked sweetly. “You up for that, Trampy?”

“Certainly,” Roy said, sipping his coffee. “Considering what I do for a living, I’m something of an expert.”

There was a short, incredulous silence. Then the entire table burst out laughing.

Including Ishapore, which surprised the rest of the company to abrupt silence. The strongman looked Roy over intently as he hooted his strange laugh. Then he placed a large, nearly skeletal hand on Roy’s shoulder.

“You laugh at yourself,” he intoned in strangely accented Amestrian. “To know humility is to approach the divine Truth.”

Without his legendary control, Roy’s jaw would have dropped to shatter on the floor. Was the Hindustani man referring to the One, the All, the ultimate Truth?

The dark man saved Roy the need to make some sort of a reply. “It has touched you.” A statement, not a question. “Yes, you know the Truth.” His polished head bobbed once, and then the man turned to walk back behind the serving counter followed by every eye in the room.

Then those eyes turned to Roy, questioning. He made no other comment than to raise an eyebrow and sip his coffee.

Nikita, the trick rider, broke the heavy silence that had settled into the cook shack, slapping her palms on the table to push herself up. “Well, if we are finished pondering the philosophical ramblings of our cook, I will take my leave,” she said, her accent thickly Drachmann. “I have a new routine to practice.”

Merrill’s head snapped up, forkful of scrambled egg halfway to his chin. “Not by yourself,” he said firmly.

“Of course not,” Nikita said, standing up. “Esinti will be with me of course.”

“Esinti doesn’t count. You know the rules; no one practices alone.” The set of Merrill’s jaw was firm.

The Drachmann scowled. “Don’t visit your insecurities on me,” she growled. “I could ride before I could walk, and Esinti would never do me harm.”

“Accidents happen. The rule stands. Why must we always argue about this?” Merrill griped.

“Because your rule is unreasonable!” the woman snapped. “I do not need a babysitter to watch over me while I am practicing!”

Bossy elbowed Roy in the ribs none too gently.

“Now’s your chance, Trampy,” he said loudly. “Lady in distress. Give her a hand.”

Roy ignored him, already standing up as well. “Would you object to an interested bystander?” Roy asked the scowling young woman. “I’d like to come with you if that’s alright.”

“Suit yourself, Tramp.” The horsewoman stepped free of the bench and strode out of the cook shack
Roy followed her, his own stride an easy match for the irritated Drachmann. She shot an annoyed glance his way as she headed for the large paddock at the rear of the big top.

Much like an army, a circus required a lot of horsepower to get from one venue to the next, and the large enclosure held a veritable herd of draft horses. Roustabouts were topping up the water troughs and forking fresh cut hay into the pen as Roy and Nikita approached. The horses were good naturedly shouldering each other for position, a shifting mosaic of black, bay, chestnut, and roan. Their large, compact, bodies; broad, deep chests; and short, well feathered legs identified them as Black Forest Rhenisch – a common Amestrian breed. Most standing at least sixteen hands tall, these gentle giants made the Mauser Brother’s Circus possible.

With index finger curled to thumb, the Drachmann woman shrilled a whistle. One black horse, much smaller and more graceful of build, broke ranks from its fellows and cantered toward the waiting humans.

“Andalusian,” Roy breathed. “A Carthusian, if I’m not mistaken.”

Nikita’s head snapped around to stare at the Tramp. “You know horses,” she said, surprised.

“My father was a cavalry man; it’s in my blood,” Roy explained. “A passion I discovered when I joined the military.”

“To my people, horses are more than just tools or possessions,” Nikita said quietly as she ran her hand gently down Esinti’s long, elegant neck. “They are our brothers and sisters, our partners in survival. It is much the same here, in this circus. The horses are the legs, the strength. The people are the hands, wielding the tools. Together we are one will.” The woman frowned. “What Esinti and I share isn’t some simple trick,” she spat.

“I suppose we all have to suffer the ignorant. We can’t beat sense into all of them, though I know of one person who thinks it worth the effort to try.” Roy thought of Edward with a small grin. “Roy Mustang, Führer of Amestris,” he said, offering his hand, “but here, I’m just a Tramp.”

The woman eyed the offered hand for a moment, then took it in a firm grip. “Nikita Makarov, proud Kossak. But here, I am just a ‘trick rider’.” Her lip curled.

Makarov opened the gate to let Esinti out, and then led the way to the big top, horse and Tramp following. The giant tent loomed over the grounds, and Roy examined it curiously as he stepped in through the arched front opening.

The gigantic marquee of cotton canvas was supported by twin center poles. They were separated by a large circular ring of sturdy wooden construction measuring forty feet in diameter, the focus of attention for this travelling equestrian show. A tightrope apparatus was rigged high above the ring between two small platforms attached to the main poles, narrow rope ladders dangling for access. Three blocks of bleachers, ten levels high, were ordered around three sides of the central ring for the audience’s viewing convenience. Colourful canvas was draped to screen the remaining quarter of the big top, a backstage area where the circus acts prepared for their entrance. The entire fabric structure was stabilized under tension by numerous guy ropes attached to ground stakes hammered deep into the soft surface of the meadow outside of the giant tent.

Nikita stepped into the circular stage followed closely by Esinti. Roy stayed back, out of the way, as the lively animal trotted friskily around inside the ring.
Prized for their prowess as war horses, the Andalusians were valued for their strength and agility as well as their noble carriage. Esinti was a prime example. The breed had long been nicknamed the Horse of Kings, and the beautiful jet black stallion certainly lived up to that standard with a sprightly step and regal bearing fit for any monarch. Watching as Nikita put her steed effortlessly through his routines, Roy recalled that according to legend, the first Andalusian was summoned into the world by Zephyr, the spirit of the west wind. Esinti in motion was the wind personified, paces smoothly cadenced and harmonious, responding to his mistress with equally keen intelligence and sensitivity.

And the spirited horse was matched in prowess by his mistress. The Kossak woman rode as if she and her mount were a single being. Roy had heard of the people who inhabited the endless steppes of eastern Drachma, known for their incredible skill as horsemen. The myth of the half man, half horse creatures known as centaurs originated with these nomadic tribesman. Watching spellbound as she vaulted astride Esinti’s bare back to bound upright, he stood enchanted, watching her graceful, acrobatic dance unfold upon the unbridled, galloping stallion. Roy understood why Merrill feared for the woman’s safety, and at the same time, he did not. She and Esinti were amazingly, breathtakingly one.

A small, red rubber ball dropped into the sawdust by Roy’s overlarge shoes. He looked behind to see a young girl, no more than twelve or thirteen years old, looking him over very carefully. A small brown and white terrier sat politely at her feet.

“You the newbie clown?” the girl asked.

“Yes I am,” Roy confirmed, taking in the girl’s snow white pigtails and chocolate brown eyes. “I’m . . . Tramp.”

“Hello Tramp,” the girl responded, unsmiling. “My name’s Tula.” She gestured to the dog. “Her name’s Roofus.”

Roy had to grin at that. “Hello Tula. Hello Roofus.”

Roofus wagged her tail. Tula did not return Roy’s smile. “Abbi told me you could juggle. I’m supposed to help.”

“Thank you Tula. I would appreciate all the help you can offer,” Roy confided. “It’s been a long time since I’ve juggled; I’m sure to be out of practise.”

The girl took a few steps closer and reached into a pocket in her baggy smock to pull out two more red balls. She tossed them to Roy, who caught them one handed as he bent to pick up the one on the ground.

“Let’s see what you got,” Tula said, crossing her arms.

After a few false starts the Tramp finally regained the knack, and soon found an easy rhythm as he worked his way through the few tricks he recalled. He had learned this particular skill as a child, taught by one of his many sisters, an employee of Madam Christmas. It appeared to be like riding a bicycle – an ability you never really forgot.

With Roofus lounging casually by her feet, Tula watched her charge with a critical eye, offering suggestions now and again. Then, without warning, she upped the ante by tossing Roy another ball. He deftly caught it and smoothly put it into play with the others. The four red balls arced high into the air, and Roy’s confidence increased.

Tula threw Roy another ball, and then another, Roy tossing the balls higher to accommodate the new
“Can you walk around while doing that?” the girl wanted to know.

Roy demonstrated that he could, strolling the length of the bleachers and then back with no mishap.

“You’re pretty good,” Tula granted, “but you need a hook; something to make this more interesting.” Reaching into her smock once again, she pulled out a yellow ball.

Roofus took immediate notice. She was instantly on her feet, legs stiff, her full and rapt attention on the ball.

Roy had a bad feeling about this.

“Don’t let Roofus get the yellow ball, and don’t drop any of the red ones,” the girl instructed, deadpan.

Then she threw Roy the yellow ball.

Roofus rocketed after the ball, leaping at Roy’s hand just as the ball dropped into it. Roy flung it up into the high looping queue, almost losing his rhythm completely as he turned his body back on to the little dog to shield the balls. Roofus was having none of that. She bound around in front of Roy, sitting stiffly as she tracked the yellow ball on its way back to Roy’s hands. Roy held out a foot, hoping to block the terrier’s assault, wagging his oversized shoe in warning. To no avail. The little dog used Roy’s leg as a launch pad to leap for her ball, and only a quickly raised elbow kept the yellow ball safe. Roy turned once again, and the dog charged to Roy’s front, but this time Roy was ready. As the yellow ball dropped toward his hand, the Tramp stepped forward so he could catch it at his back, then flipped it upward to safety once again.

Roofus shot the Tramp a look of such utter contempt that Roy had to laugh out loud. That only made the little terrier more determined. She ran behind Roy as the ball once again descended, but darted to the front when Roy didn’t step forward, leaping at the ball just too late. With a huff, Roofus sat a Roy’s feet and watched pensively as her ball spun high in the air. Roy stepped back, away from the little dog, ready to defend his balls, either rubber or flesh depending on just how frustrated the dog might be. Roofus just sat and watched her ball rise and fall, rise and fall.

Just when the Tramp thought that the dog had given up, Roofus leaped towards him and grabbed a pant leg. Shaking it vigorously, the terrier pulled back with surprising strength. Caught off guard, Roy came very close to dropping everything, only just managing to keep the balls airborne. Balanced on one wobbling foot, he tried to shove the dog away with the other.

Roy had played right into the dog’s evil little paws. As soon as Roy’s knee came up, Roofus used it once again as a spring board, bouncing from the raised leg to Roy’s shoulder, and then straight up to snatch her yellow ball right out of the air. She then ran full tilt out the back of the tent.

“That’s your blow off!” Tula shouted at him. “Pocket the balls as you chase after her! Can’t leave ‘em in the ring!”

Roy did as he was told, shoving the balls one by one into the pockets of his baggy pants as he charged out of the tent. Roofus sat waiting just out of sight in the backstage area, yellow ball at her feet, tail wagging furiously, surrounded by five more small dogs of indeterminate breed.

Roy slammed on his brakes and looked at the little cry of hounds. They looked back, tongues lolling, tails whipping air. Tula trotted up behind the Tramp, chewing at a fingernail.
“That was pretty funny,” she said, face expressionless. “I think you have a winner there. You’ll need to practice getting the balls out of your pockets and into play. I’ll loan Roofus out for your routine. She’s a good girl.” Tula glanced at the terrier and her lips twitched slightly upward for a moment, then fell back into their flat affect.

“Thank you, Tula,” Roy said, solemnly. “And thank you as well, Roofus.”

The girl looked up at him and shrugged. “You’re welcome. Go practice in the big tent so Kita isn’t riding alone.”

Roy took that advice, walking out into the main tent as he pulled two balls out of his pockets, tossing them idly aloft. Without a word from Tula, Roofus ambled sedately behind him with her yellow ball clamped in her jaws. The Tramp wondered if the little dog’s overzealous attempts to retrieve it earlier were just part of an act, and if she would willingly hand over the ball now.

Turning to sit on his heels, Roy held out a hand to the pup. “Give me the ball, Roofus.”

Roofus sat, head cocked saucily. The ball remained where it was.

With a sigh, Roy settled back to sit in the sawdust, crossing his legs. “I knew this wasn’t going to be that easy,” he told the dog, tone friendly. “Still, I had hoped that when Tula told me you were a good girl, it was true.”

Roofus cocked her head the other way.

“I’m sure you can be a nice, obedient girl,” Roy continued in the same easy tone. “I just think you have more fun being a brat. But we’re partners now, and we should try to maintain a good working relationship.”

Roofus lifted a leg to scratch vigorously behind her jaw. Roy waited for her to be done.

“So what do you say, Roofus?” Roy held out his hand again. “Won’t you please give me your ball?”

Roofus thought it over for a moment, then very graciously dropped the slobbery yellow sphere into the Tramp’s palm.

“Thank you, Roofus,” Roy said, holding out the back of his other hand for the terrier to sniff, and then scratching her behind her pert button ears.

Tramp and terrier spent the next hour practicing together. Roy started their routine simply juggling the red balls, strolling along in front of the ranked bleachers, Roofus a few feet behind. The man sedately ran through his repertoire of tricks, the dog casually accompanying him – until the yellow ball made its appearance. Then the show was all Roofus. And she knew it. As Roy became craftier at shielding the ball, the lengths to which the dog went to retrieve her treasure became epic. They practiced the short routine until Roy was confident that they could perform it flawlessly. The little dog made a fine partner; she was intelligent and intuitive, with a great sense of humor. She was indeed a good girl.

Roy was chasing Roofus into the backstage area for the fourth time when he found that Tula and her canine tribe had been replaced by Bossy and the other clowns Roy had met at the breakfast table that morning, with the addition of one more. It took Roy a moment to recognized Lieutenant Yoki as the new addition. His sad clown makeup and green cotton candy hair were an excellent disguise, and Roy had to admit that it suited the man’s character. The older man’s right hand appeared to have developed a nervous twitch, likely from repressing the urge to salute his disguised Führer.
“Say there, Trampy,” Bossy drawled around the toothpick wedged between his teeth. “It you’re done playing kiddy games, maybe you’d like to go a round with the big boys.”

Roy bent to give Roofus an appreciative pat, then sauntered over to the cluster of comics, hands in pockets.

“What do you have in mind?” the Tramp asked.

“Merrill suggested that we use you in the roustabout mid-show,” Bossy said, hands on chubby hips. “It can get kinda rough. Think you can handle it?”

“I guess we’ll find out,” Roy said mildly.

The big clown looked Roy over without expression; then he lip-shifted his toothpick to the other side of his mouth. He made a fist rocking signal to Lock, who scampered away, out of sight in the cluttered staging area. Moments later the raucous stutter of an engine in urgent need of repair slaughtered the quiet of the morning, and then something that loosely resembled a miniature panel truck hove into view. After a few deafening backfires, the contraption’s motor settled into a somewhat more stable rhythm. When it slid to smoke-farting stop in front of him, Roy stood amazed that such a vehicle could function, let alone move. He slowly circled around to examine it.

With a wheelbase about the size of a standard issue military cot, the truck was a patchwork of jury rigged parts. The frame seemed to be composed of a number of welded signposts, topped with a wooden tabletop to serve as a platform. The long sides and roof were loosely enclosed by rough wooden planks that left wide gaps out of which even the largest clown might lean. The rear was completely uncovered, with a curved metal handle bolted to each side. The motor was fully exposed, and appeared to be strapped to the frame with a number of frayed ropes and multicolored scarves. All of this sat on four mismatched wagon wheels of various sizes that lifted the platform level with Roy’s waist. Lock sat on a bale of hay – the driver’s seat - clutching a barrel ring steering wheel in one hand and a narrow barber pole stick shift in the other, revving the palsied engine with a maniacal grin.

“The object of the game is to get all of us,” Bossy gestured to himself and the other clowns, “into that,” he said, jerking a thumb toward the small truck, “while it’s moving. And just so you know, it moves pretty fast.”

Roy looked at the truck again. The scrawny, balding driver took up fully half of the passenger area.

With a shout of “Go!” from Bossy, Lock gunned the engine and threw the clownwagon into gear. It lurched forward into the main tent, and the chase was on.

The five clowns scrambled after the little truck as it shot into the centre ring to trace a path around its edge. Roy barely had time to notice with relief that Nikita and Esinti had vacated the area as he brought up the rear, gaining ground on Yoki just ahead of him. Congratulating himself on quickly mastering the difficult task of running all out in oversized shoes, the Tramp passed the older man with little effort and was closing in on Bossy when Yoki grabbed the back of Roy’s coat and pulled back to spring ahead of him.

Up ahead Stock had already clambered aboard the truck, but was almost immediately dragged off by Barrel, who climbed nimbly over his fallen colleague’s body to take his place. Stock jumped back up and managed to catch hold of one of the long handles framing the rear opening to pull himself back into the truck. Yoki had meanwhile pulled the same trick on Bossy as he had on Roy, grabbing hold of his coattails and using the bigger man’s momentum to slingshot ahead of him. Closing on the truck just as Stock was pulling himself up, Yoki grabbed at the other clown’s pants and pulled them
halfway down, exposing polka dotted boxers and a fetching plumber’s crack to all and sundry. Reaching to pull his pants up, Stock lost his grip on the handle and slipped off the rear of the truck. He just managed to catch the back bumper as he fell. Pants around his ankles, the clownwagon dragged him around the ring without pause; Yoki took the opportunity to use his sprawled body as a ramp to board the truck. Two pairs of hands reached out and jerked Stock into the vehicle as the Tramp drew close.

Roy darted past Bossy and made a grab for a long handle, but missed as the Boss clown booted him in the ass on the fly, causing the Tramp to stumble. Then Bossy was ahead, grabbing for the truck’s rear bumper. He vaulted onto the platform, slotting himself in among his colleagues like a gaily painted puzzle piece.

Roy raced up to the clownmobile and finally managed to seize a rear handle. Pulling himself up to stand on the back bumper, the Tramp swung to take hold of the handle on the opposite side as well, pleased that he had been able to carry out his task in spite of the frankly hostile behaviour of the experienced clowns.

His sense of accomplishment didn’t last long. As the last man aboard, it didn’t appear that there was even an inch of space left for him in the truck. He was wondering where he might wedge himself in amongst the other kitschy passengers, when a scuffed, floppy shoe was planted flat in the centre of his chest.

“Tell ya what, Trampy,” Bossy shouted over his shoe into Roy’s face with a leer, garish green tie flapping in the wind. “Shit’s about to get real.”

Roy clung for dear life to the bars on either side of the rear frame, the big clown’s oversized shoe pushed firmly to his chest. The Tramp could do nothing but glare at the bigger clown.

“Tuck and roll backward for as many turns as you can.” Roy read the glee in Bossy’s voice. “When you stop, get up and run like hell, because we’ll be coming up right behind you.”

Then he pistoned his leg to launch Roy off the back of the truck.

The Tramp was far too pissed to tuck or roll. He soared through the air and landed flat on his ass, sliding to plough a wide furrow in the thick pad of sawdust. Scrambling to his feet, Roy glanced behind as the little truck chugged around the far side of the ring to head straight for him at an alarming rate of speed.

He ran.

Roy had already discovered that running in big floppy shoes presented an interesting challenge, more so now that a miniature truck stuffed with clowns was bearing down on him.

“Say there Trampy!” Bossy’s voice rang loud and clear over the stuttering roar of the little truck’s palsied engine. “’S’all ya got? I’ve seen ol’ ladies run faster. Been lounging around behind a desk too long’s my guess. Cripes, you don’t get a move on, you’re gonna end up with a butt-load of fender!”

The Tramp wasn’t sure what offended him more: that the big clown was clearly enjoying every minute of this, or that the clownwagon didn’t even have fenders.

And yes, Roy was a politician, but he was by no means a simple desk jockey. He was a soldier; always had been, always would be. The Flame Alchemist had endured far more in his career than this ignorant clown could possibly comprehend. Furthermore, he had just spent a week long forced
march through the mountains and was in better physical condition than he had been in quite some
time. And as a matter of personal principle, he wasn’t even marginally inclined to put up with a
bully. This painted buffoon hadn’t the slightest idea who the fuck he was dealing with.

The little truck was hot on his heels. Roy threw himself flat to the ground, arms stretched above his
head, and the wagon passed neatly over him. Then he immediately sprang up to launch himself at the
back of the truck and again managed to catch hold of one sidebar. This time however, instead of
swinging to grasp the other, he grabbed Bossy’s oversized tie and yanked it as hard as he could.
Caught off guard, the other man flew from the vehicle with a whoop, tucking to somersault for an
impressive number of forward rolls. Roy pulled himself into the other man’s efficiently vacated space
as the rest of the car’s passengers roared with laughter.

The truck rounded the ring and closed on the Boss clown as he sprang up and started to run. For a
heavyset man, he was surprisingly light on his feet. Stock honked the horn as Bossy sprinted ahead,
the stunted vehicle thundering up to within inches of the fleeing clown’s backside, but just when it
appeared that he was going to be hit, the big clown dodged aside. Stock leaned out as the truck
rocketed past, bopping his colleague with a foam rubber bat. Bossy spun in a graceful pirouette
before falling hard on his ass. Then he leaped back to his feet and rushed the truck.

“Here!” Barrell shouted, thrusting an old straw broom into Roy’s hands. “Use this to keep him off!”
He didn’t have to explain the concept. Remarkably, Bossy had caught up quickly and was reaching
for the rear bumper. The vengeful Tramp smacked at clutching hands with the straw end of the
broom, then jabbed it at the chubby man to keep him at bay while doing his best not to be thrown
from the wildly veering vehicle himself. Barre leaned far out over Roy, Yoki dragging back on his
coattails to keep him from falling out of the truck, giving the boss clown long blasts from a fire
extinguisher, riming his face and hair. Stock wedged himself beside the Tramp, swinging his foam
bat at Bossy’s head with great accuracy any time the pursuing clown came into range. And all the
while Lock continued to swerve the little truck erratically around the ring, alternately honking the
horn and clanging a large brass bell.

After the second circuit, Bossy was struggling to keep up, and Stock gave the back of the driver’s
hay bale seat a solid kick. Lock floored it out of the ring into the backstage area of the big top, where
he slammed on the brakes, skidding sideways to a stop. Bossy charged out of the main tent right
behind them, stopping just inside. He bent over, head hanging, hands on his knees, and gasped for
breath.

Lock shut down the engine as the other clowns untangled themselves from the little truck’s platform.
Roy jumped from the back opening and walked over to the panting Boss clown, not sure how the
other would respond to the way the routine had gone down, but ready for anything.

Then Tula raced in. Running up to Bossy, she began to slap him on the back.

“Abbi!” she shouted. “That was really funny! You were so cool!”

“Tula-girl,” Bossy wheezed. “Give me a sec.”

The girl stood at the big clown’s side, hand still on his back as he struggled to catch his breath. He
glanced up at Roy, a sparkle in his eyes.

“You gotta be tough . . . to be a clown . . . and I guess . . . you’re tough enough,” Bossy said
between gulps of air. “Can’t say . . . I’m really surprised.”

Roy waited for the Boss clown to get his breathing under control. He finally did, and straightened to
look the Tramp square in the eye.

“For a hotshot desk jockey, you’re all right.” Bossy stuck out his hand, still panting. “Before I was stuck with ya. Now I’m pleased to meet ya.”

Roy took the offered hand in a firm grip. “Likewise.”

The rest of the crew gathered around to give the Tramp congratulatory handshakes and friendly shoulder slaps, obviously pleased that Roy had survived his initiation. As a matter of fact, Roy was pleased about that, too.

“The advise – that’s the show’s act schedule - will be posted on the back door of the red wagon in about an hour.” The Boss clown gave the Tramp a friendly grin. “Check it out. Tonight’s your big debut.”
Last Stand

Well into his second week of clowning Roy had settled into something of a routine, depending on what state the Mauser Brother’s company was in. He awoke before the sun, either in Edward’s bed or the one beside it. He washed up quickly and applied his makeup in the safe confines of Murata’s bandwagon. Then he left the wagon to assemble with the other circus folk for a hearty breakfast and to discover what the day held in store.

Whatever the traveling band’s disposition, there was always a lot of work to be done. If the circus was on the move, he helped hitch the horses so the caravan could continue on their journey to their next venue, then settled down out of sight inside Murata’s wagon with Edward for the day’s travel. If the company had reached their destination the evening before, Roy helped with the enormous job of setting up the grounds in preparation for that evening’s performance. If there was a show that evening, he practiced his routines, usually at the same time as Nikita, with whom he had developed a shared camaraderie. If the time had come to change locations, he helped with the equally huge task of dismantling and packing the circus back into the bandwagons. And of course, there were shows to perform for appreciative crowds. It seemed he never had a moments rest until he lay his head down on his pillow late at night, but hard work certainly beat being cooped up in a bandwagon, hiding from public view.

And oddly enough, Roy found that he enjoyed not only performing, but the manual labor as well. During basic training at the academy, cadets were always worked to exhaustion, just as a matter of principle. At the time Roy had hated it, but he had also discovered that he did some of his best thinking while engaged in mindless manual labor. With his body performing its assigned duties on automatic, his mind could be occupied elsewhere, working out solutions to problems large and small, or just perusing the day’s events. It was a handy talent that allowed Roy to accomplish boring assignments without actually being bored at all.

But whatever the task, as a member of the Mauser Brothers Circus, there was always someone to lend a hand, and in Roy’s experience, nothing brought people together more efficiently than toiling shoulder to shoulder for the common good.

There were certainly plenty of hands to share the work. In addition to the performers Roy had met on his first day, the circus boasted a fine collection of artists: a sword swallower, a tightrope walker, a lion tamer (though Heinkel was the lion in question, so the tamer’s job was not terribly challenging), a bearded lady, a contortionist, a fortune teller, two lady dwarves, and a number of roustabouts related by blood or marriage to some of the performers. What united them was the same thing that Roy himself had dedicated his life to: the security and welfare of Amestris and her people. The only real difference between the Führer and these circus folk was a minor distinction; a matter of social status, not commitment.

Roy’s new comrades in arms were as diverse a group as could be imagined, boasting cultures both home grown and from distant lands about which Roy had only ever heard whispers. Despite this, the Mauser’s company was an extremely tight knit group. Roy wasn’t sure if this was typical of a normal circus, or just the ones engaged in international espionage. It was hard to say, since this was the only circus he had ever been part of.

And Roy was proud to say that he was, indeed, part of it.

At first, despite their easy acceptance, it was clear that the Mauser’s company didn’t know what to make of their esteemed guest, so Roy worked hard to earn their trust. Whatever was asked of him, he did without complaint, thought it was obvious that sometimes his limits – and patience - were being
tested. He took it in good natured stride, and the tension gradually eased as acceptance turned to mutual respect. As physically taxing as the work could be, life with the Mauser’s little band was in fact a pleasant interlude from the stress of ruling Amestris.

And at the end of the day, Edward was there, waiting for him in Murata’s bandwagon.

Most of the time, that was.

Sitting still had never been a talent that Edward cultivated, and the Nihonese healer was experiencing the same frustration Roy remembered well from the days when Edward had been under his command: mainly, that Edward had an almost pathological aversion to following orders. Stating them firmly did no good. Threats were ignored. Appealing to his common sense had no effect. Begging was not only pointless, but humiliating. More often than not, Murata would enter her wagon to discover that Edward had once again left his bed, or worse, the wagon entirely. Locks were not a deterrent; they likely didn’t even slow the wayward patient down. No one ever saw him leave or encountered him on the grounds, and the woman was at her wits end, trying to figure out how he managed to slip away unseen. Roy was fairly certain that the blond’s connection to the Dragon’s Pulse was the means, but said nothing. That wasn’t his secret to reveal.

The alkahestris had turned to distraction to keep her uncooperative charge pliant to her orders, and there were a lot of willing people on hand to keep Edward company. Darius and Henkel, old friends of the former Fullmetal Alchemist, frequently dropped in to pass the time. Yoki did as well, and though he wasn’t well received, he seemed unaffected by Edward’s gruff treatment. Tula, Bossy’s daughter, visited daily with at least one of her canine companions. Time and again Roy had walked in on some quiet conversation between the two. The somber young girl seemed to have taken a shine to the former State Alchemist.

Curt Nikita also had fallen under Edward’s spell. She was often in Tula’s company, and since Tula visited Edward often, Nikita found herself there as well. Roy had heard that she had been a close friend of the girl’s mother, though no one as yet had let slip any clues to the absent Ishbalan woman’s fate. The Drachmann and the young dog trainer were very close, and while Nikita had initially come to Murata’s wagon simply because she had been with Tula, that soon changed. Slowly but surely, the horsewoman had been pulled in by Edward’s unassuming manner, and soon could be found visiting the blond man on her own from time to time.

So too did the stoic Hindustani strongman, Ishapore, much to everyone’s surprise. He had even agreed to teach Edward how to speak his native language in exchange for lessons in Xingese. Roy had discovered that Bossy wasn’t being facetious about his colleague’s proclivity for lying on beds of nails. Amazingly enough, his sideshow act included not only laying prone on the aforementioned bed, but having a solid cinderblock sledgehammered to bits on his naked chest at the same time, as well as walking barefoot on hot coals. Roy wouldn’t have believed it possible if he hadn’t seen it with his own eyes, and wondered if he might be witnessing the Hindustani equivalent to alchemy in action.

The fact was that most of the circus folk had taken to visiting their injured guest whenever they had a few free moments, including the Mauser brothers themselves. Edward’s open and honest nature was refreshingly charming, and he drew others to him without even realizing it. He had always had that effect on people, including Roy himself.

And it was a good thing. Roy suspected that his natural charisma was the only thing keeping Murata from murdering him in his sleep. Even with a steady stream of genial visitors, the blond still made a point of slipping away on his own. He had even managed to sneak into the big top to watch a show, offering a cheerful critique of Roy’s performance in particular. At the time, Murata had graciously
accepted Edward’s praise for her skills as a fire eater, then stressed that if he continued to leave his bed, she would remove his automail, set it aflame, and insert it into a body cavity generally reserved for the opposite process. Sideways. Unfortunately for Murata, Edward continued to ignore her orders. Fortunately for Edward, Murata had not as yet acted on her threat.

On this particular morning the circus was setting up in a new location at which they had arrived the previous evening. Supervised by the Boss Canvasman – Spider Webley - the men had already raised one king pole and were preparing to raise its twin. Using the secured pole as a lever, Roy was part of the roustabout crew pushing the other upright so its base could slip securely into a pre-dug foundation. All around him was the sound of rapidfire hammering as the sledge crews pounded in wooden stakes for the guyropes required to secure the poles.

The second king pole raised, Roy stepped back to take a short break and observe. This was the circus’ third set up since his arrival, so he knew what to expect. He watched as a crew of canvasmen unrolled the bundles of tent material side by side on the ground, followed by another team that laced the sections together. When all the crews had finished their work - the poles up, the stakes driven, the canvas unrolled and laced together - bale rings in the canvas would be in position around the main poles. The rings would be roped through a sturdy block and tackle near the top of each pole with the loose ends in turn tethered to draft horses. A signal from the chief would start the horses pulling, and the huge canvas would rise to the top of the poles. The smaller queen poles, along with more stakes and guys, would be needed to define the huge tent’s characteristic shape and to keep the wind from snatching the bright canvas away. Then, with the giant marquee in place, the task of setting up the sidewalls and arena could begin.

A shout over the pounding of sledgehammers caught his ear, and Roy turned to see Matthew Mauser walking quickly towards him.

“We have some good news,” the ringmaster said with a slight smile. “Come along to the infirmary. I’d like Edward to hear this as well.”

Good news could only mean one thing: that Roy and Edward would be back in Amestris sooner than expected.

The current plan would require at least another week before the troupe could head for home soil. Two jumps further along their planned itinerary saw the Mauser Brother on the outskirts of the city of Trýgonas, in which there resided a Cretian ally in the medical profession. It had been decided Yoki would visit this ally, who would diagnose him with a rather nasty – and quite contagious - virus. The Cretian MD would then confirm that a number of the other circus performers were also infected, and recommend that the circus return to Amestris for recovery. A simple plan, but often the simplest plans were the most effective. The length of time required to set that plan in motion was its only fault.

But Matthew’s summons might mean that the trip back to Amestris might take place quicker than expected. The Tramp certainly hoped so. As much as he didn’t want to jeopardize the Mauser’s information gathering operation, he dearly wanted to get back where he belonged, in the national driver’s seat.

Roy followed the swiftly striding redhead to Murata’s bandwagon, noting Merrill’s pony grazing politely by the steps. Matthew rapped sharply on the door and entered without waiting for a response. Roy stepped inside to be greeted by the expectant gazes of Murata, Merrill, Darius, Henkel, Edward, and a man Roy was not familiar with.

“Ah, wonderful,” Merrill smiled a sunny smile. “Now we can get down to business.” Seated in a straight back chair by Murata, the younger twin indicated the newcomer. “Allow me to introduce
Bergmann Mars, our twenty-four hour man.”

Mars affected a small bow, and answered Roy’s unasked question. “It’s my job to scout ahead to the next town, plan the route, and mark the way,” he explained.

Roy nodded his understanding.

Merrill waved an impatient hand. “Tell our guests what you discovered,” he urged the scout.

“I took a little side trip to the west of our planned route, and found a town not two miles from the Amestrian border,” Mars told them. “It’s pretty small: one main street, an inn with a bar, a general store, something resembling a town hall, local law enforcement, a few houses. It has a population of about two hundred all told, mostly loggers and farmers homesteading outside the town limits.” The man shrugged. “They probably don’t get much in the way of traveling entertainment. I did some casual checking, and got a very positive response to the suggestion that a circus was in the area and might stop by for a show or two. There are a couple of possible sites suitable to our needs, and the rates quoted for their use were more than reasonable. We could easily wildcat a stand there and still meet the demands of our planned schedule without disappointing anyone on our current itinerary.”

“So that leaves us with a new option to consider,” Matthew said. “We could make that town our next jump, which would put us in a very good position to smuggle you and Edward across the border under cover of darkness without pre-empting our summer tour of Creta.”

“Did you get a chance to scope out the landscape?” Edward asked, frowning.

“Not in depth,” Mars admitted. “The town proper is located on the northern end of a long, wide valley that curves north to east, and the site best suited to our purpose is situated a quarter mile away at the opposite end. From what I could see, the eastern slope is fairly steep and looks a bit rough, but that would also work to our advantage. The frontier wouldn’t be as heavily patrolled in rugged terrain, making it easier to cross undetected. I don’t know what the terrain is like on the other side of the ridge, but if it’s similar, I think it’s doable.”

“How far would we be from the closest Amestrian town after we cross the border?” Roy wanted to know.

“According to our map, there is a small village some five miles in,” Matthew said, causing both Edward and Roy to frown.

“That’s quite a distance to cover in that kind of terrain at night,” Roy pointed out.

“There is a logging track, however, just half a mile in,” the roadman continued. “If we decide to go ahead with this, I’m sure our commanding officer could arrange for a rendezvous. You could be picked up from there and safely transported to West City.”

“Darius has volunteered to check out the lay of the land personally when we get to . . .” Matthew looked to Mars.

“Otuxia,” the scout supplied the name of the town.

“. . . before we make any firm commitments,” Matthew told the assembled party, and the Gorilla man nodded his confirmation. “Our first priority, of course, is the safety of everyone involved.”

“In case anyone has forgotten,” Edward cut in, “I’m not exactly in good enough condition to be taking a two mile hike thought the woods.”
“You wouldn’t know it from the amount of time you spend sneaking around the grounds,” Murata muttered, shooting Edward a toxic glare.

“Darius and Henkel will accompany you on the journey,” Matthew explained. “Either one would be quite capable of carrying you that distance, or even farther if unforeseen circumstances made it necessary.”

“I’m sure they would,” Edward said sourly.

Merrill reached out to give Edward’s arm a reassuring pat. “I know it’s no fun to be dependent on others, but how you deal with it says more about who you are than your infirmity ever could.”

“Yeah, tell me about it,” Edward said, pinging a fingernail off his automail knee while giving the other man a wry smile.

“I think we should make the jump, regardless of what we ultimately decide to do when we get there,” Matthew continued. “If it turns out to be a false opportunity, we will simply fall back on our original arrangement to cut our tour short and take you back across the border ourselves as planned. Either way, slipping in an extra show or two is always a bonus.”

And so it was decided, as so many truly bad ideas are, with little fanfare.

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The lunch hour found Roy in the company of the circus folk in the cookshack, enjoying the hearty and filling midday meal provided by Ishapore. The conversation was always amusing and entertaining. It reminded Roy of his early days in the military, of the bonding that took place in casual camaraderie almost by accident. He had made a habit of lending the cook a hand with the cleanup afterward in hopes of getting to know the impassive Hindustani man, though the seemingly unemotional strongman rarely made conversation. Still, Roy thought he at least appreciated the assistance, if not the company. Afterward, the Tramp generally wandered over to the menagerie, where most of the circus crew loitered when they had nothing pressing to occupy them, and today was no exception.

As menageries go, the Mauser Brothers’ was decidedly sparse. It consisted of Darius and Heinkel, a boa constrictor, a zebra, two miniature ponies, three peacocks, a llama named Dolly, and a cranky baboon with a disturbing tendency to jerk off with shrill enthusiasm at the worst possible moments. Roy wasn’t there to examine the bizarre collection of exotic animals however; he wanted to hear what new tidbits of information the Mauser’s team had managed to glean from the local population the night before.

In the late afternoon, after practice but well before the evening show, the circus folk would go into town for a few drinks at the local watering hole, talking casually with the townsfolk and listening to the local gossip. Even here in the most rural of areas, people heard things, knew things, and didn’t mind talking about things, usually at great length with much embellishment and enthusiasm. Information gathering was the Mausers’ true purpose, and they gathered it all. Secrets, rumors, and whispers, big or small; there was no way to tell what might prove significant in the long run, so everything was considered important and dutifully reported. Roy was intimately familiar with the process, given his background.
The Tramp was not party to that aspect to the Mausers’ operation however. His freedom was limited to the circus grounds for a very good reason; specifically, that most of what wagged on every tongue at the moment was the missing Führer of Amestris, lost in these very mountains.

After three weeks, rumors were still running wild; everyone had a theory. The Führer had been killed the night of the train wreck, and the Amestrian government was keeping it quiet until a replacement was selected. He had escaped but was now dead and devoured by wild animals. He had been abducted by aliens, spirited away to a distant planet. He was lost in the mountains, wandering in circles, slowly starving to death alone in the wilds. The people responsible for the train wreck had tracked him down and quietly disposed of him before he could be rescued. He had been kidnapped, and was being held for a king’s ransom by some crafty local outlaws. The train wreck was staged; the Amestrian Führer had actually run off with a buxom Cretian beauty, was currently fornicating to his heart’s content, and would return to the limelight when he finally tired – which was, of course, Roy’s personal favorite.

Fortunately, none of the current rumors even remotely considered that he might be hiding in plain sight, performing clown routines in a circus. Apparently the old adage had it dead right: the truth was indeed stranger than fiction.

As Roy approached, he noted in passing that the large corral beside the menagerie was empty at the moment. The veritable army of Black Forest Rhenisch draft horses that served to transport the circus from site to site had been let out to pasture after completing their task of pulling the circus upright and into shape, and he spotted Nikita making her way in from the field. As expected, the other clowns were hanging around by the cages and pens that housed the circus’ exotic animal collection, which was arranged along the clapboard fence of the corral.

With the exception of Barrel and Roy himself, none of the others had their trademark makeup on this afternoon. Since Roy had to wear his clownface any time he was out in public, the others had taken up that habit as well so that he wouldn’t look out of place. Today, however, as they generally did after setting up in a new location, many of the circus folk planned to spend the afternoon in town. They would gather information as always, but their main intention was to unwinding after two weeks of rigorous activity. Matthew had given the word as he issued his assembled company their biweekly paychecks: everyone had the afternoon off. The announcement had been cheered with great enthusiasm.

Roy was moving to join his loitering colleagues when he was intercepted, stopped by a small but strong hand placed gently on his arm.

The local girl was young, perhaps Edward’s age, and very pretty. Her fresh, sun freckled face was framed with lustrous brown hair neatly pulled back in two long plaits. A plaid, button down shirt and faded dungarees showcased her substantial womanly assets; sidling up close, she pressed those assets against the Tramp’s arm, smiling coyly up at him with sparkling emerald eyes through thick, dark lashes.

“Hey there honey,” she purred around a thick Cretian accent. “How you are doing?”

“Better by the minute, from the look of things,” Roy lied through his easy grin.

The girl slipped her arm through the Tramp’s and pulled him even closer, fiddling idly with the metal grip that attached Roy’s suspenders to his waistband. “You look sad kind of to me,” she observed. “I know something that cheer you up.”

Roy pretended to give her suggestion careful consideration before speaking. Then, with a resigned sigh, he said, “Your offer is very tempting, but I can’t accept it. I have someone waiting for me back
home, and I just couldn’t live with myself if I betrayed him.”

With a pout, the girl released the Tramps arm and stepped back. “I should have know you taken,” she said with regret. Then she smiled and gave Roy’s arm a friendly pat. “You take care, honey.” A playful wink and she walked away, no doubt in search of more biddable prey.

To their credit, Roy’s audience kept their comments to themselves until he was close enough for them to remain private.

“That was pretty smooth,” Lock said admiringly. “She didn’t even get upset when you shut her down.”

“It’s always easier if they believe you’re rejecting them for some noble purpose,” Roy confided.

“Cripes,” Bossy snorted. “You can take the man out of the game but you can’t take the game out of the man.”

Roy shrugged.

“Guess we shoulda warned you. Some girls get turned on by the makeup,” the Boss clown confided, tilting his ever-present toothpick up to touch his nose. “You wouldn’t believe the action we get.”

“Yup. That’s the life of a clown,” Stock affirmed.

“We take a little comfort where we can,” Yoki said with a wistful smile.

“Then off into the sunset we ride,” Barrel said, gazing into the distance.

“With a polite tip of the hat and heartfelt thanks for the mammarys,” Lock concluded.

“After that little encounter, I’d be inclined to believe anything you told me,” Roy said with a smirk.

“I wonder what that girl would do if she found out who she was actually hitting on?” Yoki wondered.

“She’d probably barf.” Bossy grimaced. “Politicians aren’t as sexy as clowns.”

“This one is. And I’m also a clown,” Roy reminded them. “Two for the price of one.”

“I’m kind of surprised you didn’t take her up on her offer,” the boss continued matter-of-factly. “I heard you had a big dick that you like to stick into anything with a pulse. Guess I heard wrong.”

“Only about who I like to stick it to,” Roy clarified. “I’m very particular about who I do.”

“Well la-di-da,” Bossy sang, waving a hand saucily. “It’s a shame really.”

“Oh? Why’s that?” Roy asked, all nonchalance. “Were you interested? I’m terribly sorry, but you’re just not my type.”

Bossy’s shoulders hunched as he made a strangled sort of choking sound.

Barrel smirked. “Say, Bossy! My colon made a sound like that once. Turned out I needed surgery.”

“Can it, Barrel,” Bossy wheezed as he caught his breath, spitting his toothpick to the side. “You always were a major pain in my past.” He turned a glower on the Tramp. “You’re lucky my kid likes you,” he said, but couldn’t quite maintain his belligerent facade.
Darius and Henkel appeared from the far side of the big top and walked over to the fenced menagerie. The two chimeras were joined by Nikita as she climbed out of the fenced paddock, and the trio nodded to their assembled colleagues as they approached. The horsewoman pulled out a long stemmed pipe and began to fill it as both men immediately lit up cigarettes, blue tinted smoke curling into the air.

“Our illustrious alkahestris is in a foul mood again,” Henkel said as he leaned back against his cage. “She’s getting Edward his lunch, and she looks like she’d like to shove it straight up his ass.”

“He disappeared for three hours last night,” Nikita volunteered, accepting a light from Henkel. “No one ever sees him coming or going. She said she thinks he’s some kind of ninja, whatever that might be. He is driving her crazy.”

“Murata-san should cut the kid some slack; Elric’s no fainting little flower,” Darius confided, puffing out a perfect ring of smoke. “He’s been through a lot worse than a broken leg. A guy like that doesn’t need to be coddled.”

“Yes,” Henkel agreed, taking a deep draw and letting the smoke waterfall up through his moustache to be inhaled by his nose. “You have to be pretty tough to take a rusty beam straight through the gut and live to tell about it.”

Roy’s own guts suddenly felt like contoured ice. He’d seen those matching scars, front and back, and wondered. The image of Edward pinned in entomological display made his blood run cold.

The lion man didn’t notice. “Too bad we didn’t find Kimblee’s red stone ‘til after the kid used himself as one,” he mused, and Darius nodded his agreement. “Can’t really tell if it did him any harm, though. Not that he had much choice.”

Roy’s mouth was now too dry to speak, so he just nodded as well.

“That sounds like a great story,” Lock prompted hopefully.

“It is,” Darius confirmed. “Get us drunk enough someday and we might tell it.”

“Or not,” Henkel amended.

“Speaking of alcohol intake and storytelling, I suppose we should get cleaned up,” Yoki stated. “We’ll be heading into town soon.”

“Are you coming, Nikita?” Bossy wanted to know.

“No,” the Drachmann woman said sourly. “Some of my horses are getting a little long in the feathers, and I want to trim them before it becomes a problem. Tula has offered to help me.”

Boss clown’s relief that his daughter would be in good hands while he was in town was obvious.

“If you need an extra pair of hands, I’m sure I can make some time in my busy schedule,” Roy offered, though he hoped the Drachmann would decline.

“No, that’s quite alright,” Makarov said, giving him a wink. Though he often helped out with the horses, she knew that today the Tramp had other plans.

“Wish you could come with us,” Lock said to Roy. “You’ve been working just as hard as the rest of us. Everyone needs a break.”
“Don’t worry about him,” Bossy cut in. “I’m sure he’ll find someone – oops! I mean something - to do.”

“Hope I do,” Stock muttered.

Lock sighed dramatically. “You know what your problem is Stocky? Your standards are too high.”

Roy glanced at Nikita, who rolled her eyes. This wasn’t anything they hadn’t heard before. For instance, every single time the boys went into town.

“What’s wrong with having standards?” As always, Yoki came to Stock’s defence. “I think it admirable that our man Stock is out for more than just a quick roll in the hay with an anonymous warm body,” he declared.

Bossy, Lock, and Barrel snorted in unison.

“Forget you guys,” Stock said, waving his hand in dismissal. “I know what I’m looking for: the woman of my dreams.” Stock smiled a beatific smile, eyes shining with hope. “Kind. Caring. Beautiful. Then love, marriage, a little house with a white picket fence in a nice, quiet town, a couple of kids – that’s what I want when my time with you bozos is done.”

“You’re in an awful hurry to dive into that gene pool,” Bossy observed. “Tell ya what. A wife and kids add up to a big responsibility. Think it through. You gotta make sure you know what you’re getting into before you go off half cocked. No pun intended.”

Roy caught the hint of a regretful frown shading the big clown’s face, much easier to detect without the makeup. He didn’t know how Bossy had come to be a single parent, and though curiosity nipped and nagged he didn’t think he could casually ask about a matter so personal. The big clown and his solemn daughter had clearly suffered a painful experience.

Merrill’s cheerful voice interrupted the Tramp’s musings, and he looked up as the younger Mauser appear around the big top astride his trusty pony, Murata strolling contentedly beside him with a covered tray in her hands. Roy had noticed that the pair could often be found together when unoccupied by their professional duties. The alkahestris was casually dressed in a light blouse and flower-print skirt, her usual attire when a trip into a local town was on the agenda.

“You’ll be careful I hope, Ari,” Merrill was saying. “Some of these towns are worse than the cities. You never know what kind of trouble you might find in a place like this.”

“I will be fine,” Murata assured him. “Yoki-san will accompany me, and as always, we will seek out a reputable establishment. You worry too much.” Her eyes on his were warm.

Merrill did not look particularly reassured, but leaned both hands on his saddle horn as the pair approached the lounging performers.

“Ladies, gentlemen,” he greeted them with a smile. “The bills have been posted. Spider will be taking the wain into town in about half an hour. If you’d like to catch a ride, meet him by the gate.”

Mauser turned his sunny grin to Roy. “And since we’ll both be left behind, perhaps you could join me in my wagon to further discuss our plans for your departure from our company.”

Roy opened his mouth, furiously casting about for a polite way to refuse Merrill’s offer. It wasn’t that he didn’t enjoy spending down time with the circus manager; quite the contrary. Merrill’s quick intelligence and dry sense of humor made him a very engaging companion. However, Roy had planned to spend his afternoon off with someone else, otherwise engaged in intimate activities best kept private.
Murata beat him to the punch. “I think our Tramp was expecting to keep Edward occupied and out of trouble this afternoon,” she told Merrill diplomatically.

“Lovely!” the man chirped. “The three of us can thrash out the details of a few contingency plans!”

Only the Nihonese woman sighed out loud. “What a wonderful idea,” she said, straight-faced, then turned deliberately toward the Tramp. “Just let me remind you, Merrill, that I expect to be in town for most of the afternoon,” she continued, speaking directly to Roy. “I plan to take my supper off the grounds as well.”

“Yes, you mentioned that earlier,” Merrill said with a frown.

“I know,” the Nihonese woman stated. “I just wanted to make sure you were fully aware that I would be gone for hours. My wagon will be at our Tramp and Edward’s disposal. For hours.” Her eyes never left Roy.

“Oh.” Merrill finally noticed the direction of Murata’s intense gaze. “Oh! Well, then. Yes. And . . . I . . . believe we’ve actually done enough planning for one day.”

Murata smiled fondly at Merrill, giving his folded hands a light pat. Then she turned her attention back to Roy. “Do be a gentleman and carry this tray,” she said. “I’m sure Edward will be most appreciative of the food, if not the company.”

Roy obediently took the covered tray from Murata’s hands and followed as she walked toward her bandwagon, pointedly ignoring his snickering colleagues.

“Thank you, Murata-san,” the Tramp said quietly when they were some distance from the slowly dispersing cluster of circus folk. “I really didn’t want to offend Merrill by rejecting his kind offer of genial company.”

“For an intelligent man, he can be rather obtuse at times,” the alkahestris stated. “But he would not have taken offense. Clueless? Yes. Selfish? Most certainly not.”

“Forgive me for being forward,” Roy ventured, “but I get the distinct impression that you and Merrill have something more than friendship between you.”

Murata did not so much as blink. “We did. We don’t anymore.”

“Ah.” Roy waited, not intending to push it.

The Nihonese woman glanced at the Tramp, speculation in her eyes.

“We were quite the pair before his accident,” she decided to clarify. “Now he believes he is no longer man enough for me. He tells me I should move on. I don’t. I can’t.”

“I’m sorry,” Roy murmured. “I will keep that in confidence.”

Murata keyed the lock and opened the door, stepping inside to let Roy through with the tray. “Thank you. I’m sure you . . . I’m going to kill him!” she seethed.

Roy knew without looking that Edward was not in his bed. In fact, he wasn’t anywhere to be seen. The young man wouldn’t presume to enter the Nihonese woman’s private quarters, so he must have left the bandwagon altogether. Again.

Murata was livid as she stalked over to her private quarters and slammed open the door to check for
her obstinate patient, just in case. As expected, Edward was not there. Turning to Roy with gritted teeth, she swung her hands out in exasperated fury.

“How did you ever survive as his commanding officer!??” she wailed. “And more to the point, how did he ever survive as your subordinate?”

Roy set the tray down on the table by Edward’s bed. “Don’t take it to heart,” he soothed. “It’s not that he deliberately sets out to infuriate. He just likes to do things his own way. When Edward was in my command I took advantage of that, generally with outstanding results.” Roy smiled fondly at the cascade of memories. “That’s not to say he didn’t frequently drive me to distraction; I just as often returned the favour. And when it seemed that homicide was imminent one way or the other, there were always missions in distant towns to which I could dispatch him.”

The woman’s ire had faded as Roy spoke.

“Go and find him,” Murata said, eyes grave. “And please remember, since he will not, that he is injured. A comminuted fracture requires substantial recovery time, even with the aid of alkahestry, though I will admit that he is healing astonishingly fast. Still, if he is not careful, he could reinjure himself, resulting in an even longer recovery period. Do nothing that will cause him further injury.”

“I assure you, Murata-san, that he is safe with me.”

Roy politely tipped his battered felt hat to the Nihonese woman and left the bandwagon, moving down the steps and out into the midway with a distinct bounce to his step. An afternoon off was as rare as fine diamonds and at least twice as valuable. Roy didn’t want to waste a single minute of it.

Now, if only he could find his favorite ex-alchemist so that they could spend some quality time together.

Roy scanned the grounds, considering his quarry. Edward left the confines of Murata’s bandwagon because he was restless, not because he was lonely. He needed a change of scene, not company. That narrowed down the blond man’s options for hiding places quite drastically. Roy’s eyes fell on the small hay barn some seventy-five feet off the grounds, its use generously donated by the farmer who had leased out the site. Though it was in a rather poor state of repair, the circus was using it to store the hay they had purchased. The only reason anyone might venture inside was to fetch it, and the horses had already been tended to.

It was very likely the perfect place to hide from an irate alkahestris.

Roy set out to discover if his deduction was correct. He hoped it was. A rustic roll in the hay sounded like the perfect way to start his afternoon.

One of the ancient barn’s doors hung at an angle. The other was missing completely. Roy peeked inside. The small structure was stuffed nearly to the door with blocky hay bales from floor to rafters, and for a moment Roy thought he had been mistaken. Then his eyes were drawn into the dimness by the wall to his right, where he noticed how a few bales had tumbled from their careful stack, forming a serviceable, if haphazard, stairway.

It was hot in the small outbuilding, and hay dust hazed the air, tickling Roy’s nose as he climbed quietly up the bales. The silence was broken only by the chirping of crickets and the quiet rustle of small creatures going about their business under cover of the hay. Gaining the summit, Roy was pleased to discover a few bales stacked up to form a makeshift wall just a few feet from where he crouched under the roof beams. He crept closer to peer over them, into the enclosure they described.
There, resting amid the shimmering dust motes adrift in slanting sunlight, was Edward. He was in casual recline on a ragged edged red blanket, back propped against another angled bale, eyes on the opened book in his hand. One of Tula’s little dogs was curled up beside him, man and dog both enjoying the warm sunshine spearing through gaps in the battered tin roof. Roy took note of the way Ed’s black, sleeveless t-shirt hung loose on his frame. Had the young man lost weight? It was difficult to tell, particularly due to the oversized grey sweatpants, donated by Darius, large enough to slip easily over the new, much smaller leg brace, one pant leg cut short to expose most of the injured limb. Murata had modified the original brace to extend from mid thigh to heel, with a support on the bottom for walking, since, she had dryly observed, he did so much of it.

Edward must have known Roy was there, but didn't move as the Tramp climbed over the stacked bales to sit on the blanket beside him. The book never wavered as Roy reached a hand slowly towards him, reached closer, reached down – past Edward’s thighs to pet the dog. Ed just rolled his eyes, his attention still on the book.

“You’re in one of those moods, are you old man?” he said, unperturbed. Roy's low chuckle was coupled with a lazy smile curving his lips.

Lowering his book, Ed suspiciously eyed Roy's inscrutable smile. "What do you want? If you’re just here to be a dick, be one somewhere else. I’m reading."

Roy plucked the book out of Edward’s hands to examine the cover. The logographic script was unfamiliar, likely Nihonese. Roy flipped the book into the hay, just out of Edward’s reach; his plans did not include watching Edward read. The blond man scowled and levered himself up to go after his reading material.

"I have the afternoon off. It’s been a while since we’ve had any truly private time and such a lovely nest in which to spend it," the Tramp mused, eyeing Edward with a faint smirk as Ed scooted stiffly after his book. "I hope you’ll forgive a little teasing on my part."

The other man scowled. “That better not be some kind of reference to my perfectly normal stature, bastard. I know it’s hard to face change when you get old, but we’re the same height. You need to come up with some new material.” Edward had reached his book, but before he could put a hand on it, Roy snatched it up and tossed it farther away. Ed shot Roy a glare that could easily strip paint and rolled to reach for it once again. The little dog had had enough. She stood with a canine sigh and leaped over the hay bale ramparts, leaving the two irritating humans to their own devices.

"You’ve discovered quite the cozy hiding place," Roy said lightly, dark eyes slowly caressing Ed, lingering where his shirt had ridden up to expose a narrow band of tanned skin, then drifting down to his exquisite posterior as the young man stretched to retrieve his book. "Do you really want to read, or would you rather spend some quality time with your remarkably handsome lover?"

Ed snorted, but a proper comeback failed to materialize as Roy indulged himself by running a hand lightly down the younger man’s thigh. "I can think of several interesting ways we might pass the time."

Roy’s low tone scented the quiet of the barn like fragrant woodsmoke. Edward stilled and looked over his shoulder, smile rising, then rolled languidly onto his back. His face tilted up automatically as Roy leaned closer, and his eyes fluttered closed as his mouth was claimed in a fierce kiss, humming encouragement as Roy's tongue met his own. Strong, callused hands cupped Edward’s face briefly before gliding down to his shoulders, his chest, demanding a response. Ed’s hands found Roy's nape, fingers tightening as Roy’s thumbs circled and teased and moved on. Roy broke the kiss when Edward leaned to delve deeper.
Roy lifted his head, grinning roguishly, to whisper the word he knew Edward dreaded most to hear at a time like this. "Slowly."

Ed groaned for all the wrong reasons. "You’ve got to be kidding me," he griped.

Edward was coming to realize that he probably shouldn't have made those cracks about Roy’s age; revenge was imminent. Before he could protest in earnest however, Roy’s hands were moving again. The blond man couldn't stay still as they stroked down his sides to his hips, squirming on the edge of arousal and distress at the ticklishly light touch. The hands moved back up again, taking his shirt with them as warm palms smoothed lightly over tanned skin.

"Fuck," Ed gasped, arching up into the touch and then writhing away as clever fingers ferreted out his secret, sensitive places.

Edward’s affronted huff became an embarrassing squeak as Roy’s mouth dipped to trace fire across his chest, and the blond pulled his shirt off the rest of the way. By the time he had tossed it aside, Roy was sitting up again, hands settled coolly in his lap, watching a panting Ed clutch two fistfuls of blanket.

"But where are my manners? I wouldn’t want to intrude," Roy said mildly. "If you really want to read, then by all means, continue."

“You talk too much.”

Roy didn’t have time to react when Ed pounced, startlingly spry for a man with one leg in a brace. He managed to tackle the Tramp backward into the hay, but the stiffness of the brace evened the odds just enough for Roy to prevent himself from being pinned. With Edward balancing on his automail knee alone, the Tramp had little trouble tilting him over onto his back once again. A quick shift and Roy was comfortably straddling Edward’s midriff. Loosely holding Edward’s wrists against the hay, he leaned down until the two men were nose to nose.

"Slowly," Roy murmured against Ed’s lips, so close he could see the flecks of bronze and ocher in amber eyes alight with the same craving that burned in his own.

Ed changed tactics. Gazing seductively through lowered lashes, he craned up to tease the older man’s lips, shamelessly coaxing with his tongue and teeth. But when he tried to press closer, to deepen the kiss, Roy eased away with a gentle nibble to Ed’s lower lip and a quiet hum of satisfaction.

“What the hell, Roy?” Ed growled, tugging at the loose grip on his wrists in frustration. “Are you having trouble shifting the old transmission into drive? Quit fooling around and let’s go!”

“Oh, I’ll be driving all right,” Roy purred. “But this isn’t a race. Just think of it as a leisurely drive in the country.”

“Fuck your ‘leisurely drive’, ” Ed huffed, but didn’t get the chance to finish the thought as Roy leaned in again to nuzzle at his throat, tongue flicking over his skin.

Ed arched and tilted his head back, pressing for more than the light touches that were driving him mad. "I'm not going to beg," he warned, then his breath stuttered as Roy paused, lips hovering a hair away from flushed skin.

"No?" Roy purred, tongue flicking at the hollow of Ed's throat. "I guess we’ll see about that. We both know how much I enjoy a challenge."
Ed’s cursed response became ragged when Roy's hands stroked a meandering path down his chest and stomach, his talented mouth lightly nipping and kissing along the ridge of Ed’s collarbone. Ed couldn't quite stifle a hiss of appreciation when Roy eased back slowly so that his lips could trail farther downward, teeth and tongue teasing sensitive flesh, careful not to settle his weight on his lover’s injured leg. Edward’s hands clung to Roy’s shoulders, urging him on, fingers reflexively clutching, a gauge of his growing need, as Roy dropped a hand to the drawstring tie of Edward’s oversized sweatpants to loosen them.

Shaking hands moved to sweep the suspenders from Roy’s shoulders, but Roy gently pulled them away. He continued to torment his captive with tongue and teeth, earning a strangled moan as lips closed firmly over a nipple to suck, then just as quickly pulled away. Ed began to resist in earnest, twisting to gain the upper hand, reaching for Roy, reaching for himself, but Roy distracted him by pushing Edward’s sweats and boxers down, one hand curving around Ed’s hardness, and the blond arched up with a moan.

It felt good to be touched, but Ed craved more; Roy held him too loosely. The younger man was thrusting against nothing, a groan caught in his throat. Roy knew Edward was on the brink of begging, and he looked forward to it, though it wouldn’t do Edward any good. The Tramp continued his tease, stroking light and slow up Ed’s shaft, thumb circling the head and dragging slowly back down, slick with fluid.

"Fuck," Ed gasped, "please," his vow not to beg forgotten, and Roy purred his satisfaction.

Roy shifted, hand leaving Ed’s straining cock to slide under the waistbands of his sweats and boxers, tugging them down and off, tossing the offending garments over one shoulder. Smirking, Roy let his eyes wander the blond’s body spread naked before him, taking in the play of flexing muscle under tanned skin, the strongly masculine physique, before leaning over him again, fiercely claiming his mouth.

"Damn it," Ed growled as Roy pulled away again, "stop playing around and fuck me."

"Yes, you’d like that, wouldn’t you?" Roy murmured, pausing to explore a scar with gentle lips. "You’d like to have me deep inside, wouldn’t you? I like knowing that you want me to fuck you.” Edward moaned and tried to reach for him again, and again Roy loosely pinned his wrists to the blanket. “But I won’t. You’re injured, Edward, and you’re not going to become more injured. Not if I have anything to say about it. And right now, I do.”

Roy’s quiet words were followed by his hand wrapping around Ed’s cock and stroking lightly up and down, one hand firm on Ed’s hip to prevent him from thrusting too urgently. Ed gritted his teeth, likely to hold back any more pointless pleas, as the sensation of Roy stroking him so calmly while mapping his body with gliding tongue and nipping teeth quickly became overwhelming. Roy felt Edward trembling underneath him as he pumped him once more, twice more, and then released him once again to the younger man’s gasped protest.

"Roy," Ed moaned, "please . . . just . . . touch me . . ." Ed choked out a strangled shout as Roy gave in at last, pumping in earnest, enough to send his lover over the edge.

The Tramp watched, captivated as the man writhed on the faded blanket, coming over his hand in shuddering pulses. When he wilted at last, spent and limp, Edward opened his eyes to glare daggers at the man still poised, hovering astride his thighs, a genuine smile tilting Roy’s lips.

"You’re an asshole," Edward finally managed, still breathless.

Roy's smile only widened with something like fondness peeking out from around the edges. “I
thought I was a bastard,” he said.

“That too.” Edward drew in a few deep breaths just to catch them, wasting a steady glare on his lover. “What was up with that? Are you trying out some kind of sadistic kink? Should I frisk you for whips and chains from now on?”

Roy didn’t answer immediately; instead he leaned over and brushed a feather-light kiss across Ed’s lips, grinning at Ed’s growl. Turning his head, Roy whispered into the shell of Edward's ear.

“No. I wanted to watch you,” was Roy’s murmured response, his voice low and raw.

Roy’s mouth moved down Ed’s neck to his shoulder to leave one last playful nip, then rolled to lie beside the younger man, who stared at him, expression guarded. Roy laughed at that, a rumble deep in his chest. Edward turned to rest his head on Roy’s shoulder, laying a hand on the older man’s chest.

It shouldn’t have surprised Roy that Edward still had not given up on his own agenda; he never gave up, not for long. Fingers drew gentle circles over the Tramp's chest, innocent at first, then tracing lower, lower, undaunted. The metal clasps that held suspenders to trousers were loosed, short work was made of the button and zip, and Roy was palmed and stroked with a firm, confident hand. It did not take much encouragement for Roy to lift enough for his pants to be slid down around his thighs. They trapped his legs when Edward rolled on top, kissing slowly down from Roy’s navel, elbows braced on the faded blanket. Hot breath paused over a straining erection.

“You want to watch? Watch this,” Edward murmured, and Roy cupped the back of Edward's head, fingers tangling in gleaming gold as Edward swallowed him down.

Propped up on an elbow, legs trapped, Roy could do nothing but watch, taking in the light flush across high cheekbones, golden strands stuck to a forehead sheened with sweat, the burn of lust in amber eyes, the mouth full, cheeks hollowed. Edward was fully absorbed in the task at hand, deep-throating the Tramp in long, slow measure, swallowing him down, then pulling back. It took all of Roy’s considerable willpower to keep his hand gentle in his lover’s hair when all he wanted was to hold Edward's head still and fuck his mouth.

And damn, Edward was good at this. His eyes never left Roy’s, he never broke his rhythm. His mouth was so hot, so good, and his tongue, holy hell what he did with his tongue . . . “Ed,” Roy groaned as the pressure built to the breaking point. “Ed, I’m, I need to . . .”

Edward let Roy slide out, and the older man moaned lowly, bereft.

“Show’s over. Come on,” Edward panted.

Roy pressed the head of his cock against Edward’s slick lips and Edward opened his mouth, hands gripping Roy’s hips. Trying his hardest to be careful, Roy lay back and fucked up into his mouth, over and over, hands cradling Edward’s head, Edward’s hands clutched tight to his hips.

It was too good to last. In blinding white light, Roy tipped over the edge. He curled forward, hands tight in Edward’s hair to hold him still as he came.

Edward groaned as Roy finally released him, sliding out of his slack jaws. Breathing hard, Edward wiped at his mouth with the back of his hand, smearing some of the milky spend that had leaked from his lips. Roy leaned forward and tilted Edward's head up. Their eyes met. Edward put his hand on Roy’s wrist, and the older man felt something flutter in his chest, something warm and bright that wanted to fly, Roy had no idea what. Then the moment passed, and the pair relaxed into a panting
tangle of limbs, hands stroking lazily over flushed skin, breaths gradually slowing.

They stayed that way for some time, comfortable together in the warm sunshine slanting into their nest. Edward was so still Roy thought he might have fallen asleep on his arm, but a glance proved him wrong. The younger man’s half hooded eyes were unfocused, lost in thought. Roy mapped lazy fingers over his lover’s back, lingering on the scar that matched another on his midriff.

“You have an amazing collection of souvenirs from your time in the military,” he noted casually.

“So do you,” Ed countered with a shrug.

“Each one must have an interesting story to tell,” Roy continued.

“Not really,” Edward said with a yawn, idly scratching his hip. “They’re just a boring record of miscalculations, stupid mistakes, and pure bad luck.”

“You’re too modest,” Roy returned. His thumb drew a lazy circle on the irregular patch of pale skin that itched at his curiosity, then fingers curled around to caress its match on Edward’s back. “Tell me about this one.”

Edward propped himself up to pin the Tramp with a molten amber glare. “Okay. Who dropped the bomb; Mr. Gorilla or the Lion Man?”

“Both.” Roy saw no reason to be evasive.

“What did they tell you?” Edward asked stiffly.

“Nothing, really. They mentioned impalement, and something about using yourself as a red stone.”

Edward flopped back down on his back. “That’s sounds about right. End of story.”

“End of story?” Roy said, incredulous. “You used yourself, your life, the energy of your soul, to . . . what? Heal a wound?”

“To survive, Mustang,” the younger man clarified. “I wouldn’t be here right now if I hadn’t.”

“And what did it cost you?” Roy asked, almost afraid to know the answer. Was he about to find out the reason for the darkness he sometimes saw behind Edward’s smile?

“About twenty percent, by Tim Marcoh’s estimate.”

“Twenty percent?” Roy frowned. “Of what?”

“My life. No big deal.”

“No big deal?”

“Not like I had a choice. Give up some of my life, or lose it all right there.” Edward shrugged again, unconcerned. “It worked out.”

Roy rolled this information over in his reeling mind. “What does that mean, twenty percent? How long do you have?” Dread coiled in his chest.

“I don’t know; how long do you have?”

Roy got his point. “I suppose I have twenty percent longer than you,” he said slowly.
“Not exactly,” Edward said. “A year of your life is twelve months. My clock ticks a little faster, so twelve months for me is more like fourteen. I’m catching up to you, that’s all.” The currently younger man did a quick calculation in his head and grinned. “We’ll both be one hundred and seven years old at the same time.”

Roy couldn’t find a suitable response to that.

“Does Alphonse know about this?” he finally asked.

“Al doesn’t need to know.” Edward waited for Roy’s nod of agreement before he relaxed once again at Roy’s side.

“You went to Doctor Marcoh,” Roy probed.

“Well, he’s the go-to guy for this shit, isn’t he?” Ed said, tracing geometric patterns over Roy’s abs. “The Crystal Alchemist. He’s made stones; he’s used them. I figured he might be able to work out how much I spent if anyone could. Plus, he’s an old friend.”

In other words, someone Edward trusted. Was it irrational for Roy to feel a bit miffed that it seemed he wasn’t? Perhaps. After all, Edward hadn’t revealed any of this to Alphonse either. Of course, the reason Ed hadn’t told Al was to keep his younger brother from worrying. Why did he seem so annoyed that Roy had discovered this secret?

“Who else knows about this?” Roy couldn’t resist asking.

For a moment he didn’t think Edward would answer. Then he said, “Darius, Henkel, and Ling. Doctor Marcoh. And you.”

“No. I told him about it.”

“Why?”

Roy felt Edward shrug against his shoulder. “He’s my friend.”

“So am I.”

“Yeah, but you’re an asshole.”

“You’re a bigger one.”

“Hah!” Ed crowed, triumphant. “You finally admit that I’m bigger!”

Roy put a weary hand over his eyes. One hundred and seven? With any more shocking disclosures like this one, Roy would count himself lucky to see forty.

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Three days later the Mauser Brothers Circus and Wild Animal Show could be found setting up in a level meadow just a short way up the road from the village of Otuxia, two miles from the Amestrian border. Nestled into the far end of the valley close to its eastern ridge, the site was joined to the town
by a rutted dirt road sheltered by ancient oaks and maples. The big top was up, as were the smaller marquees, and the circus folk were drifting out of the cookshack after a hearty lunch provided by their talented Hindustani cook, recharged to complete the setup.

The day was fine, and Roy followed his colleagues out into the noonday sun toward their usual after-meal lounging place by the menagerie, hoping that the two resident chimeras would be there. Darius and Henkel had left to scout the terrain after the circus caravan had arrived at their new location the previous evening, and the Tramp was eager to find out what they had discovered about the two mile barrier that stood between Roy and his homeland. The nature of the landscape meant the difference between Roy setting foot on Amestrian soil tomorrow morning, or having to wait another week and a half to do so.

Truth be told, Roy was beyond anxious to return. It had been nearly a month since the train wreck. If he had made it to the Cretian capital as planned, he would likely have successfully completed negotiating the trade agreement and been back in Central by now. Instead, here he was, still in Creta, hiding incognito as a performer in a travelling show, and as pleasant an interlude as it was, he couldn’t afford for it to go on much longer. He had too much to do, and resented having to spend any more time than necessary out of touch and away from his responsibilities.

Rounding the big top, Roy was pleased to see the two chimeras leaning up against the corral, relaxing with Nikita as the clown troupe approached. Darius waved them over with a wide, simian grin.

“We’ve already reported to Matthew,” the gorilla man stated quietly. “It’s a go.”

The elation Roy felt was so intense it must certainly have shown on his face, though he hoped the greasepaint masked the full extent. He didn’t want the circus folk to think he couldn’t wait to be clear of them. Quite the contrary. He counted this inimitable collection of individuals as friends, and would likely think back on his time with them warmly for the rest of his days.

Bossy wasn’t fazed by the Tramp’s obvious jubilation in the least. He clapped a hand on Roy’s shoulder and grinned. “Looks like you’re going home, Trampy,” he said, and the rest of the clowns nodded solemnly. “Roofus is going to miss ya.”

“I’m gonna miss ya,” Lock told Roy, to which the others again nodded their agreement.

“I’ll tell my kids about you,” Stock promised. “You know, when I get some.” Eyes were rolled, for old time’s sake.

“The truck’s gonna seem too big without ya,” Barrel lamented. Heads bobbed once more.

“It was good to serve with you,” Yoki said, right hand twitching from the repressed urge to salute. “You were a damn fine clown.”

Nikita took a long, slow draw from her kiseru pipe. “I will also miss you,” she said. “It has been good to have someone to help with the horses, someone who respects and understand them.”

“I’m going to miss all of you, too,” Roy said. “This has been an amazing experience, but I have . . . obligations, and I have to get back to meet them. I’ve been away far too long.”

Darius dropped his smoke to the ground and crushed it out. “Come on then,” he said to Roy. “We’re meeting with Merrill in the red wagon to firm up the details.” The gorilla man pushed off the fence, Henkel following his lead.

Roy followed as well, and the trio threaded a path through the circus folk putting the finishing
touches on the grounds and the scattering of curious locals who had shown up to watch the circus rise up out of the meadow. They met an uncharacteristically sombre Merrill on the midway, and made their way toward the Mauser’s bandwagon as a group.

“Did you tell him yet?” Merrill asked quietly as they walked.

Henkel took as quick look at Roy and grimaced. “No.”

Roy stopped, glanced at the two chimeras, then fixed his attention on Merrill. “Tell me what?”

Merrill sighed. “Edward won’t be going with you.”

Roy waited for the explanation. He had wondered why this meeting wasn’t taking place in Murata’s wagon, as was their usual practice in order to include the blond man. Edward probably hadn’t been informed of this late development, for a very good reason. He was bound to object to being left behind.

“The terrain is very rugged. It won’t be a cakewalk, particularly at night, but I’m certain the three of us can do it,” Henkel explained. “Unfortunately, it would be far too dangerous to attempt while carrying an injured man.”

Roy nodded, feeling some of his excitement wane. Edward was going to be disappointed, but Roy couldn’t pass up this opportunity to at last set foot on home soil. “I take it you haven’t told him yet.”

“No.” The look Darius shot Roy was sheepish. “We were kind of hoping that you would do the honors.”

The sudden, sharp sound of a slap along with an outraged shout turned the head of everyone on the lot. Roy spun to see Tula desperately struggling to pull her wrists free from the large local man who gripped them.

“Hey Rube!” Merrill roared as his pony shot across the midway, Roy, Darius, and Henkel hot on his heels.

They weren’t the only ones to rush to Tula’s aid. Every member of the Mauser’s company within earshot of Merrill’s shout, a rallying call used by circus folk in confrontation with outsiders, hurried to the scene. In moments the local man and his struggling captive were surrounded. Very wisely, the man released the girl’s wrists and raised his hands in surrender, though not with any indication of apology, as Tula was pulled to Henkel’s side.

“What’s a guy got to do to get laid around here,” the yokel said, thin lips twisted into a smirk under his reddening cheek, accent heavily Cretian.

Roy took in the man’s shaved head, his thick, muscular body in too-tight clothing. His carriage was firm but relaxed, a fighter’s stance. Pale gray eyes narrow with calculation, he did not seem worried at all to be surrounded by a glowering crowd of strangers. If anything, he appeared to be amused.

Merrill had manoeuvred his pony between Tula and her assailant. “We don’t have coochie girls here,” he stated briskly. “Ours is a strictly Sunday school operation. You’ll have to look elsewhere for that kind of entertainment.”

“Look elsewhere?” the man laughed. “You are elsewhere, and you have brought the kind of entertainment I enjoy the most.” He leered at Tula, who glared back undaunted with her extended family beside her.
Bossy arrived on the scene, pushing his way through the crowd to stand next to his daughter. He placed a hand on her shoulder and added his glare to hers.

“What’s your problem, friend?” the local man asked, all innocence. “She your property? Would you like to sell her to me for a time?”

“This is my daughter, friend,” Bossy growled, teeth clenched.

“Oh.” The local’s grin was nasty. “So this is what comes from fucking around with one of those red-eyed Ishbalan devils: a miserable little half-breeder that doesn’t know enough to be grateful for the attention it’s given.”

Before Bossy or anyone else could respond, verbally or physically, the local man was suddenly hoisted up into the air. He hung by the back of his shirt collar from a skeletal fist. Clutching at his collar, the man kicked without success at the tall, gaunt giant who had hauled him up so easily. Ishapore held him well away; the flailing kicks failed to reach him. The Hindustani gave the struggling man a vigorous shake, flopping him about like a rag doll, which immediately stopped his futile kicking.

“You must leave here now,” Ishapore said gravely. “You are not welcome. Do not return. This is your only warning.”

“You’re not from around here; you don’t know who I am,” the man rasped, dangling motionless in Ishapore’s grip.

“I don’t care who you are,” Merrill said with deadly intensity. “This child is not interested in your advances, and no one here is for sale.”

Mauser made a sweeping gesture with his hand, and a path opened through the angry crowd. Ishapore set the local man on his feet, and pushed him firmly toward his exit. The man took it without a backward glance. He was off the grounds in moments; hostile eyes followed him to the tree shaded road, out of sight.

Merrill turned to Tula. “Are you alright?”

“Course I am,” she answered dully. “Take more than that to get my goat.”

No one was buying it. “Of course, my dear,” Merrill said cheerfully. “Just to set my mind at ease, would you please go have a lie down in your wagon for a little while? Take your abbi and a pup or two along for company.”

Tula shrugged and trudged away, but before Bossy could follow, Merrill caught his sleeve and leaned in close to say, “Someone stays with her at all times. She will not be performing tonight.”

Bossy nodded, expression grim, and hurried after his daughter.

The assembled company watched father and daughter walk away.

“Now what, chief?” Spider Webley asked, frowning. “Are we sticking to routine and heading into town this afternoon for a taste of the local gossip?”

Roy watched Mauser mull it over, and hoped he would decide against that course of action. The local man had been too calm about the way events had unfolded in the circus troupe’s favor, and the few other locals who had been wandering around the lot had immediately vanished when the trouble started. That gave Roy a bad feeling.
Apparently, Merrill had that feeling as well. “No. I think we’ll sit tight for the time being,” he said. “Stay on the alert for anything suspicious. Spread the word.”

The circus folk moved away, murmuring quietly to each other as they went back to whatever they had been doing before the unsettling altercation interrupted. Merrill steered his pony back in the direction of the red wagon, beckoning Roy and the two chimeras to follow. They did not manage a dozen steps before a very agitated Murata rushed over to intercept them.

“You must come with me to my wagon right now,” she said tersely, taking Merrill and Roy by the arm and pulling them in that direction before they could respond. “Tell me what just happened.”

Confused, Merrill told her about the confrontation with the local man as Murata tugged them urgently along, Darius and Henkel exchanging puzzled glances as they followed close behind. The alkahestris’ bandwagon was generally parked as far from the midway as possible so that patients in the infirmary would not be disturbed by noisy circus patrons. That meant it was too far away from where the conflict had taken place for the woman to have heard Merrill’s call to arms. Roy had a very good idea how Murata knew something distressing had happened, but the emergency was over, wasn’t it? Why was the woman so frantic? Roy quickened his pace.

Reaching the wagon, Murata bound up the three short steps and slammed open the door, Roy right behind her. Edward was half way to the exit, face grim, peering past the Nihonese woman. He spotted his lover and huffed a relieved breath.

“He’s starting a fire!” the blond man barked without preamble. “Behind the big top, about ten yards to the south!” Edward pointed the direction.

Roy didn’t waste time asking questions. He shoved past Darius and Henkel, who wheeled around to race after him. The big top loomed just ahead, and the Tramp angled to the side. He clapped his hands together as he charged around to the far side of the huge tent, scanning the tall grass of the meadow for any sign of his prey.

There. A small curl of smoke rose from a point not thirty feet in, hanging lazily in the still air. Roy ground his heels in to stop.

“Over there!” He pointed, then slapped a hand to the thick canvas of the tent as Darius and Henkel thundered past him, transforming as they converged on the would-be arsonist.

The local man sprang up from the cover of the tall grass and ran, flinging a flaming branch behind him. It was immediately extinguished as it passed through the subtly transmuted barrier of oxygen-depleted air between the enemy and the big top, bouncing harmlessly off the canvas. The lion and gorilla chased furiously after the man while Roy picked up the smoking stick and moved to investigate the thickening spiral of smoke in the field. He found a small fire rapidly gaining ground in the dry grass, advancing toward the big top. Another surreptitious clap quickly smothered both the grass fire and the smoldering branch.

Relieved that he had been able to prevent a fiery disaster, Roy peered in the direction that the local man had fled. Neither the chimeras nor their quarry were in sight. He took a few necessary moments to ensure that every last ember was black and dead. No one knew better than the Flame Alchemist just how dangerous even the smallest spark could prove given the right fuel to nurture it, and a field of dry, late summer hay waiting to be mowed, with a large construction of oiled canvas stationed alongside it, would be quite the nurturing environment indeed. Pausing a moment more to kick loose soil over the charred ground for good measure, Roy hurried back to the midway.

Merrill and Murata, along with Mathew and quite a few anxious circus folk met him as he rounded
the big tent.

“It’s out,” he told them. “Darius and Henkel are chasing him down.”

The brothers exchanged a glance, and the Ringmaster nodded.

“Spread the word,” Matthew raised his voice for all to hear. “The tent is coming down. We’re getting out of here as quickly as possible.”

Merrill clapped a hand to Roy’s shoulder. “You have my thanks for seeing to the fire, but my apologies as well,” he said quietly. “I’m afraid you’ll be stuck with us for a little while longer, my good Tramp.”

“No apologies are necessary,” Roy assured him, relieved that the Mausers appeared to sense the same ominous air that he did, and had decided to cut their losses and leave. “And your gratitude is misplaced. I’m the reason we’re here; you’re all in danger thanks to me.”

“Nonsense.” Merrill’s level glare brooked no argument. “The decision to come here was always mine and Matt’s. You are not to blame.”

Roy grimaced, unconvinced. “I just hope we can get safely away before something else happens.” Something worse, he thought, but did not say out loud.

Merrill hummed his agreement, and Roy went to take part in the enormous task of packing everything of value back into the bandwagons.

Even though the company had not completely finished the setup, taking it all back down was still a huge undertaking, and disheartening as well since they had nothing whatsoever to show for their efforts. The possibility of another attack hung in the air, and the circus folk worked with grim determination instead of the cheerful camaraderie to which Roy had become so accustomed. He felt the slow churn of guilt as he worked with his comrades to clear the site with due haste. Regardless of what Merrill had stated, Roy knew that he was the cause of the Mauser’s current misfortune. If not for Roy, they would have had no reason to come to this place. The Tramp hoped that a wasted day of backbreaking labor was the only consequence they were forced to endure for this ill-fated venture, but he couldn’t shake off a growing sense of apprehension.

They all worked with single-minded purpose. The sections of the ring were pulled apart and packed into their allotted wagon. The bleachers were dismantled and loaded up for transport as well, as were the many other odds and ends required to put on a show of this scale. The horses were made ready to be hitched to the wagons as soon as the big top was lowered. The Mauser’s company had the entire process choreographed so efficiently it could almost be done without conscious thought, but it was still a big job.

Too big, unfortunately, to be done quickly.

 Barely an hour after they had disappeared chasing the local thug, Darius and Henkel returned. They burst out of the meadow’s tall grass and drew up short, surprised at the sight of their fellows feverishly pulling down what they had scarcely finished putting up. They scanned the bustle of activity, and upon spotting Matthew directing the crew packing up the sideshow marquee, ran over to him.

The circus folk paused in their labours to gather around the returning hunters and Roy joined them, anxious to hear what the two chimeras had to report. Tension was thick in the air.

“The guy was fast; we chased him all the way to town,” Darius started.
“When we got close, we changed into our human forms so we wouldn’t cause too big a stir,” Henkel cut in.

“Didn’t matter,” Darius continued. “The asshole ran up the middle of the road and straight into the police station. Gave us a great, big, shit-eating grin over his shoulder as he disappeared into the shabby little storefront shithole. That stopped us. We talked it over and agreed that going into that hick copshop felt all kinds of wrong, so we decided to hightail it back here instead.”

“The situation isn’t normal,” Henkel added. “By and large, you’d expect people to come to the assistance of someone they know being chased by two big strangers. That didn’t happen. As soon as our runner hit the main street with the two of us right behind him, every single townie disappeared. They took one look and scattered like rats. From the reaction of the town’s people and what the guy said about how we don’t know who he is, I suspect he’s probably someone we need to worry about.”

“Not for much longer, hopefully,” Matthew said tersely. “The sooner we’re packed up the better.” He raised his voice to all. “Get back to work. We have to clear out as quickly as possible.”

Roy wondered if Matthew really believed they could make their exit without further incident, given that the only road out of the valley passed directly through the town. The thought had barely crossed his mind when he saw Murata rush over to the ringmaster, expression bleak. Her words were punctuated with a gesture towards the road. He answered her, a hand briefly placed on her shoulder, and the woman hurried away.

Matthew strode over to Roy, waving Henkel over as well.

“It looks like things are about to get nasty,” he said grimly. “Edward told Murata that there is a party of about twenty townspeople coming this way, and he believes some of them are armed. I want the two of you to grab the packs we have prepared and head east over the ridge. Make for the frontier as quickly as possible, and don’t look back.”

The lion man nodded. Roy did not. He reached into his pocket, the cool weight of Ganzer’s lighter slipping into his palm. There was no question about it. He would not allow the Mausers and their company to come to harm, not when he had the means to protect them. These people had welcomed him, sheltered him. He would not abandon them. And what of Edward? No. If the locals assumed that the circus folk would be easily bullied, they were about to find out just how badly mistaken that assumption was.

“I’m not leaving,” Roy stated bluntly.

Roy’s declaration left Matthew momentarily speechless, but he quickly recovered. “. . . what? Oh course you are!” he returned with an angry scowl.

“Not a chance.” Roy easily met that affronted glare. “If it’s a fight the townsfolk want, I’ll be more than happy to provide one.”

“And if you do, you’ll blow your cover, and ours,” Matthew snapped.

“Too hell with your cover,” Roy said coldly, folding his arms across his chest. “I’m not leaving. You and your company are no match for a gang of armed thugs looking for easy prey.”

“We’ve dealt with these situations before, and we’re very good at reasoning with irate locals,” Matthew insisted, his tone reassuring while Henkel nodded curtly in confirmation. “We’re perfectly capable of finding a way to solve this. Getting you out of harm’s way is just a precaution. There’s no
need for the Führer of Amestris to worry about us. We can look after ourselves.”

“In that case, there’s no reason for me to leave,” Roy said resolutely. “I won’t act except as a last resort, but if the need arises, I will act. I’m your secret weapon, whether you like it or not.”

Matthew looked as if he was going to blow a blood vessel, clearly not accustomed to having his orders questioned, let alone completely rejected. The Ringmaster stared hard at Roy, thinking furiously, searching for some whip crack argument that would result in Roy’s stubborn ass disappearing over the ridge and out of immediate danger. The Flame Alchemist’s lips curled into a challenging smirk, unwavering in his decision to keep his stubborn ass right where it was, poised to char any contrary argument to ash.

“Fine,” Matthew conceded at last. “Just give us a chance to defuse this peacefully.”

“Of course,” Roy responded. “This is your show; however, if they raise a single weapon against us, I will reduce it to slag without hesitation.”

The ringmaster did not look pleased with the prospect, but wisely kept his futile objections to himself. He turned to Henkel.

“Get Darius, Tula, and Bossy, and take them to Murata’s wagon,” he instructed. “Our visitors will probably be looking for you as well as our dog trainer. Since it appears that Edward has some way of knowing what is going on around us, he can give you some warning if you need to mount a defence. Stay inside, out of sight.”

With a reluctant nod Henkel left to follow his orders.

“As for you,” Mauser said disdainfully to Roy, “Don’t jump the gun. Give me every chance to talk them down. I’m not ready to retire just yet.”

With a final glare at the Tramp, Matthew moved towards the road to meet the brigade of townspeople soon to arrive.

He did not have long to wait.

Roy heard the murmur of voices and the trudge of booted feet well before the mob came into view, strolling casually out from under the trees. Some carried simple farm implements: grain flails, pitchforks, hand sickles, hay knives. A few carried long guns under their arms, pointed safely at the dirt trail. Far from appearing angry, a distinctly festive air surrounded them. In the lead strode the local thug who had attempted to set the big top aflame, grinning widely. His smile widened even further to see the circus preparing to leave and Matthew standing to meet them. He turned to speak to the rotund man in a rumpled uniform walking beside him, obviously a local law enforcement official. Both men laughed loudly, without a hint of good nature.

As the group drew near, the circus folk again quietly gathered around their ringmaster, Merrill moving beside his brother. The Mauser’s company outnumbered the approaching townspeople, but without weapons were at a clear disadvantage. They stood behind Matthew all the same, men and women both, the Tramp among them.

“A good day to you!” the fat sheriff called cheerfully in flawless Amestrian as he walked up to Matthew. “A citizen of my humble precinct has filed several complaints against a few of your employees. I am here to take them into custody.”

“I’m glad you’re here,” Matthew responded. “I would like to file a complaint of my own, against that man.” He pointed to the smirking thug.
“Oh?” The sheriff looked to his indicated fellow, whose grin threatened to split his face in two. “This is my deputy. He is beyond reproach. What complaint do you make against him?”

“Accosting a minor, and attempted arson.”

The lawman rubbed his chin in mock contemplation. “Serious allegations indeed,” he said. “I suspect these claims are an effort to cover the fact that the minor in question propositioned my deputy, and then tried to pick his pocket. As for the accusation of trying to burn down your tent,” the man shrugged, “more misdirection from a group of travelling criminals.”

“Who mentioned our tent?” Matthew asked.

The sheriff shrugged. “No one. It is of no consequence.” He looked around at the gathered circus folk and then back to his deputy.

“That’s one of them,” the thug said, pointing to Ishapore. “He assaulted me when I tried to arrest the thieving little Ishbalan whore.”

“My man came to the defence of the child your man was attempting to molest,” Matthew clarified.

“There are two others,” the sheriff cut in as if the ringmaster had not spoken. “A lion man and an ape. They attempted to assault my deputy as well. He was forced to run for his life.”

“Those men are my security team,” Matthew stated. “They discovered your man trying to set fire to our main tent, luckily before he could do any harm. They attempted to capture him so that we could press charges.”

The sheriff waved a hand idly, dismissing the claim. “I will take the girl and the three men into custody.”

“It appears that we are at an impasse,” Matthew said carefully. “I’m sure you understand why I hesitate to turn my people over to you. Judging from your refusal to entertain the idea that your deputy was the instigator in this conflict, I suspect that they will not be treated fairly, particularly the child. Under Cretian national law, underage children are strictly forbidden from being locked up in police detention. They are generally remanded into the custody of parents or guardians to await trial.”

“We aren’t in the capital. Here we do things a little differently, and aren’t inclined to coddle those who break the law, regardless of their tender age.” The fat man gestured to the mob behind him. “I would prefer to do this peacefully, but I will not be denied. We are fully prepared to take the accused by force. Turn over your people immediately. If you continue to resist, I will take you all into custody, and confiscate your holdings as well.” He smiled with satisfaction. “I await your decision.”

Matthew face fell, and Roy could tell by the set of his shoulders that he had realized there would be no reasoning with the sheriff. This wasn’t about some imagined crime alleged by a rejected local as petty revenge; this was a setup, and there was far more at stake. The greedy sheriff would take Tula, Darius, Henkel, and Ishapore into custody regardless, but his real target was the circus itself: the horses, the wagons, all the circus folk’s possessions - everything. The Tramp edged closer to the front of the crowd, pressing his palms together before slipping the lighter out of his pocket.

The sharp crack of a sudden, single gunshot split the air to echo its way down the valley causing everyone to freeze, townie and carnie alike. It had not been fired by any of the armed townspeople; they looked even more startled than the circus folk. Standing shock still clutching their weapons, they stared behind the Mausers’ gathered company in stunned silence. Roy turned to discover the reason:
a company of footsoldiers was swarming over the nearby ridge, their uniforms the distinctive mustard and crimson of the Cretian Union’s national armed forces.

The sheriff was not at all perturbed. “Ah, our cavalry arrives,” he said jovially.

The Mausers said nothing, their company standing grimly at ease as the soldiers assembled efficiently around the two conflicted groups.

A tall, barrel-chested man, some ten years Roy’s senior, marched with his second into the no man’s land between the two groups, the double bars of a field captain gleaming silver from his shoulders. His brow briefly furrowed at the sight of Merrill astride his little pony, and then if Roy was not mistaken, his muddy brown eyes briefly widened, as if in recognition. The Cretian Captain scanned the gathered circus folk for a moment, and then turned to address the Mauser brothers and the sheriff.

“What is the trouble here?” he asked without bothering to introduce himself. His authority was obvious.

“There is no trouble,” the fat sheriff said with a reassuring smile. “We are just preparing to arrest a pack of travelling thieves.”

“We are no such thing,” Matthew protested. “The sheriff’s deputy has accused some members of my company of crimes they did not commit, while in fact he has attempted to commit grave crimes against us.”

“These people are nothing more than thieves, brigands, and procurers,” the sheriff asserted. “They have disturbed the peace of our quiet community, and now have refused to deliver into my custody the persons who accosted and then assaulted my deputy. They are forcing me to arrest the lot of them and confiscate their property.”

The Captain’s eyes narrowed as he turned to hear Matthew’s response.

“One of the so called criminals this man wants us to hand over is a child,” the ringmaster stated. “A child who that man,” he pointed to the smirking thug, “the sheriff’s deputy, attempted to molest.”

“An outrageous claim,” the sheriff declared. “My deputy is a man of exemplary moral character. Their charge is clearly a ploy to excuse the charges he has made against them.”

The Cretian commander rubbed his chin thoughtfully, carefully appraising both parties. Finally he spoke. “Bring the suspects before me,” the officer ordered. “They have the right to face their accusers and refute their claims.”

Matthew kept his face carefully blank, but Roy knew he was reluctant to follow that order. The Cretian officer apparently understood the ringmaster’s hesitation as well.

“Do not be concerned for the child,” he said. “Children have no need to fear me, guilty or not.”

Matthew took careful measure of the man, then nodded and gestured for Nikita to fetch their colleagues from Murata’s bandwagon. She hurried away, and in no time returned with Darius, Henkel, Bossy, and Tula. They stood calmly beside Matthew and Merrill, Bossy with a comforting hand on Tula’s shoulder, as Ishapore moved to join them.

The Cretian Captain’s eyes had locked on Bossy as soon as he came into view, examining the Boss clown evenly and at length. Then, with a slight nod, he turned back to the local lawman with a raised
“Your deputy also stands accused; he must come before me as well,” the Captain said. “If he has witnesses to support his claims, I will hear them.”

The self satisfied smile dropped from the fat sheriff’s face. He had plainly expected the Cretian military officer to take his side without question; the proposed impartial assessment of the situation was an unwelcome surprise.

“You would question my deputy’s character?” he sputtered.

“You would question my authority to do so?” the Captain asked mildly, and without a word of command, his entire company suddenly snapped to attention and presented arms. Roy had to admit he was duly impressed.

So were the townspeople, but in an entirely different way. Their winning hand wasn’t such a sure thing anymore, and as he returned the lighter to his pocket, the Tramp noticed more than one of the locals glancing nervously around at the troopers that surrounded them. The sheriff fumed as the Captain motioned for his deputy to come forward. The local man shuffled up to stand stiffly beside his superior, the smirk wiped off his face at last.

“I will hear what happened,” the Captain declared, looking at Tula. “We will start with you.”

Tula leveled a finger to point out her attacker. “That guy got fresh with me. He tried to touch me, so I smacked him,” she said. “Then he tried to hurt me, but my friends wouldn’t let him.”

“The little slut propositioned me, but I refused her,” the local thug lied easily. “Then I caught her hand in my pocket, trying to take my wallet. When I tried to arrest her, her friends attacked me. That one,” he pointed to Ishapore, “and those two,” he indicated Darius and Henkel. “They’re monsters. They turned into wild animals and chased me all the way into town. I’m lucky to be alive.”

“I put my hands on this man to convince him to leave the grounds,” Ishapore said solemnly. “I picked him up by his collar and shook him to catch his attention, then I set him on the ground and urged him to leave and not return. I did not harm him.”

“We caught this man starting a fire behind our big top a few minutes after he was driven away,” Darius stated, once again pointing out the same culprit. “We chased him with the intention of capturing and taking him to the proper authorities to press charges, but he escaped.”

Henkel confirmed his partner’s account with a nod.

“If you like, I can show you where he started the fire,” Merrill offered. “We were fortunately able to put it out before it could destroy our property.”

The Cretian Captain’s eyes returned to Bossy. “How are you involved?” he asked briskly.

“This is my daughter,” Bossy stated, just as brusque. “She is twelve years old, and neither a whore nor a thief.”

The officer nodded slowly. Then he barked a command to a nearby solder, who snapped a sharp salute and moved to stand at Merrill’s shoulder.

“Show this man to the place where the fire was set,” the Captain directed the younger Mauser.

As Merrill turned his pony toward the big top, the fat sheriff sputtered an irate protest in Cretian, his
face almost purple with outrage.

The Captain answered him in Amestrian. “I don’t believe these people would foolishly risk their property just to rig evidence against your deputy on the slim chance that an unbiased party, such as myself, might happen by,” he said dryly.

The sheriff was livid. “You would take the side of foreigners above your own countrymen?” he snarled, voice choked with rage.

The Cretian officer leaned in so close to the sheriff’s reddened face that the fat man was forced to take a step back. “I take the side of justice and honor, always. That is my duty. As a soldier, as an officer, and as a man of Creta,” he said coldly. “I will check evidence, weigh facts, and then I will decide for myself what is true and what is false.”

The sheriff backed away with crossed arms, glaring sullenly at the Captain, his gang of hooligans shifting uncertainly behind him. Merrill and his witness quickly returned. The soldier gave his commander a brief report before he was dismissed back to his position.

“A fire was started,” the Captain said, staring at the accused arsonist. “What have you to say in your defence?”

“I didn’t do it,” the man insisted venomously. “They have no proof.”

“True. Just as you have no proof that these people attacked you without cause.” The officer gazed steadily at the glaring thug until the local man dropped his eyes, then turned to address Matthew and the sheriff. “It is the Amestrians’ word against the word of the deputy, and though I have my suspicions as to who instigated this conflict,” he gave the sheriff a long, appraising look, “I prefer to give all parties the benefit of the doubt. This touring company is preparing to leave; I am inclined to allow them to do so. That will defuse the situation to my satisfaction.”

The sheriff’s lips twisted with disgust, but he said nothing as Matthew dipped a short bow to the Captain.

“I accept your verdict and your solution with thanks,” Matthew said graciously. “If I might make a small request, we would appreciate it very much if you and your command stayed to escort us safely out of the valley.”

“I have every intention of doing so,” the Cretian commander assured him. “A small enough courtesy, in the interest of good international relations.”

The fat lawman stalked away muttering, and the Captain’s eyes once again came to rest on Bossy.

“Hey there, Tula-girl,” the Boss clown said, eyes on the Cretian officer as well. “Why don’t you head over to our wagon for a rest? I think -”

“I want to go back to Murata-san’s wagon,” the girls said. “I want to tell her patient what happened. He’s worried.”

“Oh. Okay.” Bossy shrugged, giving her shoulder an affectionate pat. “I’ll see you in a bit.”

With a shout from Matthew, the circus folk began to move away, back to the task of preparing for the road. The ringmaster hurried off as well, leaving his brother and Bossy with the Cretian Captain. Roy lingered, reluctant to leave, and he wasn’t the only one. He hung back with the other clowns, curious to discover how the Cretian commander knew their Boss.
“Your girl, she is very serious.” The Captain casually observed. “She stood up to her accusers without fear, and with great dignity.”

“Yes. Thank you,” Bossy said, cautiously.

“I think you do not remember me,” the officer said, though he did not appear offended.

“I’m sorry, but no, I don’t,” Bossy said apologetically.

“No matter. I remember you.” The man gestured to his second, and the Lieutenant led his squad to confiscate tools and weapons before dispersing the protesting townsfolk back toward the town. “We met three years ago, in the Capital. Your company came to perform at the children’s hospital.”

Bossy nodded. “Yes, that I remember, but . . .” he shrugged.

The Cretian Lieutenant turned to Merrill. “My youngest niece was a patient, my sister’s treasure, just eight years old,” he continued. “She was gravely ill. This one,” the officer gestured to Bossy, “came to her free of pity, and she forgot for a while that she was not long for this world. That was the last time I saw the wonder of her smile, heard the sweet song of her laughter. She passed easily that evening in peaceful slumber, our precious angel. It is surely by divine providence that I was assigned to search this area for your missing Führer. I am pleased that I was here to assist you, because I know a gang of bullies when I see one, and because I know my angel is watching.” He bowed deeply to Bossy, and walked away to have words with the disgruntled sheriff.

“Told ya clowns were cool,” Bossy said quietly, smirking at the Tramp as he and the other clowns gathered around.

“I never doubted it,” Roy said, smiling. “It’s rather obvious, after all.”

The boss clown posed heroically for a moment, then gave Barrel a friendly slap on the back hard enough to almost bowl him over. He winked at Merrill, who winked back.

“Okay, that’s enough farting around,” Bossy said. “Back to work. We need to get this show on the road.” He turned to Roy. “You, Merrill, and me, Trampy. To Murata’s wagon. We need to talk blondie into hiding out in the possum belly.”

“I’m happy to help,” Roy magnanimously allowed as he followed the briskly walking clown, Merrill close on his heels, “but first I need to know what a ‘possum belly’ is.”

The Boss sucked his teeth with rolling eyes. “Desk jockeys don’t know nothing,” he announced, and Roy only just refrained from pointing out the implications of the double negative. Bossy paused to poke an indicating finger towards the underneath of a bandwagon as they passed. “See that storage box built into the underside of the caravan? That’s a possum belly. It can carry just about anything: rope, stakes, canvas, fugitives. Eddy-boy’ll need to be hid when we cross the border. He’s going to be your possum belly sweetheart.”

“This is our blow-off,” Merrill explained to Roy’s questioning glance. “As unfortunate as this incident has been, it’s the perfect excuse to cut short our tour and go back to Amestris; no one would question it.”

As the trio neared Murata’s wagon, Bossy slowed, then stopped.

“Hang on Merrill,” he said, pulling a toothpick out of his breast pocket and popping it between his teeth. “I need to say something to Trampy. In private.”
Merrill nodded, wordlessly prodding his pony to continue on.

“You know . . .” Bossy pursed his lips and looked at Roy, almost bashfully. “I guess I should tell you . . .” He stopped, then tried again. “My Tula-girl, she’s everything to me, you know?”

Roy nodded.

“I guess you probably noticed that she’s, like, sad. Most of the time.”

Roy nodded again.

“My wife, she left us. About two years ago. Went back to her family in Ishbal.” Bossy looked off to the east. “You made her homeland safe, and she’d had enough of the kind of crap Tula had to deal with today. People always look down on Ishbalans, treat ‘em like crap. I’m not even sure why.”

“I’m sorry.” Roy felt it. Meant it.

“She wouldn’t take Tula with her,” Bossy continued. “Yanella’s folks didn’t approve of our marriage, and refused to accept Tula. Yani left us behind, and we haven’t heard from her since. That just killed Tula. It hurts to hate your mom, you know?”

Roy didn’t know. His parents had died when he was very young, and all he really had left were a few vague impressions - the delicate aroma of Xingese perfume; a lullaby in soothing baritone; a hand in each of his, one large and rough, one small and smooth, keeping him upright on unsteady feet. Just these small, treasured possessions, and a profound sense of loss dulled by time. He nodded anyway.

“I think that’s why she hangs out with Eddy-boy so much,” the clown reflected. “He told her his old man walked out on their family when Ed and his brother were little. I guess she talks to him because he gets it. She tells him stuff she would never tell me, and he listens. Then he tells her about a twelve year old State Alchemist working for an arrogant jackass with a crappy work ethic and too much ambition, and sometimes she laughs.”

Roy said nothing. What could he say?

Bossy must have noticed the Tramp’s dejection. “I’m not telling you this to make you feel bad,” he said. “I’m telling you this so you know how important it is to get home safe and keep up the good work. You’re starting to get folks to see that people are people, no matter what they look like or where they’re from. You’re proving we can all live together and get along with our neighbours. You keep that up, and maybe one day Tula can have her ummi back. We need a guy like you, steering the boat, or whatever. I guess.” Bossy rubbed the back of his neck, embarrassed. “I’m not so great with words.”

“I understand,” Roy told him.

“Thing is, now that I met you, I’m glad you’re the guy in charge.” The Boss clown scuffed an oversized shoe in the dirt. “You stood with us today. You coulda run, shoulda probably, but you didn’t. You give a shit.”

“Thank you, Bossy,” Roy said quietly. “You may not believe it, but your respect means a lot to me. You certainly have mine.”

“Yeah, well. That’s what I wanted to say.” The clown resumed his walk towards Murata’s wagon and a waiting Merrill. “Now let’s get busy. The sooner we’re out of this hell hole, the better I’ll feel.”
Surprisingly enough, Edward had not put up a fight about hiding in the possum belly for their short trip back into Amestris. He had slipped through a carefully concealed trap door in the floor of Murata’s wagon and nestled comfortably into the centre of the packed storage box with barely any protest, for which Roy had been grateful. It had already been a long, trying day, and the Tramp didn’t have the energy for verbal sparring. The younger man did have one intriguing suggestion, however.

“Why don’t you ride in here with me, Mustang?” he asked, arching a seductive eyebrow.

“Because you wouldn’t be able to stay quiet,” Murata sweetly supplied the answer.

“That’s not my fault!” Edward protested, face aflame as the trap door was closed over him.

The circus had finished packing up in record time. The horses were hitched, and the caravan had started on its lumbering way. When he heard of their plans to cut short their tour and leave immediately for Amestris, the Cretian Lieutenant had tried his best to persuade them to reconsider, but the Mausers were adamant, and the commander had to admit that he understood how they felt. They passed through the town watched by sullen townspeople, one of whom shouted a warning that the road to the next town was long, and anything could happen along the way. The Captain, riding shotgun beside Matthew on the red wagon, had glared at the crowd and loudly offered to escort the circus all the way to the border. Matthew had accepted the offer, just as loudly.

Roy strolled along the furrowed way with Merrill, relishing his last taste of anonymity. He would soon have to take up the mantle of authority once again, and while he looked eagerly forward to it, he knew he would miss this freedom.

But already his mind was miles ahead in Amestris. He wanted to see for himself that his command, including Riza, Havoc, and Breda, had survived the train disaster. He looked keenly forward to telling Breda about Norris Ganzer’s attack in the wilds of the Veridian Mountains, and all it implied. He grinned at the thought of Aunt Chris’ reaction when he walked into Whispers, safe and sound. He beamed in anticipation of the special commendations he would place in the confidential files of these dedicated undercover operatives, there to be discovered when their tour of duty was complete. The many acts, edicts, and orders he would issue were catalogued in the Führer’s mind, and he was chafing at the bit, ready to get back in the race.

“I don’t think I’ve told you what a pleasure it’s been to get to know you,” Merrill’s quiet words reeled Roy back to the rutted road.

“It’s been my pleasure too.” Roy smiled. “I thank you for everything you’ve done.”

Mauser was quiet for a moment before speaking again. “Matthew and I have been doing this for a long time, travelling in a road show, gathering information. We know the risks associated with both aspects of our chosen professions. We’ve had plenty of close calls, but I have to tell you, this was the closest one yet. Matthew might claim that he’s still angry with you for not leaving with Henkel when he told you to, but I know he’s grateful that you chose to be our secret weapon instead.” Merrill cast a cheeky grin Roy’s way. “And anyway, it’s hard to stay mad at your crush.”

Roy ignored the last. “If I had chosen to slip away over the ridge, I would have run straight into the
soldiers searching for me,” he pointed out.

“So everything worked out for the best. We’re all safe, our cover is intact, and we’re on our way back to Amestris.” Merrill’s smile was beatifically satisfied.

“Do you think you will ever return?”

“To Creta? Not to that particular town of course, though they will likely be quite surprised by the backlash their actions will receive,” Matthew stated with a wry smile. “The Mauser Brothers Circus and Wild Animal Show have friends in very high places all over this continent, including Creta. Our final date was to be in the capital, an exclusive show for the Cretian Royal Family, and possibly the visiting Führer of Amestris, if he was still in the city.” The ringmaster shot Roy an amused glance. “His Imperial Majesty will not be pleased that we have cancelled that engagement, and when he discovers the reason . . . Well. We will have the last laugh. And an official apology. Yes, we will return to Creta someday.”

Roy folded his hands behind his head as he walked, content. He still felt responsible for the trouble his presence had caused, but knew that this tight knit group would bounce back with little effort and never hold it against him. He had wondered at first what might motivate such a diverse group to such loyalty. Many weren’t Amestrian, but they had honestly dedicated themselves to the wellbeing of Roy’s beloved country regardless. The answer, of course, was the Mausers. The brothers had inspired this talented band of misfits with their drive, their purpose, and their genuine concern for their company, forging far more than just a group of circus performers collecting international intelligence. They were a family, looking out for each other as only the best families do. Roy was proud to know them.

The border crossing presented no problem; the ease with which they cleared the checkpoint was almost anticlimactic. Under the watchful eyes of the border guards on both sides, the Mausers’ cheerful Cretian escort bid the traveling band safe journey, and turned back upon the road serenaded by the circus folks’ enthusiastically shouted thanks and well wishes. The bandwagons then continued on their rumbling way toward the nearby Amestrian town of Eckhausen, where the circus would likely wild cat a show or two, and incidentally place a discreet call to inform certain parties that a very important missing person was finally back on home soil.

Roy was glad to be back in Amestris, but at the same time, a bit let down. His time with the Mauser’s lively little company was coming to an end, and though it had been a lot of hard work, it had also been endlessly entertaining, almost like a vacation. Admittedly it had been a vacation filled with frantic chases, exhausting physical challenges, and more than a little violence, but also with the gaining of new perspective, the forging of new friendships, and the strengthening of an intimate and highly treasured bond. All in all, it was the best vacation he’d never had.

But now he was home. It was time to get back to work.
Military Headquarters in West City was something of a shock for the Führer after weeks of blissful anonymity. When he stepped out of the staffcar to be met by his western Generals and rank upon rank of the soldiers under their command, all snapping to sharp attention in unison to acknowledge his esteemed presence, he was almost overwhelmed. Smoothing on his most commanding expression, he advanced toward the building flanked by Hawkeye and Breda as Havoc drove the roadster away to the motor pool.

Some likely found it odd that a Major General had taken on the role of chauffeur, even to the supreme leader of the country, but as Roy’s Security Chief, Hawkeye wasn’t taking any more chances. The only people allowed individual access to the Führer until further notice were those she was absolutely certain could be trusted with his life. That meant only the men Roy had had under his command since the early days plus a few other old friends were now trusted alone in close quarters with the Führer. Havoc had stepped in as his exclusive driver, and the rest of the team, along with Brigadier General Alex Armstrong, were on strict rotation as his personal bodyguards. Riza had even tried to insist that either herself or Edward be with the Führer at all times, day or night, but Roy had balked at that final demand, already finding the level of security stifling. Not even a full day after parting ways with the circus, he already desperately missed the freedom he had enjoyed as a humble clown.

Roy and Edward had bid the Mausers farewell just hours after arriving in the small Amestrian town of Eckhausen the previous afternoon. The bandwagons had barely settled in a quiet meadow on the outskirts before they were discretely visited by two anxious and familiar faces: Major Maria Ross and Brigadier General Alex Louis Armstrong. Armed to the teeth, they had spirited the two recovered fugitives away to be packed into a nondescript vehicle, which had immediately sped off. Racing along the rutted mountain backroads to West City, Ross had briefed Roy on current events the entire, six hour drive, while Armstrong had peered diligently out at the passing scenery, on guard for whatever they might encounter. Fortunately, no occasion arose that required the explosive removal of his shirt. The trip was uneventful, for which the Führer was grateful.

Riza had been the first of Roy’s Generals to meet him on his arrival in the city that evening. In the interest of personal safety, very few people were party to the fact that the Führer had been found and secured by an intelligence team operating in Cretian territory. The people responsible for the attack on the train were still unidentified, and so Roy’s rescue and subsequent retrieval from Creta had been a closely guarded secret, revealed by Hawkeye only to Havoc and Breda. With Edward standing by, Roy had commended his most loyal friend and subordinate for her diligence in effecting his safe return, and then proceeded to give her seven kinds of hell for using herself as a decoy to lead their pursuers away in the aftermath of the derailment. Riza had taken the dressing down in stride and offered an apology for causing her Führer concern, but nothing more. It was clear that in a similar situation she would do it again without hesitation.

Havoc and Breda had then been summoned to the unofficial reunion in Riza’s borrowed West Headquarters office, where Roy and Edward had related everything they’d discovered about the plot against the current Führer, particularly the confirmed identity of a traitor: Norris Ganzer, the Razor Wind Alchemist. Heymans made plans to discretely investigate the now deceased State Alchemist in hopes of finding more personnel connected to the attacks on the Führer. Coupled with his team’s brief interaction with the young traitor at the wreck site, it was becoming more and more likely that the plot against Führer Mustang was home grown.

For that reason, but not that reason alone, Hawkeye suggested that staying in West might be the
Fürher’s best option at the moment. The tactical assault in foreign territory had been incredibly bold; how much bolder might the enemy be on home soil? As well, the aborted diplomatic mission to Creta was still a concern. Though official talks had been put on hold until the Führer’s uncertain fate was determined, Constantine IV had sent a panel to West City, obviously still keen on negotiating for lasting peace. Plans were made for the Führer to meet with the Amestrian diplomatic team as soon as possible so Roy could be brought up to speed on any new developments. Plans had also been made for Roy’s reintroduction to the national driver’s seat, effective the next morning.

And so far, that reintroduction was running smoothly. Roy had been to West Headquarters a number of times throughout the years of his military career, but he had never been stationed here. Heymans Breda, however involuntarily, had. He had been transferred to West by Führer Bradley in an effort to eliminate Mustang and his team as a threat to Father’s Promised Day plans by separating them. That plan had failed miserably for the homunculus, but ironically had presented opportunities and advantages to Mustang and his loyal subordinates. Vato Falman, for example, had been in an excellent position to keep an eye on the Briggs Wall and its unyielding commander, and had been present to assist the Elric brothers when their search had taken them north. Breda in turn had stayed alert on the western front, quick to relay important developments, such as the botched suppression of the uprising in Pendleton. He had also made quite a few dependable contacts, not only at Headquarters, but among West City’s civilian inhabitants as well.

And contacts with West’s citizens were a very important resource indeed, especially now, as the western town was a rapidly growing social and economic force to be reckoned with.

The city that served as military command headquarters in the western region of Amestris matched Central in size and population, and in a few more years might even surpass the capital city’s urban sprawl. Spread out astride the Mattawari River, the city boasted a stark but beautiful vista of dry and rocky foothills with the impressive panorama of the Viridian Mountains providing a magnificent emerald backdrop.

A much older city than Central, West had been the major trading centre of a republic loosely allied with Creta before Amestris had begun her invasive, imperialistic campaign some four hundred years before. Like Riviere to the northwest, Amestris had conquered the city and integrated it and its people with her own, though no bloody crest had been carved here. Instead it had become a major military centre in the region and was renamed to reflect its strategic significance, the original name lost to antiquity. Even now an impressive number of troops were stationed there, due mainly to ongoing conflicts with Creta over the location of national borders.

With the previous basis of Amestris’s political and economic stability so strongly connected to war, many of West’s leading citizens had been of the highest military rank and elite position, closely allied to Führer King Bradley. After the Promised Day, many had fallen. With Führer Grumman’s ascendance to power, military policy had changed drastically, and so too had West’s circumstances. The dynastic military families of the city’s social elite were still the power base, but no longer was conquest the goal. Peace had taken root even here, and while there had been resistance at first, a new, peaceful prosperity was blooming. With mining, lumber, and tourism as a stable foundation, the city had become the economic hub of the west.

Arguably the cultural centre of the region as well, the western city’s growth in that area also rivaled Central’s. Fashionable shops and elegant restaurants were a major attraction. Her theaters, museums, and prestigious art exhibitions drew international acclaim, with the West Opera House as the jewel in her crown, staging productions featuring the world’s leading artists. In short, West City had taken the bull of change by the horns and turned it to her advantage. As he strolled confidently through the parade grounds surrounded by West Headquarters’ finest, Roy fervently hoped that the rest of Amestris would follow her lead.
Entering Western Command from the grounds, the Führer was escorted down a lengthy receiving line to a large briefing room containing West’s top Brass, as well as a number of the urban center’s non-military elite. The meeting room had been set up for a small, spontaneous welcome party for the returning Führer by General Robert Walther, West Headquarters’ base commander. The General had long been a supporter of the current Führer, and he proudly introduced his senior staff to the leader of their country with genuine pleasure. Then, with champagne glass raised, he had proposed a heartfelt toast to Führer Mustang’s continued health and well being, inviting everyone present to a more formal soiree the next evening.

On hand as well were most of the aborted Cretian mission’s chief negotiators, with the exception of Colonel Phillip Overholt, who had been severely injured in the train disaster. Lieutenant General Jerald Ethan, Major General Alton Dearth, and Colonel Fay Rudland were quick to reassure the Führer that their colleague had been successfully treated, and was currently convalescing at his home in Central. Roy made a mental note to have a card sent to Overholt on his behalf, with best wishes for a speedy recovery. General Dearth also informed his Führer that Creta had sent their own negotiating team to West, as a good will gesture, and to hopefully put to rest any speculation that Amestris’ western neighbor might have been responsible for the attack on Führer Mustang’s train. Both sides of the table were eager to get down to the business of forging a peaceful accord, and that definitely included Roy. He immediately scheduled a strategy session for later that afternoon.

As the get-together was informal, only a few members of West’s more prominent families were in attendance. Among them was Evert Huber, the Mayor of West City. He was accompanied by his wife and daughter – the only two non-military women present. During the toast Roy noted with resignation the flirtatious glances cast his way by the younger of the Huber ladies. Attractive and of marriageable age, she was patently overdressed for the occasion, the long gown she wore more appropriate for an evening cotillion. Her pale blonde hair was swept up in an intricate weave, styled ringlets framing her dimpled face. Roy did his best to keep his distance from the Huber trio, leading them a merry chase around the room as he greeted his West Headquarters Generals and the various other civilians in attendance, but eventually he was cornered by the buffet table.

“Führer Mustang, Sir,” the Mayor greeted him with a low bow. “Mayor Huber, at your service.”

“A pleasure as always, Mayor Huber;” Roy said, idly spinning the thin stem of his champagne coupe between his fingers.

Huber swept a hand at the two women by his side. “And allow me to introduce you to my family,” he said. “My wife, Frieda, and our lovely daughter, Kari.

Ever the proper gentleman, Roy respectfully raised his glass to the elder, and took the younger’s offered hand, bowing gallantly over it with a placid smile. The girl blushed fetchingly, and coyly batted thick lashed eyes in response.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Roy lied.

“The pleasure is all mine,” Kari said in a melodious voice, the inflection obvious. “I am a passionate admirer of yours, my Führer.”

“Oh?” Roy affected mild surprise. “You are a student of military strategy?”

“Hardly,” the young woman clarified. “I prefer to make love, not war.”

Roy glanced at the girl’s parents, who did not appear the least bit uncomfortable with their daughter’s suggestive remarks. Quite the contrary; they were beaming proudly.
Kari lightly touched Roy’s hand to speak again. “I understand General Walther is planning a more formal gathering tomorrow evening to celebrate your return. I would be thrilled to attend that ball on your arm, Sir,” she said.

She was a bold one, no question, to ask such a thing. Roy grinned in spite of himself. He did, after all, admire bravado.

The Mayor cleared his throat to regain the Führer’s attention.

“If you will excuse me, Führer Mustang, I would like to take a moment to speak with Lieutenant General Möhler,” the Mayor said. “He has generously allocated some men to assist my maintenance crews with bridge repairs, and I would like to clear up the details. I will leave my daughter in you capable hands.”

Roy was unsurprised when the Mayor and his wife hurried away, and he only just refrained from rolling his eyes; he’d been through this before, many times. Daughter was in the market for a good marriage, and Daddy wanted a match with the highest potential to improve the family’s social standing. Huber and his wife had left their daughter with Roy in hopes that he might be interested, and undoubtedly had encouraged the young woman to seduce him at all costs. That assumption proved true almost immediately, when Kari eased closer to the Führer and boldly placed a hand on his arm. She looked up at him, large blue eyes wide with feigned innocence, and smiled demurely.

“Alone at last,” she said, her teasing tone a contrast to her coy expression.

The Führer maintained his quiet reserve. “Not quite alone.” He glanced pointedly at the busy room before retuning his eyes to her.

“I’m sure we could make arrangements to change that,” the lady suggested, squeezing his arm. She certainly wasn’t wasting any time.

Roy patted her hand and then gently removed it from his arm. “I’m flattered, Ms. Huber, truly,” he said, effecting all sincerity. “Your offer is as generous as it is tempting. I fear I must regretfully decline, however. I am currently seeing someone, and my personal code of honor dictates that I never betray such a trust. It would be unfair to him, as well as to you. I’m sorry.”

The young woman’s face fell, her disappointment obvious. She had more class than most of Roy’s amorous pursuers, however. Instead of attempting to press the issue, Kari smiled gamely up at him, eyes twinkling, without a hint of anger or spite.

“I understand,” she said. “I’m sorry as well. Had I known, I would not have made the offer; a man must guard his honor. Perhaps, should you become available in future, we may speak again.”

Roy inclined his head, but made no commitment. He was not in the habit of leading people on in such matters. The lady smiled and moved gracefully away, in search of more apposite company.

A quiet cough informed the Führer that his private conversation had inadvertently gained some public attention. Turning, Roy discovered General Walther standing with General William Korth, both men sporting perceptive grins. Walther and Korth were close friends, much the way Roy and Maes had been. They were so close, in fact, that there was some speculation that the two older men had more between them than friendship alone. Neither man had ever confirmed that rumor, though they had never denied it either. As far as Roy was concerned, the nature of their friendship was irrelevant and none of his business. Both men were exemplary officers, and that was all that mattered as far as the Führer was concerned.
“You handled young Miss Huber superbly, Sir,” General Korth observed. “She didn’t even take offence at your rejection.”

“She could hardly take offence at my refusal to be unfaithful,” Roy pointed out. “That would cast her in an unfavourable light. I was reasonably sure that she was too sophisticated to risk public repudiation for such a faux pas.”

“Your reputation as an accomplished gamesman is obviously justified,” Walther said admiringly.

“And for that reason I’m quite surprised that you didn’t take her up on her offer, regardless,” Korth said matter-of-factly. “Rumor has it that you are rather fond of the occasional dalliance. How foolish of me to pay heed to idle gossip.”

“Quite,” Roy agreed. “I’m very particular as to whom I choose to spend my personal time.”

“Ahh,” Korth said, eyes merry. “It’s a shame, really.”

“Oh? Why is that?” Roy asked, all nonchalance. “Were you interested? I’m terribly sorry, but you’re simply not my type.”

The General’s shoulders hunched as he made a strangled sort of choking sound.

General Walther smirked. “I say, William! That’s quite the eloquent rejoinder! May I use it in future?”

Korth shot his friend a scowl. “I say, Robert! Why don’t you have another drink?” The General cleared his throat and made a slight bow to Roy. “My apologies, Führer Mustang. I meant no offense.”

“None taken, I assure you,” the Führer replied with a reserved smile and a distinct sense of déjà vu.

“In any case, Sir, might I ask where you plan to stay while in West City?” General Walther smoothly changed the subject.

“I haven’t made any firm arrangements as yet,” the Führer replied, noncommittal.

“Then please allow me to offer my country estate,” Walther proposed. “It’s a rather modest manor house about twenty minutes away from the city proper. My wife and I are staying in town, so The Mews and her staff would be entirely at your disposal.”

It was a tempting offer. Führer Bradley had maintained an estate in all of the nation’s major cities, but Roy did not. He did not see the need for such extravagance, particularly since many of Amestris’ citizens were struggling through difficult times. Führer Mustang had stayed on base the previous evening, but West Headquarters did not have accommodations suitable for the kind of high level social game that treaty negotiations required. For that reason Roy was currently considering one of the city’s finer hotels, much to Hawkeye’ dismay. Arranging security for a public location of that nature was rapidly becoming a logistical nightmare. General Walther’s manor house presented a very attractive alternative. Not only was the site private and therefore more easily secured, the rest of Roy’s negotiating team could take up residence there as well, making strategy sessions much easier to coordinate.

Before Roy could make a decision either way, a minor commotion at the conference room’s double doors turned all heads in that direction. Pushing her way past the soldier stationed at the entry was a young woman accompanied by two burley men in Creta’s Imperial livery. The woman scanned the room, passing over the gathered military personnel, lingering on the civilians, and finally zeroed in
on the Führer, appearing somewhat disappointed. She strode toward him nevertheless, her two escorts hurrying to keep up.

Jerald Ethan intercepted her as she approached, bowing low.

“Ah, Highness,” he said, just the hint of a smirk touching his lips. “How kind of you to join us.”

She breezed past the bowing General without acknowledging him, but he quickly stood and smoothly matched her pace, walking at her side. She marched directly up to Roy and looked him over with disdain.

“My Lady, allow me to present Führer President Roy Mustang,” Ethan said, undaunted by the woman’s disregard. “My Führer, may I present Her Royal Highness, the Princess Ekaterina, eldest daughter to His Majesty, Constantine IV, King of the Cretian Union. The Princess is here to act on her father’s behalf as his appointed Hand. She has graciously consented to represent Creta in our treaty negotiations.”

Roy was impressed. This young lady, perhaps only a few years older than Edward, had been conferred an honor bestowed on only the most trusted of counselors. In the Cretain royal hierarchy, the Hand of the King was the chief advisor and executor of the king’s commands. She spoke with the king’s voice and acted in his name with all the authority of the throne behind her. Despite her youth, there was no doubt that she would make a formidable adversary, and Roy would not underestimate her.

And by her demeanor, the Princess was well aware of the Führer’s assessment. Although Roy was half a head taller, she still managed to look down her delicate nose at him. She examined Amestris’ leader with a critical eye, and the slight curl of her lip made it clear she was not impressed.

Roy gave her similar treatment, taking in curly russet hair that fell nearly to her waist, caught back in a sliver clasp, aristocratic features darkened with scorn. Her slim, muscular frame was clad in a formfitting suit, cut in a distinctly military style. Roy kept his own expression firmly neutral. He had to forge a working relationship with this woman, and it wouldn’t do to antagonize her.

Roy dipped a short bow and offered the Princess his hand. “A pleasure to meet you, Highness.”

Ekaterina took the hand in a strong grip, which Roy returned. The Cretian King’s chief advisor would not take kindly to being treated as anything but an equal.

“I’m sure it is,” she said imperiously. “My father sends his regards, and expresses his relief that you have safely returned to your homeland. Now, where is Edward Elric?”

The Führer wasn’t expecting that. The Generals standing beside him were also taken by surprise.

Roy had not seen Edward since the evening before. Havoc had whisked him away as soon as he and Roy had recounted everything that had befallen them after the train wreck. Roy had spent the night in a secure suite on base under heavy guard, alone. Where the younger man was at the moment, Roy had no idea.

Not that he was about to admit it.

“Mr. Elric is currently attending to a personal matter,” Roy said smoothly. “I believe he will be joining us later this afternoon.”

The woman made no effort to hide her disappointment. “Ah. A pity. I had hoped to find him here.”
“I will be sure to mention your interest in meeting with him when I see him,” Roy told her.

“Your pardon, Highness,” General Korth cut in, “but am I to understand that you are acquainted with Mr. Elric?”

“I am.”

The men waited, but the Princess did not elaborate. Roy went for it.

“How did you meet?” he asked casually.

For a moment it looked as if Ekaterina might ignore the question. Then she replied, choosing her words carefully. “A few years ago he accidentally became involved in a rather sensitive political incident, which he managed to resolve in a manner advantageous to my father, the King.”

Well. That was a remarkably vague account which served to clarify absolutely nothing. As an acknowledged master of doubletalk himself, Roy was suitably impressed.

“And now, gentlemen,” the Princess said briskly, “I’ll leave you to your little party.” She turned to Roy. “I look forward to meeting with you formally, to debate the terms and conditions that will describe our much anticipated peace treaty.”

“You’re leaving?” General Walther asked, raising an eyebrow. “But you have only just arrived.”

“As I said, I only crashed this tawdry gathering in search of an old friend,” the Cretian woman told him. “He is not here. I see no reason to linger.”

Roy turned on the charm. “Won’t you reconsider, My Lady?” he said with an enticing smile. “The wine is of excellent vintage; the company quite genial; and the conversation will only become more remarkable with the addition of you invaluable insights.”

The Princess snorted in a most unladylike manner. “Turn it off, Führer Mustang; your reputation precedes you.”

“Oh?” Roy’s expression was pure innocence. “To what sort of repute am I ascribed by the gossip mill of Creta’s High Court?”

“Only that you’re an ass, and a boor, and ten kinds of sexy – just like most of the over privileged men seeking my favor. You’re not real, and you bore me.” She waved a hand dismissively, then turned to stride regally from the room.

The Führer and his Generals watched her go.

“An impressive young woman,” Korth ventured, face carefully composed.

“Quite,” Walther remarked, twinkling eyes locked on his empty champagne flute.

“She’s a bitch,” Ethan stated, matter of fact. “I’ve been dealing with her for the last three weeks, doing my best to make her stay in West City comfortable, and that is my considered opinion. Nothing pleases that woman.”

Korth pursed his lips, casting a sidelong glance at the Führer. “It appears that there might be something, or rather someone, who is an exception to that rule,” he said quietly.

“At any rate, I believe I will take you up on your offer of accommodations, Robert,” the Führer decided, and General Walther beamed.
“You honor me,” the older man said with a small bow. “I will alert the staff immediately, and have the Mews prepared for your arrival.”

“Please see that the rest of my negotiating team are offered accommodations at the manor as well,” Roy instructed. “It appears we will have to ensure that we bring only our finest diplomatic strategies and tactics to the table. The Cretian King’s Hand is not a woman to be trifled with.”

Walther saluted his Führer with a grim smile and strode away, signaling for an aide to follow, and Roy glanced around the room, looking for Hawkeye. He probably should have cleared his change of plans with his Security Chief, but Roy was confident that Hawkeye would agree that The Mews was a more defensible position than a hotel in downtown West City.

Besides, with Edward on hand, Roy rather looked forward to reacquainting himself with a large, soft bed in an undoubtedly well appointed bedchamber. For what he had in mind, it would certainly be an improvement over a haystack.

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It was late in the evening when the Führer arrived at the Mews. The day had been long and hectic, as he had known it would be. Endless meeting, conferences, and telephone conversations both vital and trivial had eaten up his time. He was exhausted both mentally and physically, and all Roy really wanted to do was get out of his uniform and into something more comfortable. Preferably with Edward, who had been absent from everything but his thoughts for the entire day. Roy found that he had become accustomed to the younger man being nearby, and he was surprised at how much he missed the blond's company for a quick break to engage in amusing banter. The time they had spent with the Mausers was fading like a pleasant, impossible dream. Had it really been just over twenty-four hours since that dream had ended?

Tossing Havoc a tired salute Roy dragged himself out of the roadster to be immediately surrounded by a contingent of attentive bodyguards. He looked up at his West City home away from home as he was walked to the imposing double doors, and couldn’t repress his resigned sigh.

Described by Robert Walther as modest, The Mews was anything but. The General and his wife, Gilda, had bought the twelve acre riverfront property some twenty years prior, and over the course of several years had built this imposing stone manor as a country home where they would likely retire when Walther’s time in the military was done. The huge, chateau-inspired thirty room home had been lovingly designed and subsequently decorated by Gilda Walther herself. As was the custom for most Amestrian aristocrats, the estate was all about the display of wealth for social prestige: conspicuous consumption. The long, winding driveway was carefully groomed crushed stone, pure white and unstained, not a pebble out of place. The grounds were thoroughly landscaped, featuring an extensive topiary of exotic animals, a manicured croquet field, and a spectacular hedge maze. Such extravagance wasn’t Roy’s cup of tea, but as Führer he often had to quietly endure the quirks of the elite in the interest of maintaining important personal alliances with influential families.

The interior of the manor proved just as ostentatious as the exterior, with an overabundance of polished mahogany, gilded trim, and brocade. Roy was met in the wide entrance hall by General Walther’s housestaff, ranked in a double row to formally receive him. A tall, slender, weasel-faced man stood between the two lines and bowed low as the Führer entered, giving Roy a magnificent view of his horrendous comb over.
“Good evening, Führer President Mustang, Sir,” the manservant said as he hoisted himself back into an upright position. “Welcome to The Mews. I am Matthews, Head Butler of the manor, at your service. Please address any and all needs and desires to me. It is my master’s wish, and mine as well, that your stay with us be completely and thoroughly pleasurable.”

“Thank you, Matthews,” the Führer said. “Please show me to my room. Has the rest of my staff arrived?”

“Only one, Excellency,” Matthews stated. “Edward Elric arrived forty-five minutes ago.”

Roy was pleased to hear that. So much so, in fact, that he almost missed the houseman’s slight pursing of lips as he turned to lead Roy to the stairs. Did he detect a hint of distaste? Well, Matthews was a bit pompous. Edward didn’t generally enjoy the company of that sort of person, and made no pretence otherwise. Still, it had to be some kind of record, managing to cultivate the houseman’s active dislike in just under an hour.

The two rows of servants bowed low as their Führer, flanked by two bodyguards, passed between them to mount the stairs. Matthews led the way to the top, then to the left down a long hallway lined with portraits, likely of Robert Walther’s illustrious ancestors. The houseman stopped in front of the door at the very end of the hall. He swung it open and stepped aside for the Führer to precede him into the room.

Round with a high domed ceiling, fully half the enormous room’s circumference was floor to ceiling windows showcasing a splendid view of the Mattawari’s moonlit, rocky banks. A pair of French doors led out to a terraced veranda overlooking the hedge maze. To the left of the room’s entrance was another door, likely to an ensuite bathroom. A cluster of plush armchairs was grouped around the large fireplace to the right of the door, the low burning fire spreading a cozy glow. Beside the mantle a portable wet bar had been pushed conveniently close, and on the coffee table, a light snack of savory biscuits rested alongside an antique brass samovar scenting the air with the rich aroma of freshly brewed coffee. The four poster bed was the centrepiece of the room, canopied and hung with heavy velour curtains in cream with gold trim to match the rest of the room’s decor. The bedspread was folded back to reveal sheets of the finest silk, and Roy longed to settle between them.

That wasn’t going to happen, however. There was no way Hawkeye would let him sleep here, and as tempting as the coffee might be, Roy had not set foot inside the room. The windows alone would make even the most inept assassin’s job ridiculously easy. Until the Hawk arrived to work it out, Roy would find somewhere else to rest. And where was his Security Chief anyway? It wasn’t like her not to be on hand to make sure these sorts of arrangements were suitably safe ahead of time.

“A splendid room,” the Führer said.

Matthews beamed at the praise. “Thank you, Sir.”

“And if I might ask, where is Edward Elric’s room?”

“We have assigned Elric to the servant’s quarters next to your suite, Excellency,” the man said, indicating the door a short way back along the hall. “He will be easily and discretely available at your convenience to perform his duties.” It was subtle, but the house manager’s disdain was still unmistakable.

_Hell_. Not _this_ again.

Anger bloomed cold in the Führer’s dark eyes, and he did nothing to disguise it. ‘I’m not sure what you may have inferred about Mister Elric’s duties, but it appears you are grievously misinformed. To
avoid any further misunderstanding, let me clarify. *Mister* Elric is an essential member of my entourage. He is my personal interpreter and advisor in matters of Cretian customs and culture, as he happens to be a personal friend of Her Royal Highness Princess Ekaterina, who herself is the designated Hand of her father, His Majesty Constantine IV, Imperial Sovereign of the Cretian Union. *Mister* Elric is also, incidentally, a respected friend and confidante of Emperor Ling Yao of Xing. In addition, *Mister* Elric happens to be a close personal friend of mine.”

The Führer’s tone was pure, controlled fury, and the houseman was frozen in complete and utter terror as Roy continued his tirade. “Furthermore, *Mister* Elric, the former Fullmetal Alchemist, popularly acclaimed Alchemist for the People, is a decorated hero of Amestris. It is largely by his actions in single combat that we were victorious in the battle at Central Headquarters on the Promised Day, and he is therefore held in very high esteem by myself, my most trusted staff, and indeed, most of the fine citizens of this nation. I don’t know where you came by your completely erroneous information, nor do I care. What I expect is for *Mister* Elric to be treated with the respect he is due. Failure to do so will result in my extreme displeasure. Do I make myself absolutely clear?”

The houseman stammered an affirmative reply as he dropped to a low bow, and Roy turned away. How anyone could possibly see Edward as nothing more than a cheap bed toy was beyond Roy’s ability to comprehend. Who the hell started these ridiculous rumors, anyway? He stalked down the hall to stand before the door Matthews had indicated, and after taking a moment to control his ire, knocked.

There was no answer.

Roy knocked again, louder.

Again, no response.

Roy’s anger returned with a vengeance. If the house manager had made his low opinion of Edward clear to the Führer, how much more disrespect had he shown the young man himself? Was Edward angry? Upset? Was he going to go back to avoiding Roy to protect the Führer’s reputation as he had on the train, all because of some ignorant snob with his head so far up his own ass he couldn’t see the obvious?

Roy twisted the doorknob, and finding it unlocked, thrust open the door. He stepped into the room and closed the door behind him to prevent his guards from entering as well.

It was Spartan, neat, and small. It was also presently vacant. Edward’s battered brown suitcase was open on the neatly made bed. His wallet, a personal notebook, and the stub of a pencil were on the single bedside table next to a tiny reading lamp, his jacket draped on a ladderback chair in the corner. The sound of running water offered a clue to the whereabouts of the room’s occupant: Edward was taking a shower.

The door to the small bathroom was ajar, and Roy couldn’t resist a peek. Through the translucent shower curtain he saw a faint, blurred image of tan and gold, his lover in the midst of washing. With no little reluctance Roy pulled himself away, over to the bed to sit and wait. He bounced a couple of times, experimentally, and had to admit that though the bed was narrow, the mattress was quite comfortable.

It wasn’t long before the water was shut off and the shower curtain rattled aside. A few moments more and Edward appeared, a towel slung low around his hips as he toweled his long, golden mane. Gleaming drops of water trailed down from his shoulders over his chest, catching Roy’s admiring eye. Edward didn’t look surprised to see him, and of course he wouldn’t be. He’d known Roy was here, and his smile was warm, pleased to see him.
Roy was surprised, however. In his current state of undress, it was abundantly clear that Edward was no longer encumbered with a leg brace.

“Havoc had me escorted to the med wing to get checked out,” Edward explained to Roy’s questioning gaze. “They x-rayed my leg. Then they cut off the brace, gave me a cane, and told me to take it easy.” He rolled his eyes.

Hawkeye had insisted that the Führer undergo a thorough medical examination as well, for which an eminent West City doctor had been summoned to provide. Roy smiled, but his mind was still on the confrontation in the hall, and it must have shown if Edward’s reaction was any indication. The blond man stopped toweling his damp hair and frowned.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, concerned.

How to broach the subject. “I’ve just had to . . . educate General Walther’s valet,” Roy said.

“Did it take?” Edward asked, smile wry. “From my experience, douche bags like him just don’t learn.”

“For his sake, he’d better. If I have to repeat the lesson, he probably won’t survive.”

The young man took in the Führer’s dour expression. “Don’t let it bother you, Roy,” he soothed, grinning. “Assholes like that just aren’t worth the time it takes to kick their asses. It’s kind of fun to mess with their heads though.” Ed’s grin grew fangs.

Roy was not amused. “I just don’t want you to feel uncomfortable being here, with me. I don’t want you to start avoiding me again.”

“I won’t. You told me I was no threat to your reputation. I believe you.” Edward turned to pull the drapes across the single small window and resumed towel drying his hair.

Not ready to let it go, Roy frowned. “I feel like I’ve become a threat to your reputation. I don’t want you to start avoiding me again.”

Edward shrugged. “Some people are idiots when it comes to sex,” he said. “All they see are differences, and think they’re important. Differences in race. Differences in age. Differences in wealth. Differences in power. They weigh those differences and scorn the one who in their estimation is of lesser value, making all kinds of fucked up judgments about motivation and moral character. The bigger the difference, the harsher the judgment.” Ed didn’t look at all offended. “I feel sort of sorry for people like that. As for their bullshit opinions, I couldn’t care less.”

Roy understood the dynamic of course, and his question had been posed out of frustration, not confusion. It was basic human nature to look for reasons why, and imagining the reasons why one specific person might chose to spend time with another was always grounds for intriguing conjecture. Most of the time it amounted to innocent speculation of no consequence; it only seemed to become malicious when envy was behind it, as Roy suspected was the case with Edward. Roy was the Führer of Amestris, a magnet for everyone looking to curry favor or enhance their social status, and as a bachelor, he was the preeminent potential husband for every single woman in the country. However, Roy had made no effort to hide the fact that he and Edward were an item. That put a large bull’s eye on the young man’s back, making him a target for anyone who wished they were in his shoes. Unfortunate, and likely unavoidable if Ed continued to see Roy.

But the situation caused Roy to return to another question, one to which he still had no answer. Why
did Edward continue to spend time with him? It certainly wasn’t easy. In addition to the ridicule he suffered, he’d been shot at, train wrecked, abandoned in the deep woods on foreign soil, forced to hike for miles through rugged terrain, had his leg crushed by an assassin out to get Roy . . . and he had no reason to expect circumstances to improve anytime soon. It couldn’t just be the sex, could it? Roy knew with certainty that as good as their physical encounters were, there had to be more to it. Edward was not shallow, and there was more between them than that. So what did the young man actually gain from being with Roy? What did he want? Roy frowned, screwing up his courage, and took the plunge.

“Why do you put up with it?” he asked quickly, before he could lose his nerve. “Why do you stay with me? Not only do you have to deal with being treated like some cheap rentboy, it’s also dangerous.”

“You don’t treat me like a rentboy,” Edward said, grinning as he dried his hair.

“I don’t mean by me,” Roy clarified.

“I know. That’s what matters.”

“But why me?” Roy asked, searching Edward’s eyes. “You don’t give a damn about power and privilege, so it’s not my position. I’m fourteen years your senior. I’m wrapped up in a career that pretty much guarantees you’ll never be my first priority. You’ve been put in deadly danger because of me. Why me?”

Edward held Roy’s probing gaze for a moment before responding.

“I’ll make a deal with you,” he said. “I’ll answer your question if you can honestly answer that same question. Why me?”

Roy opened his mouth, thought for a moment, and closed it again.

Because there was no simple answer.

Why Ed? Yes, he was drop dead gorgeous, frighteningly intelligent, and fiercely loyal. He was a passionate, playful, and considerate lover. He was a trusted friend. He was also often abrasive, confrontational, and didn’t seem to have a single ounce of tact in his entire body – not exactly a suitable match for someone in Roy’s sensitive position. So why did the thought of Ed moving on make Roy’s blood run cold?

All he knew for sure was that what he felt was complicated.

Edward waited expectantly, arms crossed over his chest with a neutral air.

“I’m not sure I can properly explain why I want you, even to myself,” Roy said slowly. “I just know that I do.”

Ed quirked a smile, unperturbed. “When you figure it out, let me know. Then I’ll answer your question.”

He turned to toss the damp towel he was using to dry his hair carelessly into the bathroom and then walked to the dresser, the other towel riding dangerously low on his hips. Taking comb in hand, Edward proceeded to drag it through his thick, damp locks.

Roy watched, still troubled. He had hoped for answers but had ended up with even more questions.
Edward caught his eye in the mirror, and Roy schooled his expression to neutrality.

“There’s a formal reception at General Walther’s midtown estate tomorrow evening to welcome the Führer home,” Roy said casually. “I hope you’ll allow me to escort you.”

“Are you asking me for a date, Mustang?” The young man raised an enquiring eyebrow with an amused twinkle in his eye.

“Why yes, I suppose I am,” the Führer replied. “Unless you have other plans.”

“As a matter of fact, no I don’t,” Edward said with an easy grin.

“Excellent.” Roy watched as blond hair was gradually tamed, admiring the gleaming fall that reached well below his lover’s shoulder blades. “I wasn’t sure how you were going to react to my invitation.”

Ed’s reflection frowned at him.

“I half expect you to take exception and accuse me of treating you like a woman,” Roy explained.

“Just don’t buy me flowers and we’ll be fine,” Ed told him. “I can open my own doors, too. And please don’t serenade me from the garden; I’d be forced to break your guitar over your head, and that would be embarrassing for both of us.”

“Hmm. I was just thinking of buying a mandolin, too. Oh well. Thanks for the tip.”

“No charge.”

“Seriously though Ed, I think it might help if we were seen together in public more often.” Roy watched Edward carefully. “I enjoy your company. I want to spend more time with you. I’d also like people to know that sex isn’t all we’re about.” And he wanted to make sure the younger man knew it, too.

Ed sighed, resigned. “I really don’t care what they think they know. They’ll believe what they want, regardless.”

“Seeing is believing,” Roy pointed out. “People can’t refute what’s right in front of them, and it will mean less for them to infer.”

“Inferring is fun, and when done correctly, it can actually yield reliable results,” Edward said airily. “For example, I’m sure that every single person who knows we’re together can correctly infer which one of us tops.”

“Well, they may think they can,” Roy said casually. “They could be mistaken, however, at least some of the time.” He arched an eyebrow at the suddenly frozen blond.

Edward found his voice. “Did you just suggest . . . ?”

Roy lips tilted into an alluring smile. “While it’s true that I generally prefer to be the fuck-er as opposed to the fuck-ee, there are times when I feel otherwise inclined.” His voice was low, smooth. “The mood usually strikes when I am in the company of a particularly talented lover; a man I can trust to take control, but not advantage.”

Amused as Ed watched intently, Roy reached slowly into his pocket and pulled out a small glass tube. He placed the lube on the nightstand and cocked his head at Edward, eyebrows raised, almost,
but not quite, in challenge.

The younger man did not disappoint. He put his comb absently down on the bureau and walked over to the night table. He picked up the tube and held it in his open palm, contemplating. Then closing it in his fist, he tilted his head to meet Roy’s gaze, a slow smile blooming on his face.

Edward stepped into Roy’s space, and anticipation hit Roy all at once, sparking along his nerves as his cock gave an interested twitch. It had been a long time since he had handed anyone this kind of control, but it felt completely natural as Edward closed the distance between them and reached for the lapels of Roy’s uniform to pull him up into a deep, searching kiss. Roy met him without hesitation, tasting him, breathing him, pulling him closer still.

As much as Roy might still be inclined to tease the younger man about his stature, the two men were very close to the same height, and it was never more evident than at times like these, wrapped in close embrace. Without breaking the kiss, Ed stepped his partner smoothly to the small bed, the gentle play of hands sliding lightly down his back causing Roy to shiver. Roy’s legs met the mattress’ edge, and with a hungry purr Edward pressed palms lightly to Roy’s chest to slide the Führer’s uniform jacket from his shoulders.

Roy leaned in to nip Ed’s lower lip, teasing a growl from his lover. Edward set to work on the buttons of Roy’s shirt, unfastening them slowly, one by one, lingering over revealed skin. Roy kicked off his boots as Ed’s fingertips stroked the planes of Roy’s midriff before easing down his zipper, Edward sinking to his knees as the other man’s pants and boxers fell to the floor. Lips brushed his thigh as Roy spread his fingers to sweep spun gold back from Edward’s face, thumbs curving to caress his temples. Edward’s eyes met his with open, honest need, and he leaned into Roy’s hand, just for a moment, before rising to his feet.

Roy pulled the towel from Edward’s hips slowly, exploring damp skin with fingers and palms, tasting stray droplets with lips and tongue, pulled back at last to a deep, sensuous kiss. Edward moaned into Roy’s mouth as the older man clenched a fist in Edward’s thick hair, anchoring him in place, breathing deep the clean, fresh scent of soap and Ed as he kissed him.

Breaking the kiss Roy leaned to nibble lightly at the skin of Edward’s throat, earning a shallow moan. Smiling, Roy raked his teeth down the side of Ed’s neck just to hear it again.

With Roy’s shirt finally out of the way, Edward reached out a hand to touch Roy's arm, his palm sliding up over firm muscle, the curve of a strong shoulder, thumb riding over the ridge of a collar bone. It took no effort at all to pull Roy the slight distance to Edward’s lilted face, and Roy made no effort at all to trap his sigh as their lips met again, content to let Ed lead. He couldn't help teasing the younger man, however, flicking his tongue out, tasting, then retreating. When he felt Edward’s hands settle lightly on his hips he smiled into the kiss and arched against him. Ed's hands tightened as the kiss pressed deeper, flamed hotter, the heat and taste of Edward’s mouth more addictive than any drug.

With his need building, Roy freed his mouth with a gasp, and Edward dropped his head to nuzzle into Roy’s throat, a hand stroking lightly down his back. He could feel the hard length of Edward’s cock against him, impossible to ignore, and he pushed closer as he tipped his head back to bare more of his throat. Edward’s lips and teeth grazing his skin stoked his desire ever hotter, and Roy loosed the sounds battling their way past his lips, encouraging Edward to continue. And he did, with nipping kisses and gliding tongue, tracing a path down heated flesh as he sank once again to his knees, Roy’s hands light on his shoulders. Edward wasted no time, and Roy’s breath hitched as a confident hand reached to cup, to draw fingers from root to tip, to circle, to stroke. He felt hot breath before the touch of lips, and Roy bucked forward, groaning aloud. The tip of a tongue flicked across
the head of Roy’s erection before Edward pulled him in all the way, sucking hard.

Roy took a breath, deep and shuddering, and released it slowly, straining for control. His fingers twitched on the younger man’s shoulders as he began to rock, rock, forward, back, Edward matching his every move, tongue tracing hard over the vein and flashing light over the slit.

Was there a more erotic sight than Edward on his knees, strong and confident, eyes locked to Roy’s as the older man fucked that sinfully talented mouth? It wasn’t long before his control faltered, frayed, fractured, and Roy’s lips parted soundlessly as he came, knees trembling, held upright by strong hands on his hips.

Edward was grinning as Roy slumped forward, and he nudged him gently back to sit on the edge of the bed.

"God," Roy breathed out, heart thundering, wondering, even now, at his all consuming attraction to this golden creature.

Edward stood to reach for the slim tube left on the nightstand, his impressive arousal on prominent display. Roy shifted backward to further arrange himself on the small mattress, eyes half-lidded like a contented cat as he watched his lover join him on the bed. Did he detect a hint of nervousness as Edward drew near? Roy thought so, but he couldn’t say why. It wasn’t in the way Edward eased onto the small space to join his lover, or in his confident smile. Roy sensed it just the same, and he poured all his sensuality into his smile, sultry and inviting.

Even more puzzling for the older man was how he had offered this without the slightest hint of trepidation. What he’d said earlier was the absolute truth. Roy wasn’t usually inclined to give this kind of control to another person, and he wasn’t remotely sure why he was doing it now. Yet as he watched the younger man dribble the scented oil to warm in his palm, Roy knew without any reservations whatsoever that he wanted Ed to fuck him, and he was surprised at how completely normal the thought was.

Then Ed was settling between Roy’s bent knees, touching him at last. Despite his obvious and urgent need, the younger man was gentle and patient. Oily slickness skated over Roy’s most sensitive of places; fingers circled and stroked to relax his tight entrance. A single finger pressed in, just a little, then retreated. Honey eyes looked up to gaze at his lover’s face as the slick pressure returned, pressing further, and again, so patient, so tender.

Two fingers now, and Roy found he was beginning to harden again. Ed’s steady, confident touch stroked deeply into him, slowly stretching, infinitely patient, now and again nudging that place that sparked and flared and set Roy’s nerves on fire. Three fingers now, still slow, still sure, and Roy purred rough, almost growling, wanting, demanding more.

He groaned when fingers withdrew, and for a brief moment he waited, longing. Then a warm body settled between his legs and pressed down, pressed in, filling him slow and steady and so, so good. He tilted his hips to take more and wrapped his arms around a well muscled back, then thrust up to meet his lover. Roy nuzzled in to the curve of Edward’s shoulder, gently nipping at that sensitive place just behind his jaw.

“Holy fuck,” Edward breathed reverently beside his ear, voice shaky, not moving, waiting.

Roy grinned, and bit down again, then licked at the hot skin he had marked as Edward began to move, to slowly stroke in and out, long and deep, finding that perfect angle on every thrust, Roy showing his appreciation with deep, encouraging moans. Ed grinned down at him and picked up the pace, the shared pleasure building. The young man had to be hanging on to control through sheer
stubbornness. Roy shifted under him, bending his knees higher, and Ed tilted against Roy’s thigh to reach for him.

Roy arched up as Edward’s hand found him, moving to grip him tightly, watching as Ed bit his lip, clutching at his shredding control. Roy’s hand slipped between them to cover his lover’s.

“Let me,” he murmured, knuckles rubbing along Edward’s midriff as they stroked in tandem.

Two more strokes and Edward loosed his grip, slipping his hand from under Roy’s, settling more comfortably over him, his thrusts becoming more even. Roy pumped himself, matching the thrusts that sent waves of pleasure surging up his spine.

He shouldn’t have been so close to orgasm again so soon, but he was. Perhaps it was the sight of Edward above him, eyes heavy lidded, skin flushed and gleaming with sweat, damp strands of gold framing his face as he rocked into him. It wasn’t long before Roy felt himself nearing the edge, and he hooked his ankles around the back of Edward’s thighs, arching closer, meeting every thrust.

They came at virtually the same instant, Roy slipping over into white silence, Edward’s mouth parted soundlessly as he was pulled over by the pulsing heat of his lover. An eternal, frozen moment, still over far too quickly.

Closing his eyes as the last of the aftershocks subsided, Roy felt Edward pull out slowly and roll to his side, panting. Fingers slid absently over Roy’s midriff, trailing in the slickness of his release. Then he felt lips light against his, and he opened lazy eyes to his smiling lover, leaning over him.

“Are you okay?” Edward asked.

“I am so incredibly okay right now that I don’t believe I could properly express it,” Roy said.

Edward smiled. “Roy Mustang at a loss for words? Now I really feel special.”

Roy kissed him, just to wipe the smug grin off his face.

If he had waited just a second longer, the gunshots from outside and the distant sound of glass shattering would have done the job just as well.

Before Roy could even register what his ears were telling him, Edward had rolled them both off the bed. In the next instant he had locked the door and pulled the sturdy dresser in front of it as a barricade. Mindful of the curtained window, Roy crouched low to the floor and scrambled for his clothes, cursing under his breath. He was pulling on his uniform pants when the sound of booted feet pounded past in the hallway. More gunfire erupted, this time from the room next door.

The Führer’s room.

“Another assassination attempt,” Roy said quietly as he shrugged into his shirt.

“Well it isn’t room service, that’s for sure.” Kneeling on the floor, Edward’s face was tilted up in his now familiar scenting-the-air position as he zipped up his pants. “Do you have your gloves?”

Roy was already pulling them out of his jacket and slipping them on.

Without a word, the two men crawled to take up positions on opposite sides of the barricaded door. Roy watched as Ed’s eyes unconsciously tracked the movements of the people out of sight beyond the walls. The shooting stopped, though hurried footsteps and anxious shouts continued. After a few long minutes amber eyes centred on the doorway between them. Both men tensed when the
doorknob rattled. Then someone knocked.

“Hey Ed, are you in there?” Havoc’s voice was anxious. “We’ve secured the area.”

Edward jumped to his feet as he answered. “Yeah, I’m here. The Führer is with me. He’s fine.”

Roy heard Havoc’s muffled sigh as the Führer helped Edward to push the dresser out of the doorway.

“That’s a relief,” the Major General said. “Because I’d hate for Hawkeye to have to waste a perfectly good bullet on me.”

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It was another two hours before a frantic Hawkeye and the rest of the Führer’s entourage arrived at The Mews. They had encountered trouble on the way out of town: the midtown bridge over the Mattawari had been destroyed in a deliberate act of sabotage, and Roy couldn’t help but recall his conversation with Mayor Huber that morning. Caught in the ensuing panic, the Führer’s motorcade couldn’t move forward, and couldn’t backtrack to an alternate route. All they could do was assist local emergency crews with the injured, as well as crowd and traffic control, until the gridlock was cleared. By then, unable to contact The Mews by telephone, Roy’s staff had been sure they would face further disaster when they reached the manor, and Hawkeye sorely regretted her decision to send Roy in a separate party.

It had been agreed that a large procession would make an easy target for the enemy; therefore Roy would not be in that procession. The Führer had arrived at General Walther’s estate ahead of his retinue because Havoc, leading another, unobtrusive little convoy, had taken a roundabout, less predictable route out of West in an effort to slip under the enemy’s radar. Unfortunately, it appeared that the enemy had anticipated that tactic and used it to their advantage, attacking the Führer while he was separated from most of his security forces.

As it was, three people at The Mews were dead: Matthews the head butler, a soldier from Havoc’s assigned security detail, and one other unidentified man. Breda had determined that Matthews and the soldier had been in the Führer’s assigned room, and speculated that they had been closing the drapes when they were shot through the windows. With the light behind them, it would have been difficult for the shooter to establish who he was shooting at; the silhouette of one uniformed soldier was much like any other, regardless of rank. The third dead man had been killed inside the room when the rest of the security team working under Jean Havoc had stormed in. The man had refused to drop his weapon and surrender, firing on the soldiers at the door instead. Breda speculated that the man had been checking to make sure his target was eliminated. The Intelligence chief currently had teams out combing the grounds and questioning the staff, searching for anything they could find.

In the mean time Hawkeye had flooded The Mews with her most trusted security personnel, much to General Walther’s consternation. The Hawk wasn’t about to back down from West Headquarters’ commander over personnel this time however; this was one pissing contest worth playing, and she played to win. She was the Führer’s Head of Security. Her word was law when it came to his safety, and she was already burning with shame that she was being out manoeuvred by clever assassins at every turn. General Walther didn’t have a chance in hell of pushing his security team over hers.

The cozy sitting room where Roy had entrenched himself was situated in the centre of the sprawling
manor, and therefore windowless. The only entrance was attended by two burly soldiers standing guard outside. Generals Hawkeye, Walther, Ethan, and Dearth had joined the Führer there as soon as they arrived. And of course, Edward had been there all along, sitting subdued by the door. Making themselves comfortable in the warm, fire lit room, both parties quickly brought the other up to date on what had transpired that evening.

“I’m sure I speak for everyone present when I say how glad I am that you escaped this attack unharmed, My Führer,” General Walther said, to a chorus of agreement.

“And once again you found yourself in the thick of it, young Edward,” Dearth said jovially. “How did you manage it this time?”

“I took a cab in from Scarborough,” Edward explained. “I was visiting an old friend this afternoon.”

“How fortunate that you were in a North Shore suburb, and not delayed in your arrival as well,” Ethan said. “I shudder to think what might have happened if our Führer had not been passing the time with you in your quarters.”

There was absolutely no malice in Ethan’s statement, but General Dearth still curled a lip in revulsion as he turned away from the young blond man. It appeared Roy’s rebuke aboard the train to Creta hadn’t been strong enough. He would have to correct that in private, and soon.

A quiet knock at the door preceded the arrival of Major General Havoc. He entered quickly and snapped a salute to the senior officers present.

“Gentlemen, Ma’am, I have some information from Brigadier General Breda.” Havoc pulled his notepad out of his pocket and flipped the pages. “According to one of the maids, the head houseman, Terrence Matthews, received a call early this afternoon after word was received from General Walther that the Führer would be staying at The Mews. The maid doesn’t know who the caller was, but from what she overheard, it was someone Matthews knew quite well. She heard him talking with the caller about the Führer’s accommodations, and quotes him as saying, ‘Thank you for the excellent suggestion’, and, ‘I look forward to seeing you, Sir’. Immediately after that, she was instructed to prepare the South Sunroom for the Führer.”

The Führer and his Generals absorbed that information without comment, but they were all likely thinking the same thing: the person who had made that call could very well be present in this quiet sitting room.

“I’m sorry, My Führer.” Robert Walther, standing to bow low, was the first to break the uneasy silence. “I have failed you. I invited you into my home and put you in deadly danger, however unwittingly.”

“No apologies are necessary, Robert,” the Führer answered. “I have no doubt that your recommendation was made in my best interests. It is clear that we have a traitor in our midst, however.”

“I fear for your safety, Sir, here at The Mews,” Walther said.

“Might I offer my services?” Ethan put in. “The Ethan family has held great influence in the west for many generations, and we have several holdings in and around the city. I believe our lovely townhouse on the Bridle Path would be suitable to your needs. I had planned to extend an invitation earlier, but General Walther beat me to it.”

The Führer trumped his security chief on the verdict. “I think we’ll stay put for the moment,” he said.
“With increased security and regular patrols, I don’t believe we’ll have to worry about another attack at The Mews.”

“A wise decision, Sir.” General Walther clasped his hands behind his back. “Transitions are always difficult situations to defend.”

“I agree. It is also clear that the enemy is escalating their offensive against you, Sir,” Hawkeye observed. “This attack was well planned and executed, given the limited window of opportunity in which they had to act. I’m positive that they were fully prepared to make an attempt on your life at the midtown bridge had you been with us in the motorcade. As well, if you been in the South Sunroom you very likely would have been killed. Our enemy is quick and meticulous in their preparations.”

“Maybe they’re getting desperate,” Havoc suggested. “Could they have some sort of deadline? Maybe they want to prevent the non-aggression pact with Creta.”

“Blowing up a bridge in the middle of a city is certainly an act of desperation,” Dearth agreed.

“Or the act of someone with a total disregard for innocent bystanders who might be caught in the crossfire of an attempted assassination.” Roy scowled. “They appear to have ample resources at their command, to mount a concentrated offensive on such short notice.”

“Maybe West is their base of operations,” Edward said quietly. “If so, they would have more resources to work with here. They also know the city well enough to be able to choose a place to set an ambush that could double as a major delaying action for reinforcements if their target managed to slip by. There’s at least one person on their team who is acquainted closely enough with General Walther to be trusted by his houseman, and to be familiar enough with the layout of his country home to hand pick a suitable room for an attempted assassination.”

“Ridiculous!” General Dearth exclaimed, eyeing Edward with disdain before turning to Roy. “My own esteemed family is among West City’s most honored citizens, and I can assure you that there are none more loyal than those who make the west their home!”

General Walther grimaced. “I sincerely hope you are mistaken, young man,” he said to Edward. “I’d hate to discover that a trusted friend of my family is a traitor.”

General Ethan frowned, but kept silent.

Edward didn’t immediately respond. He looked at Roy and his assembled generals for a long moment, expression thoughtful.

“I hope I’m wrong, too,” he finally said.
The next morning found Roy desperately trying to hide that fact that he was having some major problems easing back into his role as Führer of Amestris. He had hoped that the previous day's mild disorientation would be resolved, but instead, it seemed to have intensified. He found he was suffering from a severe case of culture shock, going from the freedom of the Mausers' circus, to the confines of power and privileged as defined by his position as supreme leader of the country. Even something as simple as dressing for the day forced him to become aware of not just the differences between his life just two days ago and now, but also the similarities, and he was hard pressed to understand how his uniform was any less of a disguise than his clown makeup had been. Who was Roy Mustang? The Führer? The Tramp? Both? Neither? Was there even a difference?

Thanks to Hawkeye's insistence that Edward stay with the Führer overnight - a security measure neither man was inclined to argue - Roy was delighted to start his day with two rounds of invigorating morning sex. Unfortunately, he soon discovered that the rest of the day was going to be a long, laborious, downhill slide.

Arriving at headquarters he was confronted with a literal mountain of paperwork that easily rivaled the Briggs Wall in height, and the two nervous Majors assigned by Hawkeye to assist him visibly flinched at his irritated growl. He reflected for a moment on the course of his military career, and how it seemed that the higher up the ladder he had climbed, the more paper he was confronted with. He had always expected that once he reached the top, he could relegate most of it to the people under him. No such luck. Many of the files that crossed Roy's desk were elements of larger, highly sensitive portfolios that could only be authorized or rejected by the overall man in charge. And now that he actually was that man? Well. If he had known way back in Ishbal just how much paperwork was involved in the efficient running of a country, he might have reconsidered his options.

In between bouts of paper wrangling, Roy also had to field telephone calls and accept visitors seeking audience with the Führer in hopes he might intercede to solve a few pressing local problems. Most of the petitioners who were able to make it through to the Führer's inner sanctum had requests for help with issues which were of legitimate concern. Others? Not so much. The sense of entitlement demonstrated by some of West City's noble families was frankly astonishing. Why they believed that the supreme leader of their country might wish to mediate petty social conflicts was quite beyond him, but he'd had deflected no less than eight so far that morning. He had also turned down invitations to General Walther's formal ball from five confident young women and one enterprising young man. Roy wasn't sure how they had convinced his two aides to allow a personal audience with the Führer, but he could make an educated guess. Likely they had bullied their way in by citing ties to West's affluent families, and threatening his aides' careers. In that case, even if Roy had been in the market for an escort, the Führer definitely had higher standards than to attend with an overindulged, self entitled snob.

Between the workload and his nagging sense of dislocation, by ten o'clock Roy had a throbbing headache so bad that he could barely concentrate on the reports in front of him. He was also completely fed up with the number of trivial interruptions. He had reamed out his two assistants, criticised their inefficient screening of calls and visitors, and told them that he was not to be disturbed until noon.

Not five minutes later the door opened and Lady Herlinda Grand-Hodenberg walked in unannounced. Poised and charming, the Lady was the niece of Brigadier General Basque Grand, the Iron Blood Alchemist, and Roy was not surprised that his aides had been unable to prevent her intrusion.
Roy had been assigned to Basque Grand's unit during the Ishblan Rebellion, and had found his Colonel to be a charismatic man of honor and conviction. Much like Roy himself, Grand had always held his subordinates in high regard, often leading the charge into battle regardless of his higher rank and against the protests of the soldiers under his command. He had even attempted to initiate peace talks between the Ishbalans and Führer Bradely, unaware that the so-called rebellion had been incited by Bradley himself, all in accordance with Father's brutal and bloody master plan. Roy had been very sorry to hear that Grand had become a victim of the mad Isbalan, Scar, and firmly believed that had he survived, the Iron Blood Alchemist would have been a valuable ally in the battle at Central Headquarters on the Promised Day.

Years later, as a General, Roy had been pleased to meet the Brigadier General's niece, Lady Herlinda, and had occasionally had the pleasure of her casual company at official state functions over the years. The same age as Roy, she was a woman of fine moral character, much like her distinguished uncle. Her husband, an officer stationed at West Headquarters, had been killed in battle on the Promised Day, fighting against General Armstrong’s forces in Central. The current Führer did not hold that against him; he had firsthand experience with following orders unquestioningly, however objectionable those orders might be. As a member of two of Amestris' noble families, Lady Herlinda had easily maintained her military contacts after her husband's death. With her children grown and making their own way in the world, she had plenty of time to entertain, and often attended formal events on a General's arm. It was rather unusual for her to be seen on base, however, and Roy wondered what had prompted this visit.

He stood and moved around his desk to greet her. "Lady Herlinda, how nice to see you," he said, smiling.

"Führer Mustang, please pardon the intrusion." She met him and offered a hand.

He accepted it in both of his with a small, gallant bow. "Consider it pardoned," he said. "I was just considering a short break; your arrival is most timely."

"Gallant, as always," the Lady murmured, lowering her eyes demurely and brushing back a lock of dark blond hair. "I know how busy you are. I came at the urging of Lady Emmeline, to convey our great relief that you have returned to Amestris unharmed."

Ah, yes. Lady Emmeline Hodenberg, Grand Matriarch of the Hodenbergs, always angling to enhance their standing and status. Recently celebrating her ninetieth birthday had done nothing to slow her down. She was intense and intelligent, putting to shame people half her age. Roy rather admired the spritely dowager, though he immediately began to speculate as to how he might figure into her current schemes.

"Thank you," the Führer said. "I'm quite relieved myself. I wonder why she didn't convey that message in person, at General Walther's Ball this evening."

The fishing expedition had begun, but who was the fisherman? Roy was fairly certain that Herlinda was the bait.

"Unfortunately, she may not be able to attend," the Lady said sadly. "She is feeling a bit under the weather."

"I'm sorry to hear that," the Führer said. "Surely you will be attending, however."

"I do have a standing invitation but I have yet to receive a suitable arm on which to attend, and I would never deign to be there unescorted."
There it was; an attempt to finagle an invitation to attend the Ball with the Führer. Though to be honest, if Edward had refused him, Roy would have been tempted to accept the Lady's offer. She was always delightful company, and very easy on frazzled nerves.

Herlinda took Roy's pause for careful consideration, and pressed what she assumed was an advantage. The Lady moved close, close enough for her stylish skirt to brush against his legs. Looking up at him, sky blue eyes earnest, she placed a slim hand lightly on Roy's arm.

"It has been a long time since we have had the pleasure of each other's company, and I find that I have missed you," she said softly. "When my Charles was alive, loneliness was a foreign concept to me, and afterward, my time was devoted to caring for my two boys. Now, however, I find that my life is quite empty. I'm still young enough to want more. I think about you often, and wonder if you might feel this way too."

So an invitation to the Ball wasn't the only thing Lady Herlinda was after. A pity. Even without his current involvement with Edward, what the Lady wanted Roy could not provide. She was a casual acquaintance, perhaps even a friend, but Roy was not inclined to venture any further down that particular road with the Lady. Herlinda was also a member of a very influential family, however, and therefore had to be let down gently.

He took Herlinda's hands in both of his and held them to his chest. "I did feel that way, not long ago," Roy told her, his voice low. "And then someone I knew years ago came back into my life. He and I have something of an understanding, and while I must admit that I have no idea where we are going or how we will get there, I find it to be a most exhilarating journey. I'm sorry, my Lady."

And standing there, her hands enclosed in his, so close that he could feel the lady's warmth, so close that he could easily see the pulse in the hollow of her throat, so close that bowing his head the scant few inches to her upturned face would bring their lips together, was how Edward found them when he walked through the door.

"Oops," was all Edward said, slamming on his brakes and ducking his head in embarrassment. He started to backpedal out of the room.

Roy stopped him.

"Edward, I was wondering when you might show up," Roy said, stepping away from the Lady. "Allow me to introduce you to Lady Herlinda Grand-Hodenberg; my Lady, Mr. Edward Elric."

Edward stepped forward and offered his hand. The Lady took it lightly, eyes wide.

"The Fullmetal Alchemist? An honor, Mr. Elric," she said. "My sons used to collect news articles about you. They filled a fair number of scrapbooks, as I recall. They were great admirers, and still are to this day. As am I."

Edward took it in stride. "Thank you, my Lady," he said, grinning. "I'm not state certified anymore though, so my Fullmetal days are over."

"I find that difficult to believe," the Lady responded with a twinkle in her eyes. "I have heard that you are traveling with the Führer's retinue. Are you planning to be reinstated into the military?"

The blond man grimaced. "No ma'am," he said in no uncertain terms.

Herlinda found Edward's open aversion to the idea amusing. She turned back to the Führer, her demeanor still playful. "You made a mistake letting this one get away," she stated.
"To whom are you referring?" Roy murmured, always the flirt. It was second nature.

Herlinda blushed and lowered her eyes. "Both, perhaps." She met his gaze again and offered her hand. "But I fear I have taken up too much of your time, my Führer. I shall leave you to your work, and hope to see you again this evening. Please do save a dance for me."

"Of course. I look forward to seeing you again."

Roy was self conscious as he bent graciously over the Lady's hand, wondering how Edward was taking his idle flirting. He spared a sideward glance to note Ed's total indifference.

That was a relief; Roy had feared some sort of histrionic reaction and the resulting damage control required. At the same time, he was just a little bit put out that Edward didn't seem to care that his lover was openly flirting with another. Roy knew how he would feel if the situation was reversed.

"Will you be attending the Ball this evening, Mr. Elric?" Herlinda asked.

"Wouldn't miss it," Edward said without a hint of sarcasm.

"Then I hope to see you there. I'm sure you have many interesting adventures to relate."

"Not really."

The Lady pouted. "Men with their secrets," she sniffed, feigning annoyance. "Didn't you spend nearly a month alone in the mountains with our Führer? That is one adventure about which I would love to hear a detailed account."

Edward mulled that over. "Well, I will admit that it was . . . pleasurable." He cast a fleeting look at Roy, smile roguish.

The lady's eyes widened, putting two and two together. She glanced at Roy, then back at Edward. And then she smiled, widely and honestly.

"Ah. In that case, Gentlemen, I wish you good journey," she said, directing a mischievous glance at the Führer.

And with that, Lady Herlinda breezed out of the room.

"What did she mean, 'good journey'?” Edward asked when the door closed behind her.


Ed frowned. "For what?"

"For that little display. I hope I didn't make you uncomfortable."

"I know who you are," Edward said with a shrug.

Once again Roy felt a little miffed. Was the young man that understanding, or was it that he simply did not care? The Führer gave his head a mental shake. That was his fatigue talking, playing up his insecurities. Edward had said more than once that he did not want to get in the Führer's way. Why would Roy question that, when Ed had proven time and again that he would do anything in his power to protect Roy, even risking of his own safety, his own life? Roy knew his concerns were unreasonable, and this damn headache was making it difficult for him to sort out his thoughts. He pushed his irritation aside.
"Thank you for being so understanding," Roy said graciously, earning a grin. "I'm glad you came in when you did."

"You can thank Hawkeye; she sent me." Ed's grin grew cocky. "It appears that your aides are having a hard time keeping the riffraff out of your hair. I offered to stand in as your bouncer."

And unofficial body guard, too, if Roy knew Hawkeye, and he most certainly did. She was likely concerned that Roy's aids might inadvertently allow audience to someone whose aggressive intentions did not include asking the Führer for a date. The guards at the door could pat down visitors for concealed weapons. Edward could pat down their Qi for ill will.

"Have a seat, then," the Führer said. "You can see what leading this country is really like." His smile was rueful.

"No thanks," Ed said, though not without sympathy. "I can't guard the door if I fall into a boredom induced coma. I'll be in the outer office, taking care of pest control."

Edward left, and for the rest of the morning the number of supplicants who were able to gain access to the Führer was drastically reduced. It appeared that the headstrong blond on guard duty would not be easily fooled or bullied by West City's elite, and while he was grateful, Roy hoped the resulting fallout wouldn't be too heavy. He already had enough to deal with; he didn't have the time or inclination to placate West City's affronted social and political elite on top of everything else.

By the time noon rolled around Roy's headache had put him in an increasingly foul mood. Strictly as a means for reducing stress, and thus possibly the pounding inside his skull, the Führer had given some serious thought to engaging his bouncer in a joint effort to test the structural integrity of his desk. There was still far too much traffic in and out of the office however, and regardless, Roy was already hard pressed to catch up on all the myriad issues that had been put on hold until his return. He couldn't help but wonder just what Acting Führer Grumman had been doing while Führer Mustang was absent. From the vast number of serious matters awaiting him, Roy had to wonder if the elderly man had tended to any affairs of state at all.

He finished with the document he was currently perusing, and signed his name at the bottom with a relieved flourish. Pushing back from the desk, he gauged the growing stack of documents in his out basket and decided that lunch with Edward would be his reward for diligently performing his most tedious of duties.

And just as he came to that decision, the door to his office opened, and Hawkeye stepped in, followed closely by Edward.

"I'll take over, Edward," the Hawk was saying. "Go ahead and enjoy your lunch."

"Make sure he eats," the blond instructed. "He has a headache."

Roy thought he had been able to hide it. "You're going out? I was going to invite you to have lunch with me."

"I'm meeting a friend," Edward said apologetically. "I'll be back in time to join you at Walther's party tonight."

Roy couldn't hide his irritation. "Who's the friend?"

"Karl Koreander," Edward said. "He owns a bookstore."

"Of course he does."
Edward and Hawkeye frowned at the Führer's disgruntled tone. Then Edward grinned, sharktoothed.

"You going to miss me, old man?" the blond asked, his pleased expression muting the insult. "I'm sorry to break it to you, but I'll have to head for Resembool sometime soon, too. I think my automail is screwed up."

"Oh?" Roy said with concern. "Are you in any pain?"

"No," Edward was too quick to assure him. "My balance seems to be a bit off, that's all. I need to get it checked."

"I'm sure there are qualified automail mechanics in West City. Can't you find someone in town to look at it?"

Edward looked at Roy as if he had suddenly sprouted a second head, and the new one was just as unintelligent as the first. "To look at it, preferably from a distance, sure. To touch it, no way in hell. If Winry finds one unidentified fingerprint on her work, I might as well hammer my own brains out and save her the trouble."

The Führer was hiding a full-fledged pout by now. "How soon were you planning to leave? I was hoping we could go back to Central together."

"I don't know, I guess I can hold off for a few days, but not much longer," the young man replied. "I'll probably be gone a couple of weeks. Maybe three." Apologetic once again.

Roy sighed internally. The slow swirl down the toilet this day was taking had just picked up speed. Roy didn't look forward to being without the younger man for an extended period, but Edward was probably lying about the pain, otherwise he wouldn't be in such a hurry to embark on a week-long journey to the other side of the country only to hurry back. Resigned, the Führer pasted on his most casual expression.

"In any case, I'm sure your family will be very happy to see you. Alphonse will likely stuff your suitcase with photographs to bring back with you," he said with a fond smile.

Edward groaned. "No doubt." The blond man turned to the door. "Later, bastard," he said, and with a chopped wave he walked out.

Hawkeye was watching her old friend with a small measure of sympathy as the door closed behind his lover, and Roy permitted himself a sigh. Then he squared his shoulders and headed for the door as well, Hawkeye moving to precede him out.

Three weeks wasn't such a long time. Roy was a busy man; he had a country to run. He probably wouldn't even notice that Edward was gone.

Yeah, right.

Roy resolved to enjoy the few days they had before Edward left for Resembool. He looked forward to seeing him at the Ball that evening, and perhaps talking the young man into joining him on the dance floor. The momentary image of his handsome lover close in his arms, gracefully waltzing across polished woodwork, lit a small smile. He hoped his suggestion didn't earn him a swift automail kick, but Roy was willing to risk it. Perhaps if he offered to let Edward lead, he'd be more open to the idea. Time would tell. Hopefully his headache would ease by then, so he could thoroughly enjoy the experience.

And then, with a nearly audible snap, a fact slid into place in Roy's mind.
When Edward had walked in to interrupt Roy's conversation with Herlinda, he had appeared surprised to see her, but he had to have known she was there. The Dragon's pulse would even have related exactly how close to Roy she was standing. Roy supposed the sudden intrusion could be chalked up to concern for the Führer's safety, though that was something of a stretch. Factor in Edward's suggestive and revealing remark about their adventures in Creta, however, and another explanation for the young man's intrusion became more likely.

Edward had come in to stake his claim, however subtly.

For the first time since leaving The Mews that morning, Roy smiled widely.

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He wasn't smiling when he was summoned to the infirmary later that afternoon. Hawkeye and Havoc escorted Roy through headquarters, on high alert even here. They hurried the Führer into the medical wing and ushered him to a small examining room, taking up positions by the door.

"I was stupid," Edward said sheepishly as Roy rushed in. "Sometimes my reflexes get the better of me and I block a blade with my right arm. Not such a good idea since it's not automail anymore. The whole thing went downhill from there. And to top it all off, the scumbags got away." The man's self disgust was plain.

Edward had never made it to lunch with his friend. On his way through a quiet park along the river, he was attacked by three nondescript men armed with knives. Watching as the medic stitched up the deep gash on Ed's forearm, and taking in the long line of stitches across his chest, Roy knew it could have been much worse. He couldn't help but feel responsible as well, since this attack was likely related to the attempts on Roy's life, evidence that their enemy was becoming frustrated with Edward's constant foiling of their plans.

"Didn't you know they were after you?" Roy asked, deliberately vague so as not to disclose Edward's unique talent to the medic.

"Yeah, I knew." Ed shrugged the shoulder on the side not being stitched.

"Couldn't you escape without engaging them?"

"I could have, but I was hoping to take at least one of them in," Edward replied. "We need answers, and I thought."

"You idiot!" Roy roared, making both Edward and the medic start. "What if they'd had guns? You could have been killed!" He pinched the bridge of his nose, striving for calm.

"Geez, don't hold back, Roy," the blond man said testily. "Tell me what you really think."

"This isn't funny!" The Führer glared, and continued to do so as the Captain went about her business, treating the blond man's injuries.

The medic finished with the stitching. She then painted the wounds with disinfectant and wrapped gauze bandages around Edward's chest and arm. Roy watched silently, glowering at the younger man who wasn't at all alarmed by his lover's indignation.

"If you're done, let's talk painkillers," Edward said to the medic, surprising Roy greatly. Since when did the blond ever grumble about pain?

"I can give you a shot," the woman said, checking her medical cart. "Or if you prefer, you can take
an oral medication. Either way, I'll write you a prescription for some tablets."

"Not for me, for him," Edward said, jerking a thumb at Roy. "The Führer has a headache."

"Yes, and he's sitting right in front of you," the Führer told the medic.

She glanced at Roy with an amused smile, and then gave Edward's uninjured arm a pat. "All set," she said. "Try to take it easy. You don't want to pull out those stitches." The woman turned to Roy. "Would you like something for your headache, Sir?" she asked, deadpan.

"No, thank you," he said with the ghost of a smile. Pain medications didn't usually have much of an effect on his headaches, and as for Edward, as annoying as he could be, Roy really wouldn't have him any other way.

Thanking the medic, Edward stood and reached for his jacket, leaving his torn and bloody shirt on the hook underneath. He carefully tugged the coat on, then grabbed his cane and walked out with Roy following close behind. Hawkeye and Havoc fell into step beside them.

"Your coat's a mess, Boss," Havoc said, eyeing the bloody suede.

Edward fingered the long slash in the sleeve. "It's not too bad. I'll get it cleaned up."

Hawkeye fixed a critical eye on the jacket as well. "It might be best to get a new one," she advised.

"I like this jacket," Edward said plaintively.

Without breaking his stride, Roy clapped his hands and laid one lightly over the slash in the coat sleeve. It only took a moment for the material to knit together and the blood stains to fade.

"Thanks," Edward said, pleased as he examined the repair.

"You're welcome," Roy said curtly, still disturbed by the current turn of events and feeling responsible for Edward's growing list of injuries.

Edward looked at the Führer sideways. "Take it easy, Roy," he said. "This isn't-"

"Fyle mou!" The voice rang out suddenly, and every head turned to see who was rudely shouting unintelligible gibberish in an infirmary.

The Princess Ekaterina was without doubt a beautiful woman, but she was positively radiant as she approached, attention fixed on Edward. Her wide brown eyes sparkled with delight, high cheeks blushed a subtle pink, full lips parted over even white teeth in a wide, warm smile.

And Edward was just as happy to see the Princess. He watched her draw near with honest pleasure, then stepped forward to take her hands in both of his, suffering a kiss to each cheek in greeting. Havoc and Hawkeye stood back, watching with undisguised amusement, as did the Princess' attentive bodyguards.

Roy, not so much.

"Edward-aki! I think you have been avoiding me!" Ekaterina declared with a pout.

"Never, Katitsa mou," Edward denied gallantly, palm over his heart. "My duties have kept me from your side."

The pair looked at each other for a long moment, then both burst out laughing.
"It's good to see you, Kat," Edward said.

"I am pleased to see you as well, my friend," the Princess returned. "I was concerned to hear that you had been injured, and came to see if you are alright." Ekaterina shot Roy an accusing glance, and Roy got the distinct impression that she was holding him accountable for Ed's wounds.

"I'm fine," Edward said. "Just a little scratch. Some people overreact to the smallest injury." He shot the Führer an accusing glance as well.

"Vlaka mou," the Princess said with genuine affection, eyebrow raised as she eyed the bandage under his jacket. "You must be more careful. I wonder if a vacation on Anti-Paxos might do you good. The Ionian Islands are beautiful this time of year, as you well know."

"Maybe next year," Edward said. "I'm working under contract at the moment."

"Next year! Next year!" The Princess waved an exasperated hand. "With you, next year never comes!"

Edward went for the misdirection. "I'd like you to meet some friends." He motioned to the bystandling soldiers and their leader. "Princess Ekaterina, allow me to introduce General Riza Hawkeye, General Jean Havoc, and Führer Roy Mustang."

The Princess raised an eyebrow. "Friends? Then of course, I am pleased to meet you." She took Hawkeye's offered hand, then a starry-eyed Havoc's, and finally turned to Roy. "Führer Mustang I have met." It was obvious that her opinion of Amestris' leader remained rather low, even with Edward's endorsement.

The Cretian returned her attention to Edward. "If you have some time in your busy schedule, I would like to speak with you," she said.

The blond man smiled. "Sure, but first I need a new shirt," he replied. "I also missed my lunch appointment, so I have to call and arrange to meet him somewhere. Would you care to join us? I know this great Aerugoan place on the Riverwalk."

Ekaterina latched onto Edward's arm, delighted, and said something soft and sultry in Cretian.

Edward's grin widened. "Dream on, my friend," he responded, and Roy felt a resentful ember flare raw in his chest.

"If you will excuse us, your Highness, my Generals and I must get back to our duties," The Führer stated. "My unscheduled holiday in the Viridian Mountains has created quite a backlog of urgent matters that must be attended."

The look Hawkeye shot her leader was priceless. Roy Mustang, rushing to do paperwork? Unheard of.

"I hope you enjoy your luncheon date," the Führer continued, tone light. "Will you be attending the Ball this evening, my Lady?"

"Yes," Ekaterina said. "Hopefully, on the arm of an old friend." She smiled at Edward.

"Sorry," Edward said, and he did appear regretful. "I already have a date." He looked at Roy, eyebrow raised.

The Princess glanced at the Führer as well, expression unreadable. "Ah, I'm sorry as well. In that
case, I will be there on the arm of my father's trusted advisor. You remember Grand Duke Alexandros Zaimis?"

"How could I ever forget good old Alitsa?"

"Please don't call him that to his face," the Princess asked with a grimace. "It infuriates him."

"Why do you think I do it?"

Edward crooked an elbow, and the Lady's took his arm. He steered her toward the exit, tuning to wink at Roy as he moved away. Then the two young people strode off, chatting amicably in High Cretian, trailed by the Princess' guards.

Roy wasn't sure what he was feeling as he watched them out of sight, but it wasn't pleasant.

Hawkeye snapped him back from grim thoughts. "Shall we go, Sir? As you so accurately told her Majesty, there are several urgent matters we have to attend to before we break for the day."

"Of course, General."

As the Führer walked back to his office, he shook off the ill will he had suddenly developed toward the Princess. He had no reason to worry. Edward regarded her as a friend; he had no romantic intentions towards her.

Did he?
The End

General Walther’s uptown estate was in the heart of West City’s most affluent neighbourhood, and so far the drive in from The Mews had been uneventful. The Führer watched the city scroll past the tinted glass of the limo from between two attentive body guards, his date not present, and though Edward had stated earlier that he would meet him at the Ball, Roy was feeling more than a little put out. He had hoped that the young man would be at The Mews when he’d arrived there late that afternoon to dress for the upcoming formal function, but that had not been the case. No doubt Edward was still out with his bookseller friend and Princess Ekaterina. Roy only hoped that his date had not lost track of time, and would not keep him waiting too long.

Downtown traffic was usually a tangle in the western city, more so now since the Crosstown Bridge had been destroyed, but Roy didn’t mind being fashionably late for his party. In fact, he wouldn’t mind missing it altogether, though that wasn’t an option. He’d had a tedious day dealing with matters of state in the form of endless reams of paper, his only respite the multitude of political sycophants and irritating social climbers making unreasonable demands for his personal attention. His headache still lurked behind his eyes, and his lover had gone to lunch with a gorgeous woman who was clearly enamored of him. All Roy really wanted to do was hunt down the aforementioned lover, spirit him back to The Mews, and crawl into bed, not necessarily to sleep.

That wasn’t going to happen for quite a few wearisome hours, however.

At nearly seven o’clock the limo finally checked through the gated entryway of the Walther estate, effectively leaving the bustling city behind.

The Führer now understood how General Walther could describe The Mews as modest; his uptown manor was even more grandiose. Passing though the arched wrought iron gates was like entering a different world. From the inside, the high, native stone walls were hidden from view by old growth red cedar, accented with grand willows and oaks, hundreds of years old. The grounds were lush and beautifully landscaped, lawns perfectly manicured. The long, tree lined drive approached to circle an immense fountain lit by gaslight in front of the manor house.

The limousine pulled to a stop at the foot of a wide walkway guarded by a pair stone lions, classically worked in serpentine, glowering down from matched stone pedestals. The Führer’s door was opened by a liveried valet, and the Führer slid out of the limousine into early evening air cool with the hint of coming autumn. He mounted the polished marble of the wide front steps, gaze running over the imposing structure before him. To say the house was huge would be an understatement. Built by the Walther family in the late 1600s, the mansion was a massive four stories of Briggs Mountain granite. Designed by an architect famous for his artful creations, the neo-Aerugoan residence featured a wealth of decorative gilding, plaster work, and hand-carved stone. Three winged gargoyles loomed above the entryway cornice.

Ed was going to love it.

Two civilian guards in parade dress bowed the Führer through the immense double doorway into the manor proper. The mansion’s vestibule proved another testament to General Walther’s massive wealth. It spanned thirty feet and featured an ornate carved fireplace, a grand stairway, and mosaic-tile floors. A houseman accepted the Führer’s greatcoat and escorted him through to the grand ballroom. Standing at the top of the imperial staircase, the Führer was announced to the guests already in attendance as he observed the room.

It was, of course, enormous, the stained glass ceiling some two stories above illuminated by the light
of the waxing crescent moon to cast a diffuse patina over the dancers. A matched pair of wide, curving staircases led to a second level gallery that encircled the room to overlook the dance floor, the ornate white balustrade hung with silk streamers of green and gold. The parquet below was ringed with small tables intimately lit with votive candles in cut crystal bowls. On a round dais just off the busy dance floor a string quartet played the lively finale of a popular sonata da camera as Roy descended the stairs.

Robert Walther met his Führer at the bottom. With a smart salute and a wide, delighted smile, he introduced Roy to his charming wife with poise and polish.

And thus the swarming began.

Hawkeye appeared at her Führer’s side as if by magic, joining the two burly bodyguards who had accompanied him from The Mews. Roy made the rounds, accepting the well wishes of West City’ gathered elite, cynically wondering who among them might have had a hand in the attempts on his life. He kept attuned to the occasional announcement of a newly arrived guest, disappointed each time that it was not his date. Surreptitiously checking the time, he was not amused to note that it was nearly eight o’clock. He had been waiting for an hour, and there was still no sign of his missing lover. With champagne flute in hand and remote smile in place, the Führer soldiered on gradually around the room, finally arriving once again beside General Walther.

“I wonder if I might prevail upon you for a few moments in private to collect my thoughts after a challenging day,” the Führer murmured to his trusted General.

“Of course, my Führer,” Walther said with a smart salute. “Please follow me.”

The General led the Führer, his guards, and General Hawkeye down a short hallway off the main hall, sweeping open the heavy door at the end to present a surprisingly cosy study. Unlike the more public portions of the manor house, this room’s decor was rather inelegant. The mismatched collection of furniture was well used but highly polished and lovingly cared for, and Roy couldn’t help but think that this was likely where Richard Walther spent most of his private time. Thanking West’s commander, Roy dismissed Hawkeye with instructions to send Edward to join him in the study as soon as he arrived. The two guards took up positions outside the door, and Roy closed it behind his two officers, shutting out the Ball with a sigh of relief.

In the quiet of the cosy, firelit room, Roy browsed the neat bookshelves, trying with little success to find some sense of equilibrium. True, he had never really enjoyed these kinds of functions. They were a duty he suffered by necessity however, and he usually counted them one of the least onerous he was forced to endure – for example, much less tedious than the teetering stacks of paper that appeared in his in-box every morning. Typically he found it easy to mingle with the guests, making inconsequential conversation, dancing with his colleagues’ wives and daughters, whiling away the evening until he could make his polite apologies and leave. Even before gaining the Führership, he had always been easily able to slip into the perfect persona of calm aloofness, a façade behind which he could observe his colleagues and rivals, giving way nothing. This evening, conversely, he was hard pressed to settle into the familiar routine that usually saw him through. Instead Roy felt as though he was drifting aimlessly, at the mercy of capricious social tides.

He couldn’t help but wonder if this might be just a bit easier with his date by his side. The Führer pulled his State-issued watch out the inner pocket of his formal dress blues and flipped open the cover. He would give Edward ten more minutes to show up, and then, dateless or not, Roy would wade back into the ballroom and make the most of it.

At the eight minute mark there came a quiet knock at the door. Roy opened it with a broad smile, fully expecting to find Edward. Instead, he found Lady Nedra Maule, smiling back just as broadly.
The Führer, professional schmoozer that he was, kept his smile from faltering, though he was more than a little disappointed. The Widow Maule was one of the last people with whom Roy would want to be alone in close quarters. In fact, in any encounter he was forced to endure with the woman he preferred to have as much backup on hand as possible.

Only a few years older than Roy, Lady Nedra, youngest of the prestigious Sauer family’s daughters, had married eighty-six year old weapons manufacturer Edgar Maule, and inherited his fortune a mere two years later when the elderly man suffered a fatal fall down the grand stairway of his country manor. As executor of his estate, Lady Nedra had immediately consolidated her windfall by cutting her husband’s already estranged adult children off from any inheritance, deeming her late husband’s heirs ‘manifestly unsuitable to manage his estate’. Their contest of her claims was still mired in litigation while Nedra ran her deceased husband’s empire with brutal efficiency. The woman was callous, unpredictable, insensitive, and extremely influential in Amestris’ financial circles. While Roy might find her thoroughly unpleasant, Nedra had long been an outspoken supporter of the current Führer’s rise to power, and it was in his best interests for Roy to remain cordial.

That the Lady had more than cordiality in mind became immediately obvious however. With a seductive smile she stepped purposefully into the room and closed the door behind her, then aggressively moved to invade the startled Führer’s personal space. Nedra advanced on Roy predatorily, forcing him to take a few involuntary steps back before she slid an arm around his to lock his elbow with hers and put a halt to his strategic retreat. The low cut neckline of her ball gown showcased an impressive décolletage as she leaned in close, looking up at him with cool calculation, the cloying scent of the woman’s perfume making Roy’s headache worse.

This forceful pursuit was new. Usually Roy’s interactions with the Lady were strictly professional, even outside the confines of their offices; the prestigious munitions magnate and her best customer, the Führer of Amestris, working to maintaining a good business relationship. It appeared that the Lady’s intentions had changed, and Roy’s personal alarms clamored for attention. This was the second time that day he’d been approached by someone he knew rather well who had never demonstrated any sort of romantic interest before.

Allowing mild surprise into his gaze, the Führer smiled. “Lady Nedra, how nice to see you. To what do I owe your inordinately warm greeting?”

The Lady grip on Roy’s arm remained firm. “My dear Führer Mustang, I am so very pleased to see you as well. As for my greeting, I’m merely expressing my extreme relief that you are back on Amestrian soil, safe and sound.”

Roy gave the woman’s hand a light squeeze and gently removed it, unwinding their arms. “Thank you, my Lady. I’m pleased to have survived my accidental holiday as well.”

“You look marvelous for a man who has just spent three weeks living in the most appalling conditions. In fact, you look positively breathtaking. But really, you always do.”

“You should see me first thing in the morning.”

“I would love to,” the woman cooed.

That wasn’t quite what the Führer meant, but he let it slide. His reputation as a lady’s man had never done him any harm. In fact, it had often opened doors unavailable to his rivals. Still, he had no intention of leading this, of all ladies, on.

“Please pardon my jest,” he drawled with a languid smile. “It was quite inappropriate, considering that I am not free at the moment to indulge.”
“So I’ve heard,” the Lady sniffed, undeterred. “A pretty but otherwise worthless little snip has had the audacity to attach himself to you, and even expects you to remain exclusive. For someone who is as good as the game, you really should know better.”

Roy’s smile remained intact, but his internal hackles were raised. “Pretty but worthless? It’s quite clear that you have never met the Fullmetal Alchemist.”

“Most certainly not,” Nedra said imperiously. “Unlike you, my Führer, I was born to my station, and have never been forced into dealings with those beneath me. I suspect that this wily youth has used his prior, professional relationship with you to worm his way past your defences and cloud your judgement. A man in your position must take care not to be exploited by greed and cunning hidden behind a beguiling smile and wanton ways.”

And who knew better than this woman how an intelligent man could be taken in by an ambitious beauty with an agenda? Roy wasn’t sure if he should call her on such hypocrisy, or be touched by her concern. He decided to give her the benefit of the doubt.

“I appreciate your warning, my Lady,” Roy said with a confident smile. “I can assure you, however, that your concern is misplaced. My relationship with Edward Elric is based firmly in friendship; he holds no devious ulterior motive. As for dealing with those beneath my station, I am simply a man among men.”

Nedra gave Roy’s arm a condescending pat, shaking her head. “You came from humble beginnings, and therefore believe all men your equal. But you’re wrong. The cream always rises to the top.” The Lady’s smile widened. “You and I are very much alike. We set our sights on what we want, and work with single minded purpose to attain it. Our only difference is from whence we started. You have had so very much farther to climb, yet here you are, having earned your place among society’s elite. Don’t allow a pretty little hanger-on to use you to gain status he does not deserve. You would be better served by choosing a more suitable companion from among your peers.”

“You, for example?”

“Why not?” the Lady challenged. “We are quite close in age.” True. “We have similar interests.” Roy highly doubted it. “And if the rumors are true, it appears that you might be entertaining the notion of a more lasting relationship, which I find exciting.” Correct, but there was only one particular person with whom Roy might be interested in relating long term. “A woman of my position requires more than a fleeting tryst, after all. I happen to believe that we would make a lovely couple.” Roy manfully suppressed a shudder.

The Führer was saved from responding to the Lady’s observation when the door opened without warning. A frowning Edward stepped into the room, and Roy’s annoyance at his date’s late arrival faded at the enticing vision before him.

As this was a formal evening affair, a perfectly cut black tailcoat and matching trousers topping highly polished black shoes were a must, and Edward had come suitably attired. He still managed to make an eccentric statement. Instead of the traditional black vest or cummberbund, he had chosen instead to wear a blood red waistcoat with matching bowtie over his starched, high collared white shirt. His gleaming golden hair was tied back into a high tail with a ribbon of the same shade of red. Plain gold cufflinks winked from his sleeves as Edward hesitated in the doorway, leaning lightly on his cane. He cut a dashing figure, and it took tremendous effort for Roy to resist moving to his side.

The Führer’s open appreciation of Edward’s appearance was not lost on Lady Nedra. Roy glanced down in time to catch the hostile glare she cast the young man’s way, quickly smoothed over with a strained smile. From the wary look on Edward’s face, he was well aware of the woman’s enmity.
“If I’m interrupting, I can come back later,” the blond man offered, speaking to Roy.

“Please do, child,” the Lady said.

“Actually, my Lady, I have been waiting for Edward most anxiously,” the Führer said mildly. “Please do stay, Edward. My conversation with the Lady is strictly casual.”

Edward advanced into the room. “Sorry I’m late. I had a little trouble with my driver.”

“Oh?” Roy frowned in concern.

Edward shrugged. “I’ll explain later.” He looked pointedly at Lady Nedra, then back at Roy.

“My apologies,” the Führer said, knowing full well that Edward’s glance hadn’t been a reminder for a polite introduction, but playing it that way for the Lady’s benefit. “Where are my manners? Lady Nedra, allow me to present Mr. Edward Elric.”

“Charmed,” Edward said, taking the Lady’s hand briefly and sounding anything but.

Nedra’s strained smile was dangerously close to a sneer. “I’m sure you are, young man. It must be an uncommon treat for you to be permitted to attend a high level function such as this. I hope you don’t feel too terribly out of place.”

“It’s pretty classy, I guess,” Edward said with a lazy smile.

“I wonder if I can do something to put you at ease,” the Lady said, giving it some thought.


“I know!” Lady Nedra clapped her hands. “A joke is always an excellent ice breaker, and I was told a perfectly hilarious one just this morning. Have you heard what the blind Isbalan holy man said when he discovered his temple was actually a brothel?”

“No,” Edward said curtly. “Have you heard what the racist asshole said after she got her ass kicked by the blond guy with the cane?”

“Oh dear,” the woman said fearfully, slipping her arm through Roy’s once again and hugging in close. “Are you threatening me? I meant no harm. I was merely trying to lighten the mood.” She looked up at Roy, eyes innocently wide, but with an unmistakable hint of gleeful spite.

Edward looked at the woman with blatant disgust.

Roy was disgusted too. The Lady had obviously been angling to get under Edward’s skin. He had played right into her hands, and he didn’t even seem to care that he was putting Roy right in the middle, damn it! The Führer of Amestris had more important things to do than play referee in such matters.

“Edward, I believe you owe the lady an apology. Threatening violence over an unconsidered jest, however offensive, is inexcusable,” Roy proclaimed, upset to be put into this position. He glared at the younger man, waiting as the Lady smiled smugly, still clutching the Führer’s arm.

Edward shrugged and turned to the woman. He touched a hand to his chest over his heart, all sincerity.

“I’m deeply sorry that you’re a racist asshole,” he intoned solemnly with a small bow.
Then he looked Roy cockily in the eye, the silent ‘fuck you’ loud and clear, before turning to leave.

“Edward!” Roy barked, outraged. He had forgotten just how easily this blond hellion could push his buttons.

The blond man never paused, never looked back, never answered.

“I’ve heard that the lack of a sense of humor is usually evidence of a severe intellectual deficit,” the Lady said loudly as Edward reached the door. “A consequence of his obvious lack of breeding no doubt. Blood will tell.”

Roy expected Edward to slam the door as he left, but he did not. He simply closed it firmly behind him.

At its quiet click the Führer cast a withering glare at the smugly grinning woman. “How much ‘breeding’ does it demonstrate to assume that there is anything at all funny about demeaning a noble people whose nearly complete annihilation was the result of our deliberate actions?” he asked coldly.

“Your crass attempt at humor reveals far more about your character than your lineage ever could, madam.”

The smirk was wiped from the lady’s face as her jaw dropped. Roy turned on his heel and strode to the door as the woman sputtered something that resembled a defense. The Führer wasn’t interested. He followed Ed’s lead and closed the door firmly behind him. He had to find that infuriating little shit and set him straight, too.

It didn’t take long; Edward hadn’t gotten far. He was a short distance down the hall, heading toward the ballroom. Roy lengthened his stride to close that distance and got a grip on Ed’s shoulder to spin him around.

“What the hell was that?” the Führer snapped.

“I could ask you the same thing,” Edward growled, shrugging off Roy’s hand.

“That was the Führer of Amestris doing damage control for your smart mouth and rude behaviour.”

“The Führer of Amestris can suck it. He’s not responsible for what I say or do.”

“He is when what you’re saying and doing is a reflection on him.” Roy eyed his lover coldly. “Since you claim to be worried about your affect on my reputation, perhaps you should keep that in mind.”

A flush heated Edward’s face, and though his jaw was clenched defiantly, his eyes darkened with something like shame. When he spoke, his voice was low. “Pardon me for thinking about Scar and why he did what he did, and Isa who’s so shy around strangers, and Tula with her little dogs, and every Ishbalan I ever met who saw the colour of my skin and heard me speak and knew I was Amestrian, and still treated me with respect.” He looked at Roy with such betrayal that the Führer almost lost his stern demeanor. “You were there. You went back and spent two years trying to fix it. You’re where you are right now because you want to make sure it never happens again. How is it okay for an ignorant asshole with more money than morals to tell racist jokes, but not okay for me to call her out on it?”

Roy suppressed the small lump that had formed in his throat. The Führer stood firm. “I’m not objecting to the fact that you called her out, but to the way you went about it. How did you ever survive Emperor Yao’s high court? He must have been apologising for you constantly.”

“No, he actually values honesty and trusted me to fight my own battles. Strange, huh?”
Roy scrubbed a hand over his eyes. “Honesty is important to me too. As are tact and diplomacy.”

“Sorry for being a tactless peasant. Should I head for the nearest country club and collect some racial slurs so I can pretend to fit in with your classy friends?”

“Lady Nedra was out of line, but there are more discreet ways to shut down a bigot. The aristocracy require a subtle hand.”

“Fuck them.”

“Not a chance. I have better things to do.”

Roy had hoped to lighten the mood with that, but Edward was not amused. If anything, his frown deepened. “Well, don’t let me keep you,” he said. “I’m sure those ‘better things’ don’t include keeping company with a rude commoner who doesn’t know his place.”

Roy realized right then that Edward just didn’t get it. Ed was who he was, genuinely himself among lowborn and high because social status was irrelevant to him. A kind, honest person earned his respect; a cruel, selfish person earned the sharp edge of his tongue. End of story.

The Führer wished he could afford to indulge that kind of natural candour. He should have considered that well known aspect of Edward’s personality earlier, but assumed that perhaps the young man had grown out of it. It would have to be addressed before Roy could invite his lover to a function of this nature again.

Edward was walking away from him, into the main hall, and Roy let him go. He would speak to him later about the knife-edge on which a head of state had to tread, but right now, they both needed to cool off.

He’d been so looking forward to seeing Edward here tonight, to having the stunning young man by his side, showing him off. So far that plan was a bust. Roy only hoped that he and Ed might still be afforded some time together, once their ire had a chance to cool. At the moment however, the Furher’s hope for a turn around the dance floor with his date in his arms wasn’t too terribly likely to happen.

With an irritated growl the Führer made his way back to the ballroom, bodyguards trailing discretely behind. As soon as he stepped into the hall the circling vultures descended, and once again the Führer was forced to endure the strain of maintaining an affect of cool command in a maelstrom of selfish pride, blatant opportunism, and outright stupidity. Add an argument with his stubborn lover and a throbbing headache into the mix, and Roy found he was even less inclined to play this game tonight. So far the evening was flirting along that fine line between bad and worse.

And that’s when Roy saw Alton Dearth on final approach, whisky tumbler in his hand and a determined look on his flushed face. Great. The Führer still hadn’t found the time to speak with his General about the misconceptions he had concerning Edward’s ‘duties’ and now was not an appropriate time or place either.

“Excellency.” Dearth snapped a salute. “We have a small problem.”

It was that kind of night. “And what is the nature of our problem?”

“It’s Edward Elric, Sir.” Of course it was. “I’m told Princess Ekaterina invited him to accompany her to the festivities this evening, but he turned her down, stating that he was attending with someone else.” Dearth’s scepticism was obvious.
“He is. He is here with me.” Roy’s cold-eyed gaze dared the older man to comment.

He wisely did not. “Regardless, Sir, in my professional opinion, our upcoming negotiations will go much more smoothly if Creta’s chief negotiator is in a more amicable frame of mind, and I believe young Edward may be of some use to achieve that. I attempted to explain this to him earlier. I don’t care to repeat his obnoxious response.”

Roy did not sigh out loud.

“Would you speak with him, Sir?” Dearth continued. “The Princess is here, sitting at a table by the dance floor with her escort. My sources tell me that she is a shrewd negotiator for one so young. At the moment she has a rather negative opinion of Amestris. The company of a handsome Amestrian man whom she appears to admire, paying tribute to all that our proud nation has to offer, might put her in a more tolerant frame of mind.”

As striking as Edward might be, the Führer was certain that Edward’s appearance wasn’t the quality that Ekaterina found most attractive about him; she was arrogant, not shallow. They had a history, the Cretian Princess and the Amestrian ex-State Alchemist, and Roy’s curiosity burned for a history lesson. How close was their friendship? Did that friendship include anything more?

Dearth continued to make his case. “Simply spending a little time with an old friend should not be such a hardship for your companion, particularly when it might further our good cause.”

No, it shouldn’t, even though the thought of Edward keeping company with Ekaterina made Roy uneasy. The Führer didn’t look forward to suggesting Edward spend time with his friend this evening either, particularly after his previous, disastrous exchange with the young man. But with that in mind, it might be a good idea to have Edward sitting where Roy could keep an eye on him, in the company of someone who accepted him as he was, and safely away from those who might have a problem with his blunt honesty.

“I’ll see what I can do,” the Führer said, and Dearth saluted again, this time with his glass, in commiseration.

Now, where had that aggravating troublemaker taken himself off to? The Führer scanned the room, hoping that the blond man hadn’t simply abandoned the manor altogether. Leaving Dearth behind, he began to slowly circulate, pausing here and there to greet well wishers, all the while keeping an eye out for Edward. Glancing up, Roy finally caught sight of him, standing by the railing of the wide gallery that overlooked the ballroom floor. The Führer mounted the stairs, noting that Edward was speaking with a tall, older man Roy did not recognize.

In stark contrast to his pallid skin, the elderly man was dressed in jet black from head to toe, including his dress shirt, tie, and gloves. His wealth of silver hair was as long as Edward’s and similarly tied up in a high tail. As he neared the stop of the stairs, Roy noticed that there appeared to be an array stitched on the man’s glove in black thread, but it was difficult to be sure. And then it clicked, and Roy knew who this man must be.

The black gloves with signature arrays stitched in black were a tradition of the Guild of Paracelsians, who made their home in the village of Cesky Krumlov. The small town on the northwestern edge of Amestris was well known as a Bohemian Mecca for alchemists due to the often unconventional and always esoteric research conducted there. At a function of this calibre, the elderly man could be none other than Wilhelm von Rosenberg, direct descendant of the founder of that order.

Edward had caught sight of Roy as he ascended the stairs, and his expression had gone from animated to guarded in an instant. Damn it.
Von Rosenberg had noted the Führer’s approach as well, and lifted a surprised eyebrow before dipping a low, graceful bow.

“Wilhelm von Rosenberg, I presume,” Roy said, offering his hand.

Von Rosenberg accepted it with a strong grip. “Yes, Führer Mustang,” he confirmed, pleased to be recognized. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“It is my pleasure as well to meet a fellow alchemist and scholar of such high standing,” Roy said with a smile.

“You honor me, my Führer,” the older man said, beaming. “In that case, we are all well met.” The man turned to Edward. “My young friend and I were just discussing Goethe’s distortion and its impact on Grey’s symbology. He has given me a rather unique analysis with respect to the mysterious benzene ring.”

“Otherwise known as the ouroboros,” Edward supplied.

Not a minute in, and Roy was already out of his league. The Flame Alchemist was no slouch when it came to alchemical theory, but discussing the ramifications of abstruse and cryptic minutiae had never held any great interest for him. And right now, frustrated with a nagging headache, he was in no mood to feel inadequate as well.

“I’m terribly sorry to interrupt your conversation, gentlemen, but I actually came up here in search of Edward,” the Führer said before he could dig himself in any deeper. “I have a matter of some import to discuss with him.”

“Ah, a pity,” von Rosenberg said, disappointed. He turned his attention back to the blond man. “I hope we can meet again later,” he said, reaching to take both of Edward’s hands in his. “If not this evening, then it would delight me to have you visit my home in Cesky Krumlov, Fullmetal Alchemist.” The old man held up a hand to forestall Edward’s protest at the use of his old title. “You may no longer be a practicing alchemist, but alchemy is still infusing your soul. I look forward to speaking with you again.”

“I’ve enjoyed our discussion as well, and I’ll be sure to visit,” Edward said, and by the tone of his voice, he too was disappointed to break off their exchange.

Still, without a hint of reluctance he followed Roy back down to the ballroom floor, leaning heavily on his cane and causing Roy a twinge of guilt. His leg brace had been removed only yesterday. Roy should have realized that coming to a function of this nature might be tiring for him, and it reassured him that having Ed sit with the Princess was a good idea. Roy wondered how soon he might be able to escape and take Edward back to the Mews for a good night’s sleep. Roy checked his watch. It was eight forty-five. As the guest of honor, the Führer probably wouldn’t be able to leave any earlier than eleven o’clock for propriety’s sake. Ed didn’t have to stay, however. Roy decided that once Edward had spent some time with Princess Ekaterina, he would convince the younger man to go back to the country estate for a well deserved rest.

“I’m sorry I had to interrupt your trip down memory lane,” the Führer said honestly, “but I want to ask a small favor.”

“Memory lane?” Edward looked at Roy sideways as they walked.

“Since you aren’t an alchemist anymore, I presume that talking theory is somewhat nostalgic for you.”
“Do I have to be an alchemist to talk theory?” The blond was frowning.

“I didn’t say that.” And he really didn’t want to argue. He was tired, his head was pounding, and he wished he had thought before he spoke. He really was off his game. “I just assumed -”

“I’ve always enjoyed pushing the boundaries and playing with ideas. I don’t have to be an alchemist to do that,” Edward explained, too calmly. “There are a lot of theoreticians who can’t transmute: Justus von Liebig, Johann Plattner, Hunter Thompson -”

“But experimentation is crucial; you have no way to test your theories,” Roy couldn’t resist pointing out.

“I do, by way of an awesome little brother who never puts me down because I can’t do it myself.” Edward’s expression was decidedly sour as he noticed General Dearth watching their approach, waiting patiently by the dance floor. “What’s this favor you want?” he asked warily.

Dearth spoke up before Roy could explain. “Ah, Excellency, you found him! Wonderful!” The General gestured animatedly across the parquet with his tumbler and dropped his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “The Princess is just over there, sitting alone and in urgent need of genial company.”

Edward turned a scorching glare on the Führer and said not a word.

“I only ask that you talk to her,” Roy said intently. “I know that she’s your friend. I don’t understand why spending a little time with a friend at a party appears to be a problem for you.”

“It’s ‘spending time with a friend’ when it’s my choice.” Edward’s voice was composed, despite his glare. “It’s an ‘assignment’ when it’s not.”

“Let’s not quibble about semantics,” Dearth advised. “We all have our duties to perform, some more . . . respectable than others.”

And now Roy really wished he’d made time for that conversation with Dearth.

“Oh, so I’m on duty.” Edward wasn’t even looking at Roy anymore. “That explains a few things. I thought I was on a date, but I’m actually just some kind of door prize. How foolish of me to have believed otherwise.”

That cynical barb shot straight over the Major General’s head and lodged directly in Roy’s chest. The sarcasm was lost on the General however. Dearth pressed on, undaunted, taking Edward’s statement literally.

“Then why don’t you take this opportunity to prove your true worth by engaging in a course of action that could be of great service to your country?” the old General asked earnestly.

“Been there, done that, have the scars to prove it. I’d much rather make like a horse, and fuck this shit,” Edward said blandly.

Dearth decided to ignore that, and instead directed his appeal to the Führer. He rubbed a finger along the side of his bulbous, vein-shot nose. “The Princess has been in West City for weeks and likely misses her homeland,” he noted earnestly. “Would the comfort of a friend’s company in the midst of an indifferent crowd of strangers be such an appalling proposition?”

Roy could read from his raised eyebrow what the General wasn’t saying aloud: that playing the flirt to charm an opponent was a tactic for which Roy himself had been notorious throughout his military
career. Was it asking so much that Edward do this as well, as a small favor?

The Führer cast a glance at Edward. He would definitely owe him an epic apology after this, whatever the young man decided to do. The blond’s expression gave away nothing, though he appeared to be gripping the handle of his cane rather tightly. Roy studied him for a moment, considering his options, and then quirked a small smile.

“Of course it is entirely up to Edward; this is not an assignment,” he said, directing his answer at Dearth, though is eyes never left Edward. “My date for the evening might kindly decide to sit with a friend, however. Then these two young people could engage in pleasant conversation, a perfectly innocent demonstration of good international relations. How could anyone object to that?”

Ed held his lover’s gaze for another long moment before turning away. “Fine,” he said without inflection, and then he walked toward the Princess’ table.

Roy followed his progress across the hall, wondering at Edward’s easy capitulation. The younger man’s arrival at the Princess’ side was greeted with a bright, enthusiastic smile and a gestured invitation to join her. Edward slid out a chair and hooked his cane over the back before taking his seat. Ekaterina placed a hand on Edward’s shoulder and leaned in close to speak. Edward did not move away. In fact, he leaned toward the Princess as well. It was perfectly understandable, considering how close they were seated to the musicians, and the overall noise level in the ballroom. Edward turned to look toward Roy, and the Princess did as well.

Roy turned away, hands clasped behind his back, and resisted the urge to frown.

As the evening wore on, Roy continued to be bombarded with constant reminders of why he had come to dislike State functions of this nature so intensely. Every manner of toady, flatterer, sycophant, and hypocritical social climber came out of the woodwork, and vastly outnumbered the people on the guest list with whom Roy would be pleased to spend his time. Often he found his eyes drifting to Edward keeping company with Ekaterina, then smoothing the furrow from his brow. It was just that the pair appeared to be enjoying each other’s company, and Roy envied them. That was what he told himself, doing his best to believe it was the truth. He thought he was doing an admirable job.

So he pushed back his unease, and stoically set about surviving General Walther’s Grand Ball.

He bandied words with his Generals and danced with their wives.

He discussed strategy with West’s elite policy makers and casually flirted with their eligible daughters.

He spoke comfortably with Hawkeye, Havoc, and Breda, and counted the minutes until he could make his polite apologies, offer Edward his arm, and leave.

But as much as the Führer might look forward to the end of this evening, he found that he was also relaxing back into his much practiced routine. With relief, he realized he was finally getting his bearings and returning to normal. He could feel it; he was regaining control. Even his headache was finally easing. For the first time that evening, Roy was truly grateful to General Walther for throwing this party in his honor. As trying, as tedious, and as tiring as it was, it had helped to ground him, and Roy was glad to be here.

A waiter passed close by and the Führer relieved him of a fresh glass of champagne. With the smallest tilt of a smile he took in the glittering, moonlit ballroom, the elegant decor, the chic, sophisticated elite of West City, relaxed in his role at last, content.
Until he looked Edward’s way and saw the blond man’s face light up with that smile, the special one that warmed Roy’s soul.

And Roy was not the recipient.

The jagged bite of pain was sudden and unexpected, and it propelled him across the room.

Standing over the two young people, Roy pushed his anger down deep under his most charming smile.

“Good evening, Princess Ekaterina. I’m sorry to interrupt, but might I have a private word with Edward, if you would be so kind?”

It appeared that the Führer wasn’t quite able to disguise his anger as well as he thought, or the Princess was more sensitive to other people’s moods than she let on. She studied Roy’s face with a small frown, and then cast a troubled glance at Edward. The blond man was frowning as well, but he nodded, and Ekaterina stood.

“Gentlemen,” she said, inclining her head as she walked away.

Roy did not take the seat the Lady had vacated. Instead he continued to loom over his lover in a most intimidating manner. Though his charming smile never faltered, he allowed anger to leak through and frost his gaze.

“You seem to be having a lovely evening,” the Führer said. “Are you having a good time with the Princess?”

“I guess,” Edward said cautiously. “What did I do wrong this time?”

“Not a thing,” Roy told him in a tone that suggested otherwise. “However, I couldn’t help but notice that you appear be having a much better time in her company than in mine.”

“What the hell is your problem?” Ed glared, temper smoldering. “You made it pretty clear earlier that my ‘company’ was causing you problems. And you’re the one who pushed me to talk to her.”

“Perhaps you misunderstood. It wasn’t my intention to suggest that you seduce her.” Roy’s words were ice. “I thought you might need to be reminded who you came here with tonight.”

Edward’s temper flared. “What the fuck, Mustang!” he snapped. “We were talking!”

“She was all over you, while you played the innocent, drawing her in while pretending to hold back,” Roy said coldly. “A very sophisticated seduction technique. My Aunt would be proud.”

“Oh yeah? Would she be proud of you I wonder, manipulating a friend to do your dirty work?” Edward’s quiet words burned with rage. “You invited me here so I could play the good little soldier and butter Kat up. And that’s exactly what I told her, because I’m not you, and I don’t play games with people’s feelings. She knows I’m not interested in anything but friendship with her; I made that clear long ago. But we’ve got a lot of respect for each other. We’ll always be friends. And if you don’t like it, that’s too damn bad.”

This was becoming ugly, but Roy couldn’t seem to stop. “Yes, I’m sure you have many . . . friends, Edward,” he said. “You spend an inordinate amount of time travelling the world. How do you support such a lifestyle? How many friends am I sharing you with?” And immediately knew he had gone too far. He braced for Edward’s explosive reaction, the reaction he deserved.
Which never came. Edward was silent for a moment. Then he took a deep breath and let it out slowly, anger dissipating. His next words were laced with resignation. “You know what? Fuck this. And fuck you. I expected something like this to happen, that you’d eventually get bored and want to move on. You could have just said so. There was no need to get nasty about it.”


“I’m not blind, Mustang, and believe it or not, I’m not stupid.” A darkness passed behind his eyes and was gone before the young man continued. “It’s pretty obvious that you’re embarrassed to be seen with me when you’re with your classy friends. Whatever. They can have you.”

“If this is about Lady Nedra, I -”

“It’s about a lot of things,” the young man cut him off, though not unkindly. “Don’t worry about it,” he said mildly. “I walked into this with my eyes wide open. I knew exactly what I was getting into with you, and exactly how much of a shit you don’t give. The only mistake I made was in believing that friendship was involved.”

It was far too late to take back what he’d said, but Roy tried anyway. “We are friends,” he insisted, then winced to recall the ugly twist he had just given that word. Mind in overdrive, he searched for a way to avert the impending disaster he had set in motion.

“No,” Edward said, voice was low. “As far as you’re concerned, I’ll never measure up to your big shot military pals and these high society snots. I thought I could avoid some of the bullshit by refusing to work for you, but I guess it doesn’t matter whether you’re my commander or not; I’m still just a tool to be used, a means for whatever end you see fit. I always was, and always will be.”

Edward’s words stabbed Roy painfully. “That’s not true,” he stated adamantly, voice a bit louder than he had intended, drawing unwanted attention. Ed was so badly mistaken about Roy’s motivation that the older man didn’t know where to start fixing this. An apology stuck to the end of his tongue, and he worked to shake it loose. He didn’t get the chance.

Edward shrugged. “Deny it all you want, Mustang, but actions always speak louder than words.” Pulling his cane from the back of the chair, Edward stood up and turned his back on his Führer. “I guess our research project is finally complete. I have all the data I need.” Looking over his shoulder with a small smile, he said, “It’s been fun, bastard,” and he walked away.

Roy watched in stunned disbelief as his now former lover disappeared into the crowd. It was over? Just like that?

“The infamous Mustang charm strikes again.” The voice was low, and amused.

Roy glanced back to discover Jerald Ethan, with Fay Rudland on his arm, walking up to stand just behind him. Roy was glad he was still in shock. It prevented stunned desolation from twisting his features. He pushed all his inner turmoil behind the impervious Führer persona it had become second nature to present, and turned to address his subordinates.

“Lieutenant General, Colonel,” he greeted them, voice perfectly under control. “I hope you are enjoying your evening.”

“More than you are, I’m afraid, Sir.” Ethan’s tone was sympathetic. “My date is rather more practical than yours.”

The Führer raised an eyebrow. It was his only response.
“I’m sure you didn’t mean to lead the young man on,” Ethan commiserated. “He is young and idealistic, and likely didn’t understand his subordinate role. You must admit that it’s better this way. He was doubtless becoming far too attached.”

The eyebrow remained raised, but Roy reflected on the fact that it was Roy himself who had become attached. If he had kept his manipulative, condescending, jealous, stupid mouth under control, he would still be attached.

“I’m sure I have no idea what you might be inferring,” the Führer said, warning in his tone.

Ethan ignored it, determined to speak his mind. “Men such as ourselves, who have the weight of the world on our shoulders, can’t afford to be distracted by the trivial responsibility of maintaining a ‘meaningful’ relationship.” Ethan gently pulled Rudland’s hand from his arm and transferred it to his Führer’s. “But we are still men, with all the weaknesses that men must endure. Best to indulge them with those who understand their true role, and don’t presume to higher worth.”

With a short bow followed by a smart salute, Ethan walked away.

“I’m sorry Sir,” Rudland said softly, taking her arm from Roy’s.

The Führer noted his subordinate’s frown. “I take it you don’t agree with General Ethan’s world view,” he observed.

“Permission to speak freely, and confidentially, Sir?”

“Of course,” Roy responded.

Colonel Rudland met her Führer’s eyes unwavering. “He is a good commander, but something of an arrogant ass.”

“Hmm.” Roy was glad he wasn’t the only one who thought so.

“Perhaps Edward will have second thoughts,” the Colonel ventured, standing now at ease beside the Führer.

“No.” Roy really didn’t want to talk about this; didn’t even really want to think about it. He’d screwed up royally, and there wasn’t much he could do about it. “He’s stubborn, and proud, and not the type to change his mind. And he has every right to be angry with me.”

“I’m sorry Sir,” the Colonel said again.

The Führer straightened his shoulders and clasped his hands behind his back. “This is what comes of setting ones sights too high, I suppose.”

“He is quite young, Sir, and probably didn’t realize to what heights he aspired,” Rudland noted. “In time he might come to understand what you . . .”

“I was speaking about myself,” Roy corrected. “Anyone who knows Edward Elric also knows that he is far more than I deserve. I suspect that Jerald may be right. When it comes right down to it, I just don’t have what it takes to strike an equitable balance between my career and a personal relationship. I had hoped that Edward might understand the all-consuming nature of my commitment, but it appears that I was mistaken. I thought . . . that . . . Oh.”

Roy’s voice trailed off, because he was wrong. Edward did understand what it was to have a goal that transcended everything else in his life. He knew exactly what kind of commitment Roy had
made, because he had made one just like it himself – years ago, to his brother. And he had finally satisfied that commitment, at great cost to himself. However, as dedicated as he had been to achieving his goal, Edward had never once lost sight of what really mattered.

People. And not just family, and friends. All people were important. Everyone mattered.

In the midst of his own desperate struggle the Fullmetal Alchemist had always done everything in his power to lend a hand to others, often putting himself in danger to do so, accepting nothing in return. He had refused to put his goal above the wellbeing, the lives, of others; refused to use a Philosopher Stone to retrieve Alphonse from the Gate; refused to allow anyone but himself to suffer the consequences of his mistakes. He did not take. He gave. His personal code of honor demanded no less. He had been one of the most powerful alchemists Roy had ever known, and the noblest of souls. The Alchemist for the People.

The broken child Roy had manoeuvred into his command in hopes of furthering his own agenda had grown to become so much more than the malleable pawn Roy had anticipated. Surpassing all of Roy’s expectations Edward had ranged the country in the military’s name, committing justice. In the end, he had for all intents and purposes saved Amestris, if not the world. Anyone else would believe they were owed a great debt of gratitude. Not Edward. Suggest it and he would shrug it aside, saying that he had only done what he had to do. Nothing more. Edward Elric was a unique individual.

And in the midst of it all Edward had somehow become Roy’s friend. Underneath the city he had saved Roy from himself, not with the threat of a bullet to the head, but with the compassionate conviction of his words and actions. He had stood sweating with Envy clutched in his hand, knowing that Roy was fully prepared to incinerate the homunculus right there and damn Ed for collateral damage. He had demanded that Roy face the monster he would become with just one more snap of his fingers, because he couldn’t stand by and watch Roy destroy himself. The homunculus would have died by the Flame Alchemist’s hand and taken Roy’s soul, and all his dreams, all his promises, to hell with him. Edward had stopped him, and with the help of Scar and Hawkeye, had made him think, really think, about what he was about to do. Roy firmly believed that he would not be where he was today but for that.

And how many times had Edward protected Roy in the last few months, putting himself in the line of fire without hesitation? At Whispers. In Creta. At The Mews. He was willing to risk his life to keep Roy safe for no other reason than friendship. And he had trusted Roy with his life as well, because he believed Roy to be his friend, too.

And Edward had been the most exhilarating of lovers. Passionate. Playful. Bold and uninhibited. As in everything else, he did not demand. He inspired. Ed in all his fierce glory blazed like the sun. How had Roy ever imagined he might tame such a creature? How in all his arrogance had he ever believed that he should? Edward had chosen to be with Roy of his own free will. He had asked for nothing, and had given Roy everything.

And Roy had repaid him with condescension, arrogance, and scorn. This evening he had treated Edward as if he were nothing more than a willful child, berating him for his blunt honesty, manipulating Ed’s protective nature to keep him in line. He had belittled the young man’s interests. He had pushed a reluctant Edward to curry favor with a political rival, and then dared to call the young man’s character into question when he was successful. No wonder Edward had come to the conclusion that Roy was done with him. No one would expect a trusted friend and lover to treat them so poorly.

Roy could make any excuse for his appalling behaviour that he wanted: that he was tired after a hard day; that he was frustrated with the petty and demanding people he had to deal with; that the plot
against him and the toll it was taking on innocent bystanders was weighing heavily on his conscience; that he was experiencing difficulty getting back into the mindset that his role as Führer required; that all of this together had him teetering off balance. All of those mitigating factors were true, but even so, it all came down to the same thing: Roy had treated Edward with disdain and taken him for granted, and the fact that Edward had apparently expected something like this to eventually happen made this evening’s conclusion inevitable.

Roy had screwed this up, after the spirit of his best friend had invaded his dreams to warn him not to.

“I’m an idiot,” the Führer said with deep conviction.

Rudland regarded her commander sympathetically for a moment. Then a small smile tilted her lips.

“That might very well be true,” she said. “But sometimes in the midst of a crisis of understanding, a simple, heartfelt apology can go a long way.”

The Führer gave that some thought, and decided it was sound advice and definitely worth a try. Particularly since he was sorry for his recent behaviour and wanted Edward to know, if nothing else.

As he stood at ease beside his subordinate, the musicians struck up a lively waltz, and Roy offered Rudland his hand. The Colonel raised an eyebrow, but did not hesitate to accept. The Führer smoothly spun his partner onto the dance floor, immersing them in the ebb and flow of the dance, hoping to lose himself to the step and glide of three quarter time. It didn’t work. All he could think about was how he had blown his chance to do this with Edward, possibly forever. The waltz ended, and Rudland excused herself, leaving Roy to his regretful musing.

The evening dragged after that. It seemed there was no end to the procession of petitioners begging the Führer’s ear that evening, and Roy found himself discretely checking his watch quite often, counting the minutes until he could politely excuse himself for the evening. He wanted to get back to The Mews, hoping that he would find Edward there so he could offer his apology. Roy had not seen the young man in the ballroom since their argument, and assumed that he had left.

He was mistaken.

At ten minutes before ten, Hawkeye stepped up beside him, interrupting a western Brigadier General’s appeal to the Führer for more standing troops at his border garrison. Although she was doing an admirable job of hiding it, the set of the Hawk’s jaw was a subtle hint to her tension. Roy excused himself immediately and followed his trusted General up the grand stairway to a small private room, where Edward was pacing in agitation around a grimfaced Breda.

The heavy set Brigadier General wasted no time on formalities. “We’ve just defused a bomb. Edward discovered a soldier planting it and Kain Fuery disarmed it.”

“The soldier?” Roy wanted that man. He would take great pleasure in wringing answers out of the kind of person who would set a bomb among so many innocent civilians.

“He’s on his way to the hospital in critical condition,” Hawkeye said flatly. “Shot himself as soon as he knew he was cornered. The ambulance crew told me that he probably wouldn’t make it to the emergency room.”

“How-”

Edward didn’t give Roy a chance to ask the question. “I caught a bad vibe from the main dining hall, and when I went to investigate, I found a Lieutenant Colonel crawling out from under the head table.
He made some comment about finding his cufflink as he walked out, but he just felt wrong. I
checked under the table and spotted the bomb attached to the underside.”

“You should have started an immediate evacuation!” Roy said through gritted teeth.

“My decision, Sir,” Breda said. “Edward came to me. He and Hawkeye took a team out to take
down the bomber, and I sent Kain Fuery in to assess the bomb. He had it defused in about a minute
flat, and I didn’t want to start a panic.”

Roy was not mollified. “We should still evacuate; there could be more than one bomb.”

“Major Fuery told me that the bomb he disarmed was an alchemically enhanced high explosive of
standard military design with a timed detonator, set to go off at 10:30, and would have demolished
most of the manor house. We have conducted a systematic sweep of the entire building, and are
confident that no more explosive devices have been planted.” Hawkeye’s statement was briskly
professional.

Roy’s Chief of Security was nothing if not efficient, and Roy knew that if she thought remaining in
this building presented any lingering threat to his safety, he wouldn’t be standing in it right now.

“There’s something else,” Edward cut in. “I think the bomber might have accomplices here. When
he left the dining room, he went back to the Ballroom to make a scene with the doorman, then left
the manor. I think he did it to attract attention, probably as a signal to his confederates that the job
was done so that they could escape the blast.”

“We have been preventing anyone from leaving, using the excuse that there is a routine security
sweep in progress, but beyond that, we’re not sure how to proceed,” Hawkeye stated. “Some of the
guests are insisting that they be allowed to leave.”

In the thoughtful silence that followed that assertion, the Führer came to a decision.

“Then let’s make it even more difficult for them to do so,” Roy said, smile grim. “No one leaves, no
exceptions, no explanation. Gather everyone in the main dining hall. On the Führer’s express order.”

Sometimes being a supreme dictator with absolute executive power came in tremendously handy.
Richard Walther's main dining hall was large. Nevertheless, it was still uncomfortably crowded with his guests, many milling about nervously instead of sitting at tables, detained upon the Führer's direct order. All exits were barred by armed and unyielding security officers from Roy's personal guard. Demands for an explanation were deflected with vague reference to possible danger, or outright ignored. Führer Mustang stood unapproachable by the room's main doors, flanked by his two most diligent protectors.

Roy glanced to the woman on his right. His chief of security stood at rigid attention, concern for her friend written in the way her hand rested on the grip of her holstered weapon and the tightness of her jaw. The Hawk had voiced strident objection to Roy stationing himself in the room with the rest of the guests, but the Führer had been adamant. Tonight he would have his answers, and he could offer no more enticing bait to his ruthless, mysterious foes than himself.

Roy now glanced to the man on his left. Edward had made no comment at Roy’s decision to gather the guests in the room where the bomb had been planted. Indeed, after the brief report of his role in this evening’s drama, he had made no comment at all. The blond man was extremely tense as he scanned the mildly agitated crowd, head tilted up in concentration. The stage was set and he was on high alert, as were all of Roy’s close subordinates.

As was the Führer himself, though with his hands in his pockets, the fact that he was wearing his gloves was not immediately apparent. Roy’s eyes occasionally flicked to the glass domed clock ticking harmlessly on the mantelpiece, hoping that someone in this crowded room might crack as the time to detonation counted down.

And the count down was agonizingly sluggish, in contrast to the high level of anxiety in the room.

The clock’s hands were closing on ten thirty when Major General Dearth approached with Colonel Fay Rudland. Both were outwardly calm, though their concern was obvious. Edward’s eyes narrowed as they drew near, but he did nothing to prevent it when they stepped closer to the Führer.

“Are you sure it's safe for you to be here, Sir?” Dearth asked quietly. “It is quite possible that those plotting against you are here in this room.”

“Perhaps it would be best if you were secluded elsewhere in the manor,” Rudland added, troubled.

Roy pretended to consider the Colonel’s suggestion, when he was actually considering Edward. The blond man had allowed Rudland and Dearth to approach the Führer unchallenged, which inferred that he did not consider them dangerous. Hawkeye was eyeing the two soldiers with suspicion but made no objection, trusting Edward’s instincts – which they had all come to rely on. Roy could only imagine the roiling, tumbled web that the Dragon’s Pulse must be at the moment with so many agitated people in the room. The concentration required to sift friend from foe in this nervously shifting crowd of captive socialites must have been immense.

Roy was just about to assure Rudland that sufficient precautions had been taken to ensure his safety when he saw Edward’s eyes lock on someone in the room and narrow. Roy traced a path between that intense stare and Jerald Ethan. The Lieutenant General was standing with his hands behind his back, casually watching the mantle clock. Roy glanced back at Edward, whose attention remained
on Ethan.

Rudland appeared uneasy with her Führer’s lack of response. Then she noticed who he was looking at, and her gaze softened. The woman turned to General Hawkeye and continued her appeal for more secure quarters for the Führer, joined by Dearth.

Roy was not listening to that exchange. He was watching the silent drama unfolding before him, thinking about Lieutenant General Jerald Ethan, trusted advisor to the Führer in matters of international relations, son and heir to the patriarch of the prestigious Ethan family. His parents, Maxwell Ethan and his wife, Clara, were not in attendance this evening, and Roy had thought that passing strange until now. Suddenly their absence made perfect sense.

The seconds ticked away. Edward’s eyes never left Ethan. Ethan’s never left the clock. When the minute hand reached the half-hour, the little clock chimed, and the General’s shoulders slumped, just a little. He stood for another full minute, then stuffed his hands into his pockets, resolutely squared his shoulders, and began to move toward the Führer.

Roy hadn’t noticed when Edward left his side, but Hawkeye was now standing directly in front of her commander, pistol in a two-handed grip at her shoulder, while Dearth and Rudland stood confused by the abrupt end to their appeal. Edward was stalking quickly toward Ethan, who stopped, smiling gently at the blond man’s intensity.

“Take your hands out of your pockets, slowly,” Edward growled low as he advanced, and then all hell broke loose.

A number of determined men were suddenly converging on the scene at the front of the room. A Colonel standing to Edward’s left pulled a pistol from inside his jacket. Who he planned to target was never revealed when Ed’s cane flashed up to break his wrist, then down across his temple, staggering him. A second blow to the head flattened the Colonel to an unmoving heap.

Ethan’s service pistol was in his hand as he attempted to dodge around Ed to get to the Führer, but the blond lashed out with his injured leg to slam the General’s hip, spinning Ethan half around. The General let his momentum carry him out of range of Edward’s cane strike as his pistol swung to center on his blond opponent. The bullet went into the floor when Princess Ekaterina landed on Ethan’s back.

The gun’s report turned the crowded room into a boiling frenzy of panicked socialites and combat ready soldiers, seeking either escape or engagement respectively. Through the shifting mass Roy saw Breda and Havoc tackle another man to the floor. He saw General Walther struggling with General Möhler, the pistol in Möhler’s hand emptying futile into the ceiling. He saw General Korth swipe a sleeve at his bloody nose as he stood over the unconscious soldier at his feet, looking for another foe to take on.

Another shot rang out, and Fay Rudland gasped as the bullet clipped off her earlobe to bury itself in the wall close to Roy’s head. Hawkeye, handgun at the ready, pushed backward, flattening Roy against the wall as both Rudland and Dearth also moved to shield their leader. The Führer’s hand was up, finger’s ready to snap, but at the moment it was impossible to use his alchemy without putting innocent bystanders at risk. He stood prepared, waiting for that to change.

When the chaos had subsided, the civilians were hugging the walls as far from the Führer as possible. Five enemy soldiers were either restrained or unconscious. Ethan was braced by the mantelpiece. His gun was to the Princess’ head, his free arm around her neck to anchor her against his chest, using her as a shield. Edward was standing a short distance in front of them, balanced on the balls of his feet, a throwing blade gleaming in his hand, ready for anything.
Hawkeye held Roy back against the wall in a one-handed grip so strong it might as well have been
automail, shielding Roy with her body. Rudland, blood from her injury sheening her neck and
staining the collar of her dress uniform black, pushed herself back against Roy as well, arms spread
from her sides to provide more cover for her Führer. General Dearth stood in front of them all, head
held high, assessing the situation.

Silence settled over the room. Ethan broke it.

“See our brave Führer,” he called snidely. “The Hero of Ishbal, cowering behind strong, Amestrian
women.”

“Lieutenant General, Colonel.” His two guardians reluctantly allowed the Führer to step forward and
stand between them. “I’m not ashamed to accept the protection of these brave soldiers,” Roy told
Ethan mildly. “They shield me by choice, unlike your captive. Free Princess Ekaterina and
surrender.”

Ethan ignored the command with a smirk. The room watched the standoff in heavy silence, waiting
for what might unfold. Roy gauged the distance between his traitorous subordinate’s face and that of
the Princess, and decided against going for a pinpoint flame attack to Ethan’s eyes. Though the
General and his captive were but a hand’s breadth apart, the Flame knew he could easily manage to
hit his target without injuring the Princess, but couldn’t guarantee that Ethan would not pull the
trigger on her as a result, either on purpose or by reflex. Roy kept his hand poised, hoping for an
opening, but resigned to taking Ethan out himself only as a last resort. In the meantime, he left the
next move up to the traitor.

Then General Dearth squared his shoulders and began to walk slowly toward his desperate
colleague, coming to a stop beside Edward. Ethan’s pistol wavered for a moment, then returned to
the Ekaterina’s temple, jabbing her cruelly. She neither cringed nor flinched, her lip curled in disgust
at her assailant.

“Jerald,” the old General said sadly, shaking his head. “I can’t believe it. If anyone had ever made
the smallest suggestion that you might be a traitor, I would have dueled them to the death.”

“I am not the traitor here, Alton,” Ethan stated firmly. “I am not the one who threatens Amestris. My
goal is to preserve our way of life by eliminating the one who seeks to destroy it.”

“Yeah, we decoded your fake Drachmann love letter.” Edward’s lip curled in disgust. “It was quite
the pep talk for your brainwashed assassins, I’m sure. Congratulations. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a
purity? Really?”

Ethan shook his head in wonder. “Ah, Edward. Can you imagine my shock to discover that you’re
still on the premises? After all the trouble we went to, doing our best to separate you from our
Führer, the rumors and gossip we spread, the tempting opportunities we orchestrated that our
promiscuous leader surprisingly rejected. The men we sent after you today, at the park, and your
driver this evening. All wasted effort, when our Führer managed to drive you away quite efficiently
on his own. Yet here you are, still the wrench in our carefully laid plans.” The man’s smile was fond.
“I wouldn’t expect you to understand what motivates us. As much as I admire you, you are not a true
Amestrian. You are lowborn and of mixed blood.”

“Explain it to me, then, Jerald,” General Dearth challenged, before Edward could respond, “Unless
you wish to call my heritage into question as well.”

“You are a true Amestrian, Alton, but misguided,” Ethan stated. “You have been seduced by an
outsider’s vision of equality and international solidarity. Mustang is not a pure Amestrian. His vision will not benefit Amestris. All human beings can’t live as equals, and mingling with those beneath us would be our downfall. The strong are meant to lead and the weak to follow. Our nation is great because until now our Führers understood this. Individuals and communities must be subordinate to the will of the state and its leader."

“And you see yourself as that leader?” Dearth wanted to know.

“Why not? Our highborn are the cream of a superior crop,” Ethan explained. “Amestrians are the strongest of the strong. Our army is undefeated. Our alchemists are the best in the world. Our technological advances outstrip those of any other nation. Amestrians are the master race. If not me, then another of noble birth will rise to lead Amestris into a new age of imperialism, and all Amestrians will prosper.”

“You won’t have many left to choose from if you go around indiscriminately blowing them up along with your actual target,” Edward said, disgusted.

“Sometimes sacrifices must be made for the greater good,” Ethan said regretfully. “My colleagues and I vowed that we would eliminate the threat posed by this halfbreed Führer no matter the cost to ourselves, knowing full well that the blood of innocents would be spilled. Regrettable, but unavoidable. Our cause is just.”

“Were these Norris Ganzer’s beliefs as well?” Roy dearly wanted to know how someone who held close the same dream for Amestris’ future could want him dead simply because his heritage was not entirely Amestrian.

“Ah, so he was able to track you down in the mountains. He is dead?” Ethan asked.

“Yes,” Roy replied.

“I suspected as much when he failed to return,” Ethan said dolefully. “He thought he had a fair chance of disposing of you since you believed he was a kindred spirit, and he could use your trust to catch you off guard.”

A plan that could easily have succeeded. If Ganzer’s accomplice had not fired on Edward, Roy would likely have trusted the Razor Wind Alchemist automatically, and Ganzer would have been in a very good position carry out his deadly plan.

“He was quite the actor. I honestly believed his passion for democracy matched my own,” Roy admitted.

“Your idea of democracy in a multiracial society is a fool’s dream,” Ethan sneered. “Someday Amestrian democracy will be achieved, but in a racially homogenous society, with all social classes cooperating for national unity while we expand our territory at the expense of inferior neighboring nations.”

Dearth shook his head sadly. “Such arrogance. Pride is your downfall, Jerald. I pity you.”

“Pity yourself,” Ethan snapped. “You will regret leaving the path set down by Amestrian Führers through the centuries. Their vision made this nation great.”

“They were puppets who made this nation a crucible, its only purpose to endow their alien master with the power of a god.” Roy’s voice was quiet, but it carried to every corner of the room. “They forged this nation in blood and death, and their master would have claimed the souls of every man, woman, and child within her borders, regardless of race, or class, or culture. That was the path set
down by Amestrian Führers.”

“But we defeated that monster!” Ethan snarled. “The reasons why this nation was brought to
greatness are irrelevant. The fact remains that we were, and we should not squander what proud
Amestrians fought for, regardless of the reasons. We will continue down that same path now, to a
different, triumphant future.”

“Yes, we defeated that monster,” the Führer agreed, controlling his anger even as he wished for a
chance to unleash it through his gloved hands. “And we did it with the help of many allies who
weren’t what you consider ‘true’ Amestrians, myself included. Allies of Xing. Allies of Lior and
Ishbal who saw beyond the injustice ‘true’ Amestrians inflicted on them and risked everything to aid
us. Even the last Xerxesian and his Amestrian children cast their lot with us. Would you repay our
allies with further injustice?”

“I can’t allow my country to be corrupted, Amestrian bloodlines to be tainted by lower races, and our
destiny to be drowned in mediocrity.” Ethan was resolute. “We may be inhumane, but if we protect
Amestris from her barbaric neighbors, we preserve her humanity. We may be unjust, but if we save
true Amestrians from race defilement, we have prevented the greatest injustice. We may be immoral,
but if our way of life is preserved we have paved the way for true morality. In the name of saving
Amestris, everything is permissible.”

“You consider yourself a superior human being, yet you haven’t the wit to understand that barbarity
is a fool’s remedy.” Dearth said, resigned. “Regardless, you will no longer be free to lead your
faction of deranged fanatics. Your fate is sealed. Release the Princess and surrender. That is your
only option.”

Death is an option I’m willing to entertain,” Ethan said, unperturbed. “For me, certainly, but for this
Cretian bitch as well unless you allow us safe passage to the street and a waiting car.”

“You’re not leaving here with the Princess,” Edward growled.

“Then the Princess dies. You’re fast, Elric, but not fast enough to stop me from shooting your
Cretian slut,” Ethan said.

“What,” amber eyes glittered with lethal intent, “will you bet?”

Ethan answered by tightening his arm around Ekaterina’s throat, her hands clutching his forearm. “I
swore that this would be over tonight. Since I have failed to end this Führer’s catastrophic reign, my
life is forfeit, but I will not go easily. Or alone. Force my hand, and that will become clear.”

Edward pursed his lips in resignation. “We could stand here all night, getting nowhere; neither one of
us is going to give in. So let’s play a little game,” he suggested, and Roy saw the Princess quirk a
grim smile. “I’ll count to three, and we’ll find out who’s faster. What do you say?”

The General made no reply. His sardonic smile never faltered. He knew there was no escape. He
was ready to hurry this standoff to its inevitable conclusion and fully prepared to make good on his
promise to kill the Cretian King’s Hand.

Edward grinned barbed wire as he pinched the blade of his short handled knife between thumb and
forefinger, then shifted to a high, balanced stance.

“One.”

Edward’s knife flashed from his hand as Ekaterina threw a heel into the General’s shin and fell to her
knees, toppling the man half over her shoulder. Ethan was unable to pull the trigger with three inches
of tempered steel through his wrist, but before he could switch the gun to his other hand, Ekaterina
snatched it and was pulled out of harm’s way by Edward.

And then the traitor was tackled flat to the ground by his former comrade in arms. Dearth was
remarkably agile for a man his age and managed to pin Ethan down long enough for Hawkeye’s
security team to descend and take over restraint of the traitor. As they took Ethan into custody,
Edward offered a hand to assist Dearth to his feet.

“You may have stopped me, but this isn’t over!” Ethan called out as he was handcuffed. “Another
true Amestrian will rise to take up the torch. We won’t let the halfblood son of a Xingese whore
bring Amestris to ruin!”

If the disgraced former General was expecting a response, he was disappointed. A soldier gripping
each arm escorted him from the room, closely followed by more soldiers seeing to Ethan’s
accomplices.

“Double security in the brig with soldiers from the Führer’s personal forces, and put a suicide watch
on the prisoners,” Hawkeye instructed the Colonel commanding her security team. “We will begin
interrogations within the hour.”

Roy did not see the Colonel salute and turn to carry out his orders. He was watching Edward and
Ekaterina grinning at each other, her guards hovering nervously as her official escort’s scolding was
ignored. General Dearth stepped to block his view, his hand snapping up smartly in salute.

“Major General.” The Führer returned the man’s salute just as neatly. “You have my personal thanks
for your eloquent defence.”

“It was my pleasure, Sir” Dearth said, beaming at the praise. Then his face became serious. “But it
was also my duty. I once told you that there are none more loyal than the noble families that make
West City their home. I am ashamed now to know that for one of our own, that is not the case. I
seriously hope my actions are proof that Jerald Ethan’s treachery is the exception, not the rule. Most
of us would find his poisonous ideology, blatant bigotry, and outright racism appalling.”

“Of that I have no doubt,” Roy said.

But Roy had plenty of doubts. He had encountered rabid nationalism before, in many forms and on
many levels, but never like this. He was the leader of all of Amestris’ people, whatever their heritage,
and it was his sworn duty to protect them. It was daunting to know however, that on top of
everything else, he now had to protect them from themselves.

How widespread was Ethan’s brand of social Darwinism Roy had no idea. Edward had reluctantly
shattered the illusion of Führer Mustang’s universal popularity on their first evening with the Mauser
brothers’ band, and Roy had realized then that he had become disconnected from the general
population at some point in his rise to power, but this? It was almost unimaginable that something so
malignant could have festered in his command, flourishing under his watch. How could he have
become so out of touch with what was going on that something like this could develop right under
his nose?

That the plot against him was more than a grassroots movement had been fairly obvious almost from
the beginning. It was still deeply disheartening to confirm that a respected military leader posed a
threat to the inner peace and stability of the country. Worse yet, Roy was certain that Ethan was not
the only one holding the reins. The fact that he claimed his life was forfeit for his failure this evening
more than suggested that there were others ready to take control if Ethan was lost. Given the
ideology of the group, they had to be of noble blood.
In order to give structure to human society, people naturally fell into the roles of leaders and followers. The leaders set the goals for the growth and development of their nation, while the followers completed the tasks to bring those goals to fruition. Roy knew that good leadership was instrumental to achieving social change, and up until now, he had believed that Amestris’ upper classes would rise to that challenge. They were already in positions of power, and thus in a very good position to take the leadership role required to effect the necessary changes. It appeared the Führer had been mistaken in that assumption. He would not make that mistake again.

Roy kept his expression mild as he met Dearth’s eye. Despite the older man’s actions in his Führer’s defence, Roy still found that he did not trust him. Ethan’s betrayal, like Norris Ganzer’s before him, had shaken Roy’s confidence in his own judgement. He had trusted those men only to be deceived, their poisonous intent well hidden even from a man who knew well the ways of deception. Unfortunately, it would likely take quite some time and a hell of a lot of persuasive evidence before the Führer would trust another aristocrat to hold all of Amestris in their best interests. Unfortunate, because there were many in the upper ranks of society who did just that.

Expression thoughtful, the old Major General cut into the Führer’s dour thoughts.

“It hasn’t been officially announced, but my youngest son has recently posted the banns of marriage,” Dearth said casually.

Roy blinked at the total non-sequitur. “You have my congratulations,” he said smoothly.

“Would you like to see my favorite picture of the happy couple?” Dearth asked, reaching into his breast pocket before the Führer could respond. “It was taken in Central, just prior to my departure on this ill fated mission.”

Taking the picture, Roy suddenly understood. Dearth’s son was a younger, slimmer version of his father: unreservedly dashing in his military blues, blond and blue eyed as were most of Amestris’ aristocratic families. As his fiancé was definitely not. Her smooth dark skin, long silky hair as white as fresh snow, and twinkling red eyes were a testament to her distinctly un-Amestrian heritage.

“A lovely couple,” Roy said honestly.

“He met her in Ishbal, on his mandatory tour of reconstruction duty,” Dearth said in explanation. “When he informed me of their intention to wed, I outright demanded that he break off the engagement, but he refused. I took leave time and rushed out to the desert to try and talk sense to him.” The older man laughed quietly. “I was the one who had his eyes opened. Safa is as strong, as intelligent, and as noble as she is beautiful. After meeting her, after seeing how good they were for each other, no sane man could possibly object to their union. I’m proud to say that I was able to convince her family that their objections were unfounded as well.”

Roy remembered well the ugly muttering that surrounded Riza and Miles’ marriage, the viciousness and cruelty of speculations as to why Führer Grumman’s granddaughter would stoop so low in her choice of husband. Such shallow observations weren’t just a folly of the aristocracy, either.

Dearth continued. “I may be guilty of being an arrogant ass on occasion, but I’ve been active in the Diplomatic Corps for a long time, first under Führer Bradley’s rule, then Führer Grumman’s, and now under yours. That’s long enough for any intelligent human being, even a pompous old aristocrat, to learn that it’s what is inside a person that determines their worth, not what is outside. Believe me, my Führer, when I tell you that Jerald Ethan and the racist fanatics he commands are the minority.”

Roy was honestly surprised. After Dearth’s undisguised scorn for Edward, he was the last person the
Führer might expect to have even the smallest kernel of tolerance.

And where was Edward? Roy glanced around, hoping to catch a glimpse of him, but was not successful. As the Führer was speaking with his General, Hawkeye’s team had been efficiently separating Roy from the rest of the slowly recovering guests. The low, nervous murmur of troubled conversation was punctuated by louder demands to leave the Walther estate as the gathered aristocrats recovered from their shock. While courteous and respectful, the Hawk’s elite security personnel were controlling the agitated crowd firmly while their exit was confirmed to be safe.

Dearth pulled Roy’s attention back once again. “Now the task of cleansing Ethan’s noxious mindset begins,” he said grimly. “I suppose we will have to begin by probing within the ranks to weed out individuals holding to those subversive principles, but they must be purged.”

“Holy shit.” Edward’s mild tenor cut Roy off before he could respond to Dearth’s observation. “For a second there, I thought King Bradley was back from the dead.”

The young man had appeared at Roy’s elbow, and stood scowling at the old General.

Dearth was used to those scowls by now. He beamed a genuine smile at the younger man. “Edward! I must say that I’m quite impressed with your heroic performance. I had assumed that your talents were strictly . . . bedroom related. Apparently I was mistaken,” he stated magnanimously.

“Were you?” Edward murmured.

Dearth misinterpreted the younger man’s quiet tone. “Clearly,” he reassured the blond. “You should be proud of what you did here tonight.”

“I’m glad everything worked out,” Edward said, “Ethan is an asshole, but he was right about one thing. He’s not the only one who holds a purist view of Amestris. I don’t happen to agree with that bullshit ideology, but I also don’t think you can force people not to believe in it; you have to show them why it’s wrong, teach them that people are people, no matter where they’re from or what they look like. And how far do you go? It’s natural to be proud of who you are; it goes wrong when you don’t accept that everyone else has that right, too. When you get right down to it, no one should be allowed to enforce what people should and shouldn’t think.”

Dearth snagged a glass of wine from a passing waiter and observed Ed over the rim as he sipped, smiling indulgently. “Ah, the naive idealism of the young. Who was it that once said, ‘I may not agree with what you have to say, but will defend to the death your right to say it’?**?”

“I don’t know. Some old dead guy, probably.” Ed shrugged. “A hopelessly romantic Renaissance type from the sound of it.”

“Hmm, indeed.” Dearth said, nonplussed. He recovered quickly. “At any rate, there’s no need to worry your pretty blond head about it. I suggest that you leave the important decisions to those of us better equipped to make them. Let me just say ‘Well done’ young Edward. Your assistance above and beyond your assigned duties is greatly appreciated.”

“Thanks, I guess.” Edward turned to look Roy straight in the eye as he said, “Not bad for an old friend, wouldn’t you say?”

Aunt Chris’ words, twisted with Roy’s own and thrown back. There was absolutely no way for Roy to prevent his face from burning with shame. He kept his silence as Hawkeye called out to the blond man, who turned away to push through the guards that the Hawk had posted around her Führer. Dearth stood back and watched him leave, then saluted to excuse himself as well.
The dining room doors swung open, and the freed guests surged from the room to be greeted by more of Hawkeye’s security forces, safely controlling their headlong flight. Roy and his guard were the last group to leave the room, cautiously hanging back from the throng of socialites. General Walther appeared to lead the Führer and his security team along a more private route to the front foyer, and though thoroughly the efficient soldier, it was clear the man was deeply troubled by the evening’s turn of events. Roy had no time to speak with Walther as his guards hurried him to the exit, but he did manage to offer a small, reassuring smile with his return salute of dismissal.

Haymans Breda was in the grand vestibule fielding questions from a horde of reporters, their cameramen swarming, snapping pictures as Roy was hustled by. The newsmen converged on the Führer as soon as he was spotted, shouting questions, but were held at bay by a cordon of security personnel.

Roy was hustled from the vestibule and out to the front steps surrounded by his heavily armed human shield in Amestrian blue. His guards were taking no chances, ranked closely around him. From the top of the wide concrete stair Roy caught a glimpse of his long black limo pulling around the driveway to stop in front of Riza and Edward standing at the curb. He watched as Riza wrenched open the door and gestured insistently for Ed to enter. The blond man’s jaw was stubbornly clenched and he did not move. Hawkeye leaned toward the young man, speaking earnestly. He finally relented, angrily sling his cane into the back seat like a spear before entering the car. She then turned to signal the Führer’s guards to approach. The phalanx with Roy at its centre hurried to the limo. Just before she pushed him inside, Riza leaned to speak directly into his ear.

“Whatever the hell is going on with Edward, you had better fix it.” Her quietly spoken words were fierce.

Roy hoped he could follow his most trusted subordinate’s order. He slid into the backseat followed by two bodyguards. Two more got into the front with a very tense Havoc, hands in a white knuckle grip on the steering wheel.

The ride back to The Mews was uncomfortably tense. The guards were on high alert, eyes collectively pinned on the passing city and countryside as the limo was escorted back to the Mews in a full military convoy. Roy’s attempts to make quiet conversation were rebuffed by Edward’s refusal to respond. As the roadster pulled into the circular driveway, Ed finally broke his silence.

Leaning toward the driver’s seat he said, “Could you stick around for a few minutes Jean? I need someone to drive me back to town after I grab my stuff.”

Roy caught Havoc’s troubled glance as Ed slid out of the car and headed for the house. “You’re dismissed, Jean,” the Führer told him.

“It’s a long walk to town, and the Boss . . . “

“He’s not going anywhere,” Roy snapped, then held a hand to his brow. “I’m sorry. Don’t worry. I’ll talk to him.”

It was clear from Havoc’s frown that he had little confidence in the Führer’s persuasive abilities where the former Fullmetal Alchemist was concerned, but the roadster pulled away as Roy was escorted to the manor house surrounded by four attentive soldiers.

Stepping inside, he handed his long coat to the valet, dismissing the man and his bodyguards with a wave of his hand and a no nonsense salute. Then he took up a sentry position at the bottom of the grand stairway. He didn’t have long to wait.
Edward soon appeared at the top of the stairs. It had taken under five minutes for him to change from his suit into jeans and tan jacket, and to pack his belongings into his battered leather suitcase.

“I sent Havoc away,” Roy informed him as the young man descended.

Edward shrugged. “If you think that’s going to stop me from leaving, you’d better think again.” His tone was still coldly formal.

“Just hear me out. Then if you still want to leave, I won’t try to stop you.”

“I’ve heard all I care to,” Ed said as he walked toward the door.

Roy walked with him. “I want to apologise. I had no cause to speak to you the way I did.”

“Apology accepted. Now if you’ll excuse me . . .” Edward reached for the doorknob.

“I’m not done.” Roy pressed a hand to the door to prevent Ed from opening it.

“I am.” Ed attempted to brush Roy’s hand out of the way, and Roy stepped between Ed and the door.

Edward’s fists clenched white knuckled, and for a moment Roy thought that the younger man might physically lash out at him. He did not.

“Stand aside, Mustang,” he said, voice rough.

“Not until you hear me out.”

“I’ve heard enough to know that you’re a bastard.”

“Old news. We established that when you were twelve.”

Ed scowled and folded his arms across his chest. “So talk. I have a train to catch.”

Roy took a deep breath. “I’m not going to make a lot of excuses for my behaviour. I took advantage of you tonight, and I regret it. Deeply. Please believe me when I tell you that when I invited you to the Ball, it was simply to enjoy your company. I had no right to ask you to apologize to Lady Nedra, and out of line to suggest that your honesty could be a determent to my reputation. You were in no way ‘on duty’, and I was wrong to ask you to spend time with Princess Ekaterina when I was well aware that you didn’t want to tarnish your friendship with politics. And then to accuse you of inappropriate behaviour was inexcusable. I’m sorry.”

Edward listened, unmoved. “Apology accepted,” he said again. “Now get out of my way.”

“I’m not finished,” Roy said, and Edward’s jaw tightened, but he made no attempt to leave. “I have no excuse for what I said to you, but I want you to understand. I couldn’t help but watch you and Ekaterina; your close friendship made me uneasy. She is strong, intelligent, beautiful, and . . . closer to your own age, and I realize now that I felt threatened.”

The younger man was trying not to let go of his cool detachment, but the slight softening of his always expressive eyes gave him away.

Roy continued, hopeful, though it was difficult. “And then, I saw you smile at her. Not just your polite, I’m-completely-bored-but-please-continue smile. Your honest smile. And I was . . . “

“Jealous,” Ed inserted into the pause, one skeptical brow raised.
“Yes,” Roy finally admitted. “I wondered what the two of you could have been talking about to make you smile that way. And . . . I didn’t want you to smile like that for anyone but me.”

“Is that when you interrupted us?”

Roy nodded. “Yes.”

“You’re an idiot,” Edward told him, and Roy couldn’t argue that point. “I was telling her that I was seeing someone. You. I was talking about you.”

As if Roy didn’t feel bad enough already. “It hurt me to see you smile at her like that, and I . . . just . . . wanted you to hurt too. Completely irrational, yes, and yes, I am a bastard. I deeply regret what I said to you in anger. In no way did I mean a single word.”

“That was just the last straw. I was already pissed about the way you and Dearth ganged up on me, trying to pimp me out to her,” Ed said, the hurt showing through the cold in honest, open amber. “That old bastard thinks I’m just a worthless piece of ass, and I couldn’t care less, but when you decided to use me like that, after everything else - that finished it for me. I was starting to believe that you . . . that I could trust you.”

“I’m sorry. For everything,” Roy said, holding his steady gaze, hope rapidly dwindling.


“I wish you would reconsider. I think we can work this out.”

Edward was shaking his head before Roy finished speaking. “There’s nothing to work out. You’re not the only one who screwed up tonight. We’re too different,” he said. “You’re at home in sophisticated company. You know what to say and do in the most delicate situations. I wouldn’t know what diplomacy was if it jumped up and bit me on the ass. And you know what? That’s the way I am, and I’m never going to change. I wouldn’t even know where to start. I’ll just end up being an embarrassment to you.”

“You could never be an embarrassment to me,” Roy said, adamant, but he couldn’t help but remember what had occurred in the study with Lady Nedra, and later, how he had been an embarrassment to Ed. He faltered, wondering. Was this for the best?

Edward caught it, and wasn’t sold on Roy’s assertion. “I already am. You’re the Führer of Amestris. You have important things to accomplish. I’m just Ed. And it’s over.”

“I . . . don’t want it to be,” Roy heard himself say.

Edward’s resolve wavered for a moment, then firmed. He said nothing, just stood, waiting, and Roy could think of nothing else to say. Finally he stepped reluctantly aside. Edward opened the door to reveal the limousine idling at the end of the walk, Havoc standing by. Edward stepped outside without another word.

The blond man walked down to the waiting car, and out of Roy’s life. The Führer watched as the General took Edward’s suitcase and opened the passenger side door. Without a single backward glance the young man slid inside, out of sight behind tinted glass. Havoc walked around to the limo’s rear and put the suitcase into the trunk. As he walked around to the driver’s door, Havoc smiled sheepishly at his Commander. All things considered, Roy couldn’t bring himself to be angry that his subordinate had failed to follow his order.

He was in far too much pain.
*Ethan’s speech is a modified version of a speech given by Adolf Hitler in April, 1923.
** S. G. Tallentyre is the hopelessly romantic old dead guy in question. He purported that this was the attitude of another hopelessly romantic old dead guy – Voltaire. Thanks SailorTalfamadore!
Dear Führer Mustang,

Once again, thanks for the timely phone call. There’s nothing more jarring than seeing my brother scowling out of our local newspaper’s front page, but your warning softened the effect. He wants to ‘beat the living shit’ out of Brigadier General Breda for outlining his role in the West City drama to the press, but I’m sure I can talk him out of it. Brother is not at all pleased with the notoriety he’s gained from his heroics, but really, he should be used to it, shouldn’t he? After all those years of travelling together, of being mistaken for him so often because of the armor, of listening to him insist that he isn’t anyone special, I still can’t understand how he doesn’t realize that he actually is.

I must tell you that it was difficult for me to stay in Resembool while you and my brother were missing in Creta. I only learned that you had been found after you had returned to West City. At first I was angry not to be informed of your whereabouts weeks earlier, and then I was hurt. I can understand now why General Hawkeye didn’t let me know right away that you were in hiding, slowly making your way back to Amestrian soil. Without knowing who was targeting you, it was better to keep that information as confidential as possible so that your enemies didn’t have the opportunity to go after you while you were so vulnerable, and these rural party lines are notorious for being anything but private. As it was, I spent the first week of your disappearance with one foot out the door, ready to rush to Creta and mount a search of my own.

Fortunately, General Hawkeye set me straight. Much as I longed to join in the search for you, I wouldn’t have been of any real use, and my family needs me here. Gone are the days of my youth, back in my natural body after the Promised Day, when I was free of obligation to others, able to go where I would, when I would. Though it pained me to sit watching from the sidelines however, deep down I knew everything would turn out just fine. The two of you were out there together, and that gave me comfort. You and my brother are two of the strongest, most capable people I know, and I know that together you can accomplish anything.

And from the sound of it, you had quite the adventure. I wish I had a photograph of you in that unusual disguise. Brother tried to draw me a picture, but frankly, unless it’s an array, he can’t draw worth a damn.

I’m pleased that Ed has decided to stay with us while he gives his leg a chance to properly heal. These last few weeks have been very pleasant. Brother seems content to while away the days with Maes and Sara, though I notice something like sadness surrounds him when he sits alone on the porch in the evening. Of course when I ask him about it he insists that everything is fine with that overlarge grin he always uses to reassure me, which actually offers no reassurance at all. I might be confusing his unusually quiet mood with restlessness, but it’s hard to say. When I questioned him about it, he said he was anxious to get back to work and was hoping that General Breda had an interesting new assignment for him. He didn’t really address what might be bothering him, and no amount of prodding, subtle or otherwise, would open his stubborn mouth.

It’s unfortunate, but Brother and I haven’t regained the closeness we once shared, so I’m never sure what’s going on in that convoluted mind of his. Back in the day we used to be very careful not to let anyone we cared about know just how desperate our situation was, not wanting to burden them with our problems. I now find myself on the outside looking in, and it’s difficult for me to accept. If he has confided in you, I won’t ask for any details. I’m just hoping that you can let me know if he’s really alright.

On that note, while his natural leg is healing very nicely, Winry had to do a major repair on brother’s
automail. Ed complained that his balance was off, and when Winry checked, she discovered that a slight curvature to the support casing was throwing off the servos. She had to completely replace the housing. That must have been quite the tree to do so much damage. Winry was pretty upset about it of course, until Ed told her that if it wasn’t for the quality of her automail, he would have suffered two broken legs. Not quite mollified, she told him that we would all breathe a lot easier if he’d just quit wandering blindly into trouble and settle down.

Winry has never quite understood that Brother isn’t the type to be content sitting around reading the paper, and while he’s not too crazy about making the front page either, that’s often exactly where he ends up. I really don’t think that settling down is something he would ever be happy doing. I just wish he was a little more grounded. He hasn’t really had a home since the day we burned ours down all those years ago. Although Winry and I have tried everything we can think of to change it, even here in Resembool it’s obvious he feels more like a guest than family. It would be nice if he had a special place where he felt he belonged, but I suppose that’s something he’ll have to find for himself. Everyone needs to belong somewhere.

I am including some recent photographs of the family. My favorite is the one of brother and Maes walking up the path from the river, the setting sun casting long shadows behind them. It made me think of the times when my mother would call Edward and I home by lighting a lantern in an upstairs window of our house. We would follow the light up the path, welcomed home from the descending twilight to the nurturing warmth of her perfect love. We thought those days would never end, but they did, all too soon. My family, including brother, is now my guiding light in the darkness. I used to be Ed’s. I’m not anymore. That saddens me, especially when he seems lost, because he won’t let me help him.

He’s such a stubborn brat. He’s helped so many. Why can’t he allow just one person to return the favor?

Anyway, I’m sure he’ll be returning to Central as soon as you conclude the negotiations with Creta and return from the west as well. It might be a good idea to warn all those poor, long suffering Generals that their egos will once again be in danger of explosive decompression at that time.

All the best,

Alphonse.
Roy knew the minute Edward’s train pulled into Grand Central Station, mainly because Amestris’ trains were renowned for their punctuality.

He knew within the hour that Edward had checked in with Heymans Breda, because he had asked the Brigadier General to inform him of that eventuality as soon as possible.

He knew that Breda had set Edward an assignment researching an obscure array found at a crime scene the previous week, as per Roy’s request. It would likely keep Ed in Central for quite some time, which was the Führer’s intention.

It should therefore have been easy to corner the young man for a serious heart to heart.

It was not.

Edward Elric had once again become very difficult for Roy Mustang to pin down. The situation might have been pleasantly nostalgic if it wasn’t so completely frustrating.

Weeks had passed, and Roy still hadn’t managed to get over his mistake, still plagued by a disturbing sense of loss. The cold winds of autumn seemed colder than ever, and he wondered if it was because he felt . . . alone. He had become so accustomed to having Edward near that his absence felt distinctly unnatural. Worse yet, instead of fading with time, the feeling appeared to be getting stronger. Roy suspected that guilt had something to do with it. He couldn’t recall ever treating a close friend so callously, and although Edward had honestly accepted his apology, Roy had a nagging sense of unfinished business between them.

Unfinished, because Roy was unwilling to let it go. He had many friends and close colleagues in the military, confidants he could trust to back up his decisions. His friends would stand firmly behind him, follow wherever he led, no matter what. His personal staff and close subordinates would jump to his every command, motivated by an informed sense of duty, a kindred spirit, or both.

And that was the difference. Edward wasn’t a follower; he wasn’t backup. He stood beside who he chose to, ready to act as he saw fit. While in his younger days he had often been characterized as a loose cannon, Roy had discovered that with maturity Ed had evolved into something of a self-guided missile, striking literally or figuratively with surgical precision. Edward wasn’t military, and even back when he was in Roy’s command, had been subordinate to no one. He had always been terrible at following orders, questioning even the most inconsequential command to the finest detail, framing what was demanded of him by the gauge of his personal moral compass, flat out refusing to comply when an order did not stand up to that code. Roy couldn’t count how many times that in questioning his orders, Edward had forced Roy to question himself.

As Ling Yao had so astutely pointed out months ago, a friend like Edward was rare and valuable. Roy knew he could risk being open and vulnerable with the younger man because he knew with absolute certainty that Edward would never betray that trust. Roy had only ever held such a close bond with one other person in his entire life, and Maes Hughes was still acutely missed. Roy missed Edward differently but just as deeply. Perhaps even more so, as physical intimacy was something Roy and Maes had never shared.

But while Maes was lost to Roy forever, Edward was not, and Roy wasn’t willing to let him go so easily.
In the intervening weeks he had come up with scores of arguments and counter-arguments against their parting ways permanently. Roy Mustang wasn’t one to give up without a fight, and had always been a master at outmaneuvering his opponents, planning many steps ahead for every contingency. If all he could salvage from his thoughtless conduct was friendship with the younger man, then so be it, but he wanted Edward in his life one way or the other and would accept no less.

All his soul searching hadn’t had any discernible impact on Roy’s performance of his duties however. In fact, the Führer of Amestris was currently performing his function with a zeal he hadn’t experienced in years. Behind the usual, well constructed facade of laidback confidence he presented to the public at large, the Führer of Amestris was in fact back to his old, dedicated, hard driven self. He had rediscovered the reasons why he had striven to become Führer in the first place, and ironically, he had Jerald Ethan to thank.

Somewhere along his climb to the top Roy had lost touch with his grassroots beginnings. His master plan had been to gain power so he could protect those below him, reaching for the pinnacle of Amestris’ power structure where he could ensure that those above protected those below them. Unfortunately however, his drive to defend all Amestrians so they could take an active role in shaping their shared future had been smothered in the many day to day challenges and crises he faced as leader of the country. Roy had become lost in the forest, unable to see past the trees.

Ethan’s betrayal and the toxic ideology behind it had been the slap in the face Roy needed to get him back on track. There were many in power whose only goal was power itself, who sought to gain it by stripping it from others. Protecting those under them, their subordinates, and ultimately, all the people of Amestris, was the last thing on their agenda.

It was Roy’s job to ensure that that changed. It wouldn’t be easy. The sense of entitlement fostered by many in prominent positions was firmly entrenched. There would certainly be great resistance when the Führer began to implement his long-held plans for a system of checks and balances to ensure that those on lower rungs of the social and political ladder were protected by – and sometimes from – those above them. It would be a long, laborious process, but Roy had always expected the task to be challenging. Gaining the Führership had never been the end of Roy’s demanding journey, but always the beginning.

And that was fine, because Roy Mustang was back in the game, and more than ready to play.

So he had attacked the Cretian treaty negotiations with a passion that frankly astonished not only his opponents, but some of his personal staff as well. The Cretian King’s Hand had been as skilled a negotiator as Roy had expected, and soon got over her initial assessment of the Führer of Amestris as an over privileged pretty boy of no substance. It was his obvious commitment to finding a mutually beneficial solution to their ongoing border dispute that finally won Ekaterina over. In the end they managed to negotiate a set of mutually acceptable compromises for a solid accord, and while the Führer and the Princess did not quite part as friends, there was a great deal of respect on both sides.

Finally back in Central, the next item on Roy’s agenda became the national economy instead of negotiations with Drachma as originally planned. Securing good international relations had to simmer on a backburner for the moment. Thanks to Edward, Roy now knew that his peaceful overtures towards neighboring countries in the interest of national security could easily be twisted to appear as pandering to foreign interests at the expense of Amestrian nationals. Though the economy was improving, it was gaining ground too slowly, and that had to change. Men like Jerald Ethan used hard times to advance their poisonous beliefs by offering up handy scapegoats. Thus, immigrants were blamed for taking jobs away from the native born, and the lower classes were blamed for having too many children they couldn’t support, selfishly draining public resources. The best way to counter those egregious and erroneous arguments was to hurry plans for economic relief.
Tinkering with the complex interconnection of the uncountable markets that compose a national economy was a tricky business however. Throwing it out of equilibrium with unconsidered tampering could easily result in economic disaster instead of relief. It wasn’t just a matter of printing more money; such a foolish act would only speed inflation, devaluing the cen and making matters worse. The Führer was already responsible for causing something of a recession by cutting back hard on military projects. He didn’t want to compound the problem. It was time to call in the big financial guns.

The Armstrongs of Central. The Walthers of West. The Halbachs of North. The Eckharts of East. The Harbingers of South. These illustrious old families were key players in the high stakes game of Amestrian commercial enterprise. As well, they had been staunch and outspoken supporters of Führer Grumman, and now Führer Mustang. It was to these financiers that Roy turned when he called a secret summit to discuss the state of the economy. By the time it was over, their meeting of minds had resulted in a feasible plan not only for rapid economic relief, but long term growth as well. All present proved to be committed to prosperity for everyone in Amestris, understanding that this could only mean prosperity for themselves as well.

In addition to all this, there was still the matter of the ongoing investigation into Jerald Ethan’s insurgent cadre to engage the Führer’s attention. The disgraced former Lieutenant General tenaciously maintained that he was the sole leader of the group, but Roy and many of his closest confidants had grave doubts about that claim. A number of officers had been exposed as co-conspirators, most with ties to West Headquarters, but except for General Möhler and Ethan himself, no one of rank greater than Colonel had been branded. Given the scope of the conspiracy, it was very likely that there were other ranking officers involved. Ethan had been willing to sacrifice himself to get to Roy, which implied there was someone else in the background, calling the shots. No, Roy was not convinced that it ended with Ethan. Still, for the moment at least, it appeared that exposure of the plot made it necessary for the plotters to lay low, and now that the Führer and his loyal comrades knew what to look for, it would no longer be so easy for the insurgents to operate under the radar. Roy was confident that sooner rather than later, any conspirators still at large would be identified.

Throughout all these imposing and ponderous undertakings, the absence of Edward dulled Roy’s days. Late in the evening, alone in his rooms at the manor, he found himself dwelling on current events, wondering what his outspoken ex-lover might have to say about the Führer’s machinations, and what insights he might offer. Roy missed the young man terribly.

He hoped that, perhaps, Edward missed him too.

That wasn’t likely however. By his second week back in Central, Edward had successfully evaded all Roy’s attempts to make contact. Messages sent through Brigadier General Breda came back undelivered. Phone calls to the number listed in his file went unanswered. All efforts to surprise him by walking into arranged meetings with other subordinates failed. Edward was never in the mess hall when Roy peeked in, nor did he ever encounter the young man randomly in Headquarters’ network of hallways. Roy suspected the Dragon’s Pulse as Edward’s means of avoiding him, and if that was the case, Roy realized that he would have to step up his pursuit of the blond or he might never manage to corner his former lover.

In the mean time, the Führer had plenty to distract him, both professionally and personally.

Heymans Breda was officially in charge of the intensive mop-up operation of Jerald Ethan’s faction, but Riza Hawkeye had insisted she be included in the proceedings, and it was mainly because she had taken her inability to protect the Führer as a personal failure. The traitors had run circles around her stringent security measures, and despite her continued professionalism, it was clear her injured
pride demanded an accounting. She was quick to indicate that her main concern was to discover how the insurgents had so easily circumvented her intensive safety precautions in order to ensure that all weaknesses could no longer be exploited, but everyone involved knew that she held a personal stake in the matter as well. She was the Führer’s sworn protector, and she felt that she had failed in her duty, no matter how vehemently Roy assured her otherwise.

The Hawk was currently combing through the service records of the personnel in her unit, searching for any connection to Jerald Ethan, however minor. She had confided to Heymans Breda that she suspected a mole in her chain of command had been feeding information to Ethan’s insurgent group, and was determined to ferret the possible traitor out. Concerned, the chubby Brigadier General had mentioned this to Roy, and the Führer had agreed to speak with his old friend. Like Breda, Roy knew how compulsive the woman could be about his wellbeing, particularly when she felt she had let Roy down. While he knew it was a good idea for Hawkeye to confirm that her staff was loyal, it would do more harm than good to start a witch hunt based on rumor and speculation, persecuting those whose only crime was a casual connection to a known traitor.

The Führer didn’t call ahead to meet with his right hand. In fact, this spontaneous conference was the result of a few spare minutes in his busy schedule. He planned to make use of those few moments to confer with his Security Chief, and subtly remind her that simple acquaintance did not necessarily imply treasonous intent.

All that went out the window when the Führer entered his General’s office.

Riza and Edward sat shoulder to shoulder on the leather couch in front of the Lieutenant General’s desk, file folders fanned out on the coffee table before them. The pair looked up as Roy strode into the room, flanked by his personal assistant, his secretary, and his two body guards. Riza rose immediately to her feet and snapped a perfect salute. Edward stood as well as he looked into Roy’s surprised eyes, expressionless. The young man’s face held no hint of emotion; not happy, not angry, not anything. His demeanor was completely neutral.

While Roy’s heart was beating hard enough to shatter his chest.

“Forgive the interruption, General, Edward,” he said smoothly. “I wonder if I might speak with you privately.”

“I’ll catch you later, General Hawkeye,” Edward said, taking a step toward the door.

“Actually I was hoping to speak with you both,” Roy clarified. He didn’t mind saying what he had to in front of Hawkeye.

Edward hesitated, and Roy took that opportunity to dismiss his retinue to the hallway. The Führer, hands clasped at his back, waited until he heard the door close behind them, eyes on his blond former lover. As much as he had rehearsed this speech, words were failing him now. Which was probably for the best. What Roy had to say, he had to say from the heart.

“Edward.” Best to start with the basics. “You have been avoiding me lately.”

“Wow. Your intuitive grasp of the obvious is impressive.”

That certainly wasn’t the denial Roy was expecting. “May I ask why?”

Ed shrugged. “I figured you weren’t going to let it go, and I don’t feel like beating a dead horse. Was I wrong?”

“No actually, you weren’t, though I wouldn’t call discussing it further ‘beating a dead horse’.”
“It is.” Edward scrubbed his hands over his face, then met Roy’s eyes again. “There is nothing you can say that will change my mind. I mean it Roy. We’re done.”

Before Roy could say another word, Edward moved to the door and left.

Shit.

At times like these, Roy understood why King Bradley sometimes found it necessary to give his guards the slip. As much as he would have liked to follow Edward to make his case for a continued relationship, of friendship at least, with his retinue waiting in the hallway it just wasn’t practical. Had a window been handy Roy would have been sorely tempted to transmute a suitable distraction and make use of it to escape and track Edward down, though as yet he felt no inclination to present anyone with a melon.

Riza Hawkeye was unlikely to fall for the old transmuted distraction trick, and the only window in the room provided a lovely, fourth floor view of the parade grounds, thus eliminating that course of action. Roy heaved a frustrated sigh.

Hawkeye was quietly watching him with some sympathy. “Will that be all, Sir?” she asked after a moment.

“No, General Hawkeye,” Roy said, all business now. “I understand you are conducting in-depth background checks on your personnel.”

“Yes Sir.” Hawkeye said, standing at parade rest. “I have discovered a possible connection between a Major and a Lieutenant Colonel under my command, both of whom may have ties to Jerald Ethan’s insurgent group.”

“I see. What are your plans?”

“At the moment, I have both officers under surveillance. I will take no further action unless my on-going investigation turns up clear evidence of their involvement in the plot to assassinate you.”

“Very good, Lieutenant General. Carry on, and keep me apprised of developments in this situation.”

“Yes Sir. And as to the matter with Edward, if you need someone to talk to, you know I’m always available to listen.”

And not only would she remain impartial, she might even have some useful advice. “Thank you, General, I’ll keep that in mind.”

Roy pinched the bridge of his nose, clenching his eyes shut for a moment. As tempting as Hawkeye’s offer might be, Roy didn’t believe it would lead to a solution to his problem. Talking to Hawkeye would be a good way to vent his frustration, but wasn’t likely to result in a plan to resolve the situation; the stoic woman would be the first to admit that personal relationships were not exactly her strong suit. Roy’s day would still end the same way as it had for the last few weeks: losing himself to exhausted sleep, alone in his far too large bed.

That was his life. Work. Sleep. Repeat. A year ago it had been just the same, and that had been fine, because he couldn’t miss what he never had.

Roy’s life had held so much more with Edward in it. He wanted him back. But how could he make his case if Edward wouldn’t stand still long enough to hear what Roy had to say?

Roy needed advice from an expert.
Since Maes death, Gracia Hughes had been living with Elicia in a small apartment over a flower shop. She had bought the thriving little business not long after the Promised Day with money scraped together from her savings, the meager payout from Maes’ military life insurance, and the monthly pittance crassly referred to as the Widow’s Death Benefit.

As if anyone could claim benefit from losing their beloved soulmate.

It had been quite some time since Roy had visited Maes’ widow. He walked into the small store flanked by his usual contingent of guards and glanced about. It hadn’t changed.

As always, the first thing to hit him upon entering the modest little shop was the fresh green aroma of flowers in bloom and the moist brown scent of rich fertile soil. On tables, counters, and on the floor, flowering plants both potted and cut vied for space. Almost every available surface sported an assortment of cut flowers attractively organized according to color and type in brightly decorated, water-filled containers. Shallow wall mounted shelves displayed pots, vases, and other items of floral home decor. The only uncluttered surface was the small counter that separated the front of the shop from the back. Order forms, a cash register, a telephone, and a small counter bell were set neatly on its polished top. A quick glance beyond it into the back of the shop confirmed that Gracia was not designing a floral arrangement in her work space, so Roy walked up to the counter and tapped the bell.

It only took a moment for Gracia to descend the stairs at the rear of the store. Her easy smile turned to shocked delight when she recognized her visitor.

“Roy!” she exclaimed, rounding the small counter to accept his embrace with pleasure. She pulled back to hold him at arm’s length, grinning widely. “What a surprise! You’re looking well, despite your recent adventures.”

“And you are looking absolutely stunning, as usual,” Roy said with a wide smile of his own.

Garcia gave the Führer’s arm a playful swat. “Still have that silver tongue I see,” she returned. “Are you here to buy flowers, or can you visit for a while? Elicia will be home from school soon, and she’d be thrilled to see her Uncle Roy.”

“I’d love to,” Roy accepted. It had been a while since he had seen his godchild, and always enjoyed hearing of the teenager’s adventures. “I’m hoping you’ll be able to offer me some advice as well.”

“Not in a matter of State, I hope,” Gracia said ruefully, gesturing for Roy to follow her into the rear of the shop. “That’s your area of expertise, not mine.”

“Don’t sell yourself short,” the Führer admonished. “Maes married you for your brains and your beauty, as he was always very quick to insist, and as is obvious to anyone who knows you.”

Gracia shot Roy a calculating glance as she led him through the small gate to the back of the shop. “But this isn’t about an official matter, is it.”

“See what I mean?” Roy grinned. “Sharp as a tack.”

Gracia started up the stairs, Roy and his guards following. “Then I’ll have to assume that this is about Edward,” she concluded.

Her back was to him, so she didn’t see Roy’s surprise. He hadn’t been joking about her intelligence by any means, but her insight still managed to jolt him.
“You do know that he’s staying here at the moment, don’t you?” Gracia continued.

“No, I didn’t,” Roy said, surprised again. “I was going to ask if you knew where he was, but I really do need your advice as well.”

The kitchen was small, and spotlessly clean. One of Roy’s guards took up a position by the top of the stairway while the other, with Gracia’s permission, moved through the apartment to stand guard at the front door. Roy took a seat at the table while Gracia set the coffee to brew. When the percolator began to gurgle merrily, filling the room with the rich scent of good coffee, she sat across from Roy, a small frown creasing her brow.

“Tell me what’s on your mind,” she said.

“As I’m sure you already know, Edward and I were an item for a few months, starting around the end of spring this year.” Gracia nodded, and Roy continued. “I . . . did something incredibly stupid while we were in West City, and I . . . want to fix it. The problem is that he’s avoiding me.”

“Did you get a chance to apologise?” Gracia’s frown had deepened.

“Yes, and he accepted my apology, but it wasn’t enough. He’s formed a badly mistaken impression of what he was to me, and I want a chance to correct that.”

“And just what is he to you, if you don’t mind my asking?” Gracia’s eyes probed deep into Roy’s own.

Roy had been thinking about this extensively, and while he still didn’t think he had the whole and complete answer, he had one that was close. “A friend. A dear, trusted, cherished friend.”

“And what is the ‘wrong impression’ he holds?” the woman asked softly.

“That he is a tool to be used, a means for whatever end I see fit,” Roy quoted.

“Ouch. I don’t even want to know how he got that idea,” Gracia said through a grimace.

Which was fine, because Roy was ashamed to even think about his behaviour. He didn’t want to outline it for his best friend’s widow, though he would have if asked.

“If that’s what he believes, then I can certainly understand why he’s avoiding you,” she continued.

“How did you come to the conclusion that I was here to seek advice about Edward?” Roy couldn’t resist quenching his curiosity. “A woman’s intuition?” Growing up the way he had, Roy had a healthy respect for that fabled ability.

Gracia smiled, eyes soft. “No,” she said. “He seems a bit down lately, and he doesn’t go out to see you anymore. One plus one.”

Edward seemed a bit down? Roy felt like a cad for considering that good news, but if it meant what he hoped it did . . .

“Can you help me?” Roy asked, cutting right to the chase. “You might actually be helping Edward, too, it seems. I just need him to hold still long enough to hear what I have to say.”

Gracia tapped thoughtful fingers on the side of her coffee cup. “It will be difficult. You know how stubborn he is.” She grinned at the man seated across from her. “He’s just as pigheaded as you are, when I come to think about it.” Then she frowned. “A dinner date might work, if it’s clearly in the
interest of friendship alone. Someplace that serves a nice steak and potatoes type fare and isn’t too fancy would be your best bet. From personal experience, I’d venture to say that Edward’s stomach is likely his favorite organ.”

Roy thought that Ed’s stomach had a rival for favorite organ, but didn’t offer that opinion. If he could entice the young man to dinner and it went well, he might be able to indulge that other organ, too. Later. Along with his own. Away from prying eyes.

“I think I can manage a suitable venue with a little preparation,” Roy decided. “Getting him to accept the invitation will be the real challenge.”

“That’s where I’ll come in,” Gracia said. “I’m sure Elicia will help too. Leave it up to us to convince him he shouldn’t shut you out. He holds his friends very dearly, and despite what happened I’m sure he still considers you a friend. I seriously doubt he would want to lose touch with you completely.”

Roy hoped Gracia was right.

The two sat in companionable silence for a few moments as the coffee continued to perk. Roy was just about to ask after Elicia when the guard on the back stairway suddenly snapped to and positioned himself to bar the doorway. Roy and Gracia were on their feet in an instant, though for different reasons. Roy reached to stop her as Gracia moved to peer around the security man, but she sidestepped him easily, face lighting up to see who had arrived.

“Edward, dear, you’re home early! Please do come up and join us,” she called down the stairs.

The Führer motioned the guard to step aside, and Edward came into view, eyes locking on Roy seated at the table.

“Sorry to interrupt,” the young man said mildly. “I’ll come back later, when your company has gone.”

“Nonsense,” Gracia said, latching onto his arm to guide him to the table and a seat across from Roy seated at the table.

“Tell me, Edward,” Gracia finally said when the silence had stretched on for too long. “How was your day?”

“It was fine.” Edward picked up his mug and took a sip, grimacing when the too hot liquid scorched his tongue, upper pallet, and esophagus all the way down. He set his cup back on the table and contemplated the logo of a local flower wholesaler imprinted on the side.

“Well then, Roy, would you care to tell us how your day was?” Gracia asked.

“It was tiring, frustrating, and lonely,” Roy said, giving Edward the puppy dog eyes.

Edward continued to examine his coffee mug with intense concentration.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Gracia said sadly. “I’m glad you’re here in that case. We will do our best to ease your troubled mind.” She looked toward Edward. “Won’t we?”

Edward glanced at Roy, made note of his kicked puppy demeanor, and quickly dropped his eyes.
Roy took that as an encouraging sign. “At the risk of imposing on your hospitality, Gracia, I wonder if you could give me a few moments alone with Edward.”

“Of course,” Gracia said magnanimously. “I have a few things that need taking care of in the shop.”

Roy now turned to the guard standing at the top of the stairs. “Please take up a post at the bottom of the stairwell, Second Lieutenant,” the Führer instructed.

With a sharp salute the soldier preceded Gracia down the steps.

“Alone at last,” Roy said.

Edward was not amused. “I guess it won’t do any good to tell you, again, that I’m not changing my mind.”

“You’re quite correct,” Roy confirmed. “I won’t let something so valuable go easily.”

Edward scoffed. “What the hell are you talking about? There’s nothing valuable here.”

“You’re mistaken,” Roy stated firmly. “Your friendship is of immense value to me, and I’m not prepared to lose it. Can you honestly say that our closeness meant nothing to you?”

“Of course not,” Edward growled. “Regardless of what your classy friends might believe, I’m not some status seeking bimbo.”

“And therein lies the problem.” Roy let that hang between them for a moment, Edward frowning his confusion. “My classy friends, as you call them, are not actually my friends at all. I am very particular as to whom I ascribe that kind of status. The tally includes my Aunt, my team from the early days, Gracia, you and Alphonse of course, and a few others, most of whom you know. As for everyone else, they fall into a number of categories depending on their sphere of influence. They are people that I work with, professional acquaintances. It is a requirement of my position as head of state to interact with people from all walks of life, including the military high brass and society’s elite. I have no choice in this. It is my choice, however, and my pleasure as well, to spend time with you.”

Or at least it was, until Roy blew it.

“They’re still important people, people who play an essential role in the running of this country.”

Edward’s jaw was a study of stubborn determination. “I mean, you could do it anyway, but with them on your side it’s a lot easier to do the job you need to do.”

Roy could hear what was not being said: who was Edward, compared to them?

And this wasn’t playing out quite the way Roy had expected. Edward was not responding as the injured party. Roy realized he was missing something important. Unfortunately, prying it out of the young man in full-on obstinate lockdown would require more time and effort than Roy was willing to expend here in the Hughes kitchen. Taking this to the privacy of his rooms back at the Presidential manor would be ideal, but not an option at the moment.

“That may be true,” Roy said smoothly, making plans even as he pressed on with his original argument. “What you don’t realize is that a single honest friend is worth more to me than all of them combined. I took advantage of your friendship. I apologised. You accepted my apology. I suppose I can understand why you would want to scale back the level of intimacy we shared, but why does the friendship have to end?”

A frown creased Edward’s brow, and Roy got the distinct impression that he was confused by Roy’s argument. Something was definitely off. Not only were they not on the same page, they might not
even be in the same book. Hell, they might be in different libraries altogether. Roy needed to find out how Ed was reading this, and for that, he needed to get the young man into a more open frame of mind.

“Have dinner with me, just as friends,” Roy asked earnestly. “Because I miss you, and I find that it’s your friendship that I miss the most. Am I wrong to suppose that you miss my company as well?”

Edward was quiet for a moment, eyes on Roy’s. “You’re not wrong,” he finally admitted, grudgingly. “But -”

“Dinner. That’s all,” Roy repeated.

He could see Edward’s refusal in the stubborn set of the young man’s jaw, just as Gracia stepped back into the kitchen.

“Oh, what a perfectly lovely idea!” she said brightly. “You both can have dinner with Elicia and I this evening! Elicia will be over the moon with two of her favorite people to entertain! Be a dear, Edward, and tend the shop while I put on a big pot of stew. Your bodyguards are invited too, of course, Roy.”

The woman began bustling around the small kitchen, pulling out a large stew pot and checking her stock of vegetables, discussing the merits of garden fresh over store bought produce with the air, and leaving no room for either of her guests to protest.

Not that Roy had any intention of doing so. After a moment Edward retreated downstairs to the flower shop, and Roy shot a grateful glance at his best friend’s widow.

“Thank you,” he said quietly.

“You’re welcome,” the woman responded, just as softly. “You have your chance. Make the best of it.”

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Given the choice between the hospitality of West City’s upper crust and that of the Hughes’ humble household, Roy knew he would choose the homey comfort of Gracia’s kitchen every time. The small, immaculately clean workspace was soon in lively domestic motion. Roy was drafted into service to help with the preparations of course; Elicia as well when she got home from school. The teen’s squeal of delight upon discovering her Uncle Roy in the kitchen chopping vegetables had been deafening. The atmosphere soon became decidedly festive with everyone pitching in to put the meal together. Even Roy’s bodyguards shed their dispassionate demeanor in the face of good natured and infectious camaraderie. While careful to remain vigilant, the two burly men were soon joining in the cheerful banter warming the kitchen.

Edward appeared in the kitchen occasionally throughout the afternoon, pulled in by Elicia or Gracia as another pair of hands to lighten the workload. Roy had been delighted to discover that the young man’s extensive list of skills included the ability to make dinner rolls of unparalleled quality, acclaimed as almost legendary in the Hughes household. By the time he had covered the rolls and left them on the breadboard to rise, Roy was amused to note that the only place Edward had managed to smudge flour was onto the tip of his nose, which Roy found particularly adorable.

Not that he dared say so out loud.

With the stew simmering on the stove, the dinner rolls rising in the pantry, and the flower shop closed for the evening, Elicia set Roy and Edward to peeling apples for a pie while Gracia opened a
bottle of sweet red wine to help pass the time until dinner was served.

Throughout the process Edward was clearly uncomfortable, and though he sat down to share in the task and the wine, he was cordial with Roy but nothing more. Roy ignored his standoffishness, falling into the easy familiarity they had enjoyed before Walther’s Ball. He cranked up his natural charm to high output, hoping to improve his chances, but by the time dinner was served Edward still had not loosened up.

Elicia came to the rescue. Perhaps Gracia had given the youngster a heads up. Perhaps she had inherited her parents’ intuitive nature. Whatever the reason, the girl spent the entire meal smoothly drawing Edward into conversation with Roy. Whether the discussion was about her classmates, subjects, or current events, she required the opinions of both men, and demanded they defend their stand on each point not only to her, but to each other. By the time everyone was ready for dessert, Edward had lost much of his stiff demeanor despite himself, and had finally slipped back into their habit of comfortable give and take that Roy had missed so much. When the Hughes women insisted that clean-up be left to them and shooed the two men out of the kitchen, Edward didn’t hesitate to take his coffee and follow Roy to the living room.

Roy settled on the couch while Edward took the big armchair by the fireplace. They were as alone as they could be in the small flat, the women in the kitchen, one guard by the back stairs, the other down the hall by the front door. The only observer was the framed picture of Maes Hughes smiling demurely from the mantle. Roy knew it was now or never, and he was ready to make his move.

Edward beat him to it. “I know what you’re going to say.”

“Do you?”

“You’re going to say how great dinner was, and how much you enjoyed yourself, and that we should get back together.”

“Well, yes.”

Ed shook his head. “Well, no. I don’t know what else I can say to convince you that we were a bad idea right from the start.”

“There is nothing else you can say because it’s simply not true,” Roy parried Edward’s thrust. “I can’t think of another lover that I have held as dear as I hold you. I can think of only one other friend I trusted as completely and without reservation. I don’t know what else I can say to convince you that it would be a bad idea to discard all that because of a single evening that spawned a few thoughtless words and deeply regretted actions.”

“Then we’re at an impasse,” Edward said. “You will keep trying, and I will not change my mind.”

Stubborn brat. This was going to take more effort, but Edward was quite correct in that Roy was up for the challenge. He did not intend to lose. And screw settling for friendship alone; he wanted it all, and he would fight for it. For now, however, he needed a convincing feint.

“I meant what I said before,” Roy told his opponent. “I miss your friendship most of all. Can we at least have that, if nothing else?”

“It would be best to make a clean break,” Edward said quietly. “I’m a bad apple. I’d make trouble for you eventually, just like I did in West City.”

What? Roy frowned. He had been negotiating on the assumption that Edward was still angry about how Roy had behaved towards him. Had he misjudged the dynamic?
“I’m not sure what you mean,” Roy admitted.

“Sure you do.” Ed looked away, embarrassed. “Me getting pissed off and threatening to kick asses. I fit into the high class circles you travel with all the elegance of a dog turd in a Ming dynasty vase, and that’s not likely to change. You don’t need the aggravation of doing damage control for my big stupid mouth. It’s best if we . . .”

“Shit.” Roy refrained from slapping a palm to his brow. He really should have known. Edward had always been just as quick to forgive as he was to take the blame. Roy had been making his case based on a mistaken premise.

Roy’s quietly uttered and uncharacteristic expletive had stopped Edward midsentence. He watched Roy guardedly as the older man took a moment to reorganize his argument.

“Edward.” Roy wished he could reach out to the blond, but knew it was too soon. “Remember that day in West Headquarters, when you walked in on Lady Herlinda and I?” Edward nodded with a frown, not sure where this was going. “Do you remember what you told me when I hoped my flirting didn’t make you uncomfortable? You said, ‘I know who you are’. Well believe it or not, I know who you are, too.”

“It’s different, though,” Ed said quietly. “Who you are doesn’t cause other people problems.”

“Oh really?” Roy asked. “Who pushed you to talk to Princess Ekaterina when he knew you would be opposed to it?”

“That didn’t cause me a problem; it pissed me off. There’s a big difference.”

“I still regret it.” Roy pressed on. “I also regret not setting Major General Dearth straight as soon as I realized he still held a mistaken impression of your worth to me. I’d had a hectic and frustrating day, but I made time for other, far more trivial issues. I should have made time for you. Why I didn’t is still a mystery to me.”

“So? I couldn’t care less what that miserable old fart thinks of me.”

“I care. I care because you don’t deserve to be treated so disrespectfully. Not by him. Not by anyone.”

“I don’t need you to protect me,” Ed muttered. “I can deal with assholes just fine on my own.”

“You most certainly can; with all the lethal grace and brutal finality of a pouncing tiger.” Roy delivered his coupé. “My question is: do you think I can’t?”

Edward looked askance, expression wary, and Roy knew his riposte had slipped past the young man’s parry.

Roy pressed his advantage. “I’ve seen combat on the front lines. I’ve fought inhuman monsters nearly impossible to kill, and not only survived, but triumphed. I’ve seen the Truth. I’ve manoeuvred myself up the military ladder all the way to the Führership.” He smirked. “As annoying as it can be to deal with, do you really think I can be brought down by an irate reaction to your blunt honesty?”

“Of course not,” Edward did not hesitate to counter. “But you have more important things to do. It’s just one more hassle that you don’t need to deal with.”

“Exactly.” That bind took Roy’s opponent by surprise. “Because I don’t need to deal with it. You were quite correct when you stated that I was not responsible for what you say and do, and I was
wrong to suggest that how you choose to conduct yourself in a situation of that nature is any of my business.”

Edward frowned. “Maybe that’s true, but you’ll still get caught in the backlash. I’m sometimes not fit for polite company.”

“That would be polite company’s loss,” Roy said with a smile. “I will admit that over the years I have occasionally wished that you could avoid pissing off those ill-equipped to take it in stride, particularly when you were my subordinate and I was often held accountable for your behavior. For the most part, however, I found your raw and reactionary attacks highly amusing. Now you are no longer my subordinate. You are your own man, free to do and say as you please, and to suffer individually whatever consequences may result. And to be completely honest, I admire your perfect candor. Sometimes those in lofty positions need a reality check, and far be it for me to object when you are quite happy to provide one.”

“Including to you?”

“Especially to me.” Did Roy detect a small tilt of Edward’s lips? Sensing victory, he forged ahead. “As for our continuing friendship, of course there must be give and take on both sides. So let me state for the record that I trust you are strong enough to deal with my scheming, manipulating, and flirting. I hope you can trust me to be strong enough to deal with the sharp side of your tongue, whomever it may cut.”

Edward thought it over carefully. “I don’t know. Some of the shit I stir up even makes me cringe. You sure you know what you’re getting into?”

“Please.” Roy sniffed. “You forget who you’re talking to. Who sponsored you for the State Alchemist program and survived your initial assessment, Mr. I-think-I’ll-demonstrate-my-skills-by-transmuting-a-spear-and-holding-it-to-the-Führer’s-throat.”

Edward considered that for a moment, then smiled sheepishly. “You’ve been putting up with my crap for a long time, haven’t you.”

Roy nodded. “I have. But you’ve been putting up with mine for just as long. I have always had a natural tendency to shamelessly manipulate every situation on principle whether I need to or not. I believe that I have actually gotten worse on that score over the years. Do you think you can handle it?”

“Haven’t I always?”

Roy took that as a ‘yes’. “And I am confident in my ability to weather any storm you may stir up. I therefore see no reason why we can’t put that disastrous West City Ball behind us and continue from where we left off. Unless, of course, you would prefer to start with a clean slate and take it slow.”

Edward just looked at him for a moment, solemnly. Then he said, “You’re still pushy as hell. And a bastard. And actually, an idiot.”

Before he knew what was happening, Roy’s arms were full of Edward, warm and solid and real, one knee pressed into the couch next to Roy’s hip, firm hands pushing him against the backrest, eyes gleaming honey as lips descended toward Roy’s. The rush Roy felt, a surging tide of heat burning from his core, seared the last few long, lonely weeks away to nothingness. Roy threaded his fingers into spun gold to tilt Edward’s head, and he kissed him, softly at first, then with a swift swell of passion. Edward kissed him back, matching his passion, answering it with equal intensity. And then their mouths parted, Edward’s hot breath against his lips strumming tremors along Roy’s nerves, the
flavor of sweet apples and cinnamon lingering on Roy’s tongue.

Touché.

A girlish giggle pulled Edward from his arms, but a quick glance proved that Elicia had left them to their own devices, likely to report their guests’ progress to her mother. Edward sighed and straightened, then sat down beside Roy on the couch.

“So now what?” the young man asked with resignation.

Roy slung one arm around Edward’s shoulders and sprawled the other along the back of the couch. He pulled the blond man closer and smiled a contented smile. “Now we finish our coffee. Then we venture into the kitchen to see if the ladies need our help. We help them whether they want us to or not, and then we sit politely at the kitchen table, making conversation, until it’s time for me to leave.” Roy checked his watch. “I estimate that to be an hour from now. It will be up to you whether you come home with me or not.”

“Such a dumbass,” Edward grumbled.

“Was that a no?” Roy pouted, though he knew it wasn’t. “From personal experience, I can testify that make up sex is the best sex there is.”

“And I’m sure you’ve had plenty, judging from your extensive experience with pissing people off.”

“I provide a public service,” Roy said airily. “It’s a far better fate to be pissed off than pissed on.”

“Yeah, you think you’re funny, but you’re really not,” Edward told him, and then stood up and headed for the kitchen. “Besides, the first time you get pissed on, you’ll realize that neither condition is mutually exclusive. Take it from me.”

Roy got up to follow. “That sounds like the beginning of a very entertaining story,” he ventured.

“It is. Maybe I’ll tell it later. It would probably make for good pillow talk, you know, after.”

That was the most intriguing proposal Roy had heard in weeks.
Dear Roy,

Sorry about the late response to your previous letter. Things have been pretty hectic around here lately. The apple harvest was early while the grape harvest was late, and as a consequence of having to harvest both at once, every able-bodied man and woman in the area was drafted into service to get the crops in before they went bad on branch and vine. Even children as young as Maes were out in the fields. I must say that my little boy enjoyed the experience immensely, though I suspect quite a few of the apples he picked never made it into his basket. He has an incredibly healthy appetite – a bottomless pit, Granny calls him - and who does that remind you of?

We couldn’t have managed the harvest without the help shuttled in from East City. I’m sure you’ll be happy to hear that the Führer’s plan to help people find work and work find people is beginning to take hold. Some of the folks who came in to pick fruit have stayed for the fall planting, since, as you know, here in the southeast we enjoy relatively mild weather year round and can always use extra hands to help with the task of keeping ourselves and the northern regions fed. I hear that a few of the younger men from the city have even been asking about open land that might be available to settle. For us country folk, that’s outside the realm of our experience. Usually the young people around here can’t wait to run off to the city, and do so as soon as they come of age. It appears that at least one of your economic remedies could be changing the world as we know it.

Speaking of which, I received a letter from Edward yesterday. As I’m sure you know, brother is terrible when it comes to writing. I always assumed that it was because when his arm was automail he was forced to write with his left, and since he is right handed it was a frustrating chore to write legibly. He still hates to put pen to paper even now however, for correspondence at least, so I guess that hypothesis was incorrect. In any case, the letter was a surprise in itself, the content more so.

I don’t know if you are aware, but Ling Yao recently contacted my brother to see if he wanted to return to Xing with him in the spring. The Emperor’s party plans to take the northern route via Drachma’s Transsibirskaya rail line through the Tungusican steppes. The newly completed branch line stretches all the way to the port city of Vladivostok on the Great Eastern Sea, and from there it is a relatively easy overland trek to the Xingese capital. There would be so much to see on that nearly 10,000 kilometre journey: from the heart of modern Drachma through mountains, taiga, and frozen plains to a destination at the furthest reach of this continent – I can only imagine the wonders hidden in those remote regions. How do the indigenous people live? What cultures and customs have evolved? What form does their alchemy take, if they practice it at all? I was honestly tempted to join Ling myself when Edward mentioned his itinerary. Brother also said that he had turned Ling down because he plans to stay put for a while.

That pretty much floored me.

Ed staying put is a peculiar notion. Ed turning down a unique opportunity to explore unknown territory is beyond strange.

I’m certain that his relationship with you is the reason. Aside from spending time with Maes and Sara, as much as he tries to hide it, Brother still doesn’t actually enjoy his stays in Resembool, though it’s getting better. Bad feelings linger between us, but time will eventually fade them. At least, that is my hope. I know where he is now, and he visits regularly, which is more than I could have said a year ago.

It’s all because of you, and I thank you, so very much. I am relieved that he has someone he can go
to who knows who he is. Someone who knows what he’s done. Someone who understands him.

My brother has many friends. He makes them almost by accident, and it takes him by surprise every time. People are drawn to him because he obviously and genuinely cares about them, and they come to realize that he will always stand up for what is right, regardless of the risks. People open up to him naturally, because he is willing to listen and to lend a helping hand wherever and whenever he can.

On the other hand, there are very few people that he will open up to. I was one, but no longer. Winry was another, but thanks to me, is also no longer. Ling is the only other person I know of who still has that privilege, but soon he will be on the other side of the continent. I’m not sure if Edward has taken you into his confidence, but I sincerely hope so. As strong as he is, as confident as he appears, as carefree as he seems, deep down I know how important it is that he has someone to lean on when he needs to.

There I go, rambling on as usual. My apologies. As consolation, I have included some recent photographs for you to enjoy. Winry snapped the one of Edward sparring with me. We both like to keep our martial skills sharp, and I find that aside from our teacher, no one can push my limits like Brother. He rarely gets the better of me, however, in this area at least. In so many others he is always the better man. It’s a shame he doesn’t realize it.

Take care,

Alphonse.
Roy had a very efficient internal clock. From an early age he’d found that he was always able to wake up precisely when he needed to. It wasn’t something he had trained himself to do; it was simply an innate talent, and one that he had learned to appreciate over the years. It came in particularly handy when he had someone in his bed who he didn’t want disturbed by an early morning alarm, as he often did these days much to his satisfaction. He woke up more mornings than not with Edward there, usually sprawled half over him, warm and solid. Roy marveled that being alone in bed now felt unnatural; he had barely noticed when that had come to pass. It felt good, nevertheless.

When he opened his eyes, no light crept around the thick drapes, and he knew the sun had not yet risen on this cold winter morning. He reached to the nightstand for his gloves; snapping the fireplace alight quickly dispelled the room’s chill. A gentle knock at the door had Roy heaving a quiet sigh, and he shifted to slide out from under Edward’s arm only to find himself reeled back in with a soft grumble. With a grin Roy untangled himself from his lover’s sleepy grip. He never would have imagined the former Fullmetal Alchemist to be a cuddler. What surprised Roy more was that he enjoyed the closeness as well.

On the third try he managed to roll out of the bed before Edward caught him again; the younger man hummed something unintelligible and nuzzled into Roy’s pillow. Pulling on a dressing gown, Roy went to open the door, running his fingers gingerly through his hair in an effort to tame it. Ever the unflappable manservant, Winston stood by with a covered tray on a serving cart, awaiting permission to enter. Roy swung the door wide.

Winston rolled the cart into the room, then reached into his vest pocket to pull out a folded slip of paper. He handed it to Roy with a small bow. “Thank you, Winston.” Roy flipped open the note. A message from Hawkeye, reminding him about a meeting with the Xingese Ambassador later that morning. The warning not to be late and of possible consequences for tardiness was implied.

The Führer had been late for a number of early morning meetings recently.

“I will be leaving within the hour,” Roy said quietly. “Please have my car brought around to the front.”

“Very good, Sir,” Winston responded, just as quietly.

As his manservant left the room, Roy went to the window and parted the drapes to peek out the frost-rimmed glass. Snow was a thick mantle over hill and hollow, drifts cresting against tree and shrub. He would need his gloves and muffler today, and something warm and wholesome from the kitchen to prepare him for his trek into the cold. Returning to the cart, Roy lifted the silver dome from the tray to discover fresh baked buttermilk scones, a pot of blueberry jam, and a carafe of strong black coffee. Thank you, Isa.

Edward was watching him when he turned, the young man’s regard an odd blend of sleepy contentment and wildfire, a drowsy tiger’s gaze. Roy wheeled the cart closer to the bed and wasn't the least bit surprised when Edward immediately reached for him. He didn't pull away when he was
caught, but he couldn't afford to be pulled down and distracted by a kiss, either.

"Edward," he said, giving the man a cautioning look when he continued to tug him closer. "I have to leave in an hour. If I'm late for another meeting, Hawkeye is going to make good on her threat to have me neutered." Edward didn't nod or say a word, but he let go of Roy's hand and reached up to brush his knuckles lightly over his lover's cheek, smiling lazily.

Roy found it incredibly sexy.

It was one thing to caution Edward against making the Führer late. It was quite another for the Führer to decide for himself that he could make time for a quickie. It was obvious by the lay of the comforter across his hips that Edward was in possession of a rather impressive morning erection. The younger man did nothing to stop him as Roy reached to run a hand over the jutting appendage ruining the smooth line of the blanket. Roy was already mostly hard as well, and the warmth of Edward’s arousal against his hand was rapidly finishing the job. Roy shot his lover a considering look, then dragged the covers out of the way and wrapped his hand around Edward's cock, giving him a single, firm stroke.

Edward reclined languidly, passively enjoying Roy’s attention. His sleepy smile never faltered when Roy leaned down, opened his mouth, and flicked out his tongue to taste salt and skin, though anticipation sparkled in his eyes. Shifting his hand, Roy rolled his thumb over Edward’s cock, tracing a long, slow path from base to crown, enjoying the way Ed’s breath caught. Then he curled his tongue to taste the underside, drew it in a slow circle around the smooth fullness of the head, and lapped a slick, clear drop from the slit. The low sound Edward made when Roy took him fully in his mouth was indescribable, and listening to Edward pant and feeling him try desperately not to buck up too hard was intoxicating. Roy had always been undeniably turned on by power, and being in control of someone so innately uncontrollable was an incredible trip. Still, underneath it all, making Edward feel good was ultimately what made Roy crave this.

"Roy." Edward’s rough tone shot straight to Roy’s groin.

He lifted his head slowly, unable to resist one last taste as he let his lover slip from his mouth. "Yes Edward?" Roy said huskily, hungry to continue.

"If you don’t get busy and fuck me, you’re going to be late again."

Edward sat up and scooted back to lean against the pillows and rummage through the nightstand. When he came up with his prize, a near empty tube, Roy couldn't help tossing him an arch look.

"We’ll need more for next time," Edward noted.

"I’ll keep that in mind." Roy smiled as he accepted the lube.

Edward returned the smile. "Now come here. Unless you've got better things to do."

Roy didn’t. He crawled up, straddling Ed’s lap and was pulled down for a kiss. Ed’s hands went straight for Roy’s hips as Roy braced his own on Edward’s shoulders.

Roy had discovered that Edward's kisses had magical powers; they could short circuit his brain and make him forget the rest of the world entirely, lost in the sensation. He gave a ticklish shudder when Edward’s knuckles brushed his stomach as he loosed the belt of Roy’s robe, their lips never parting. Ed’s hands slid around his waist, pulling Roy more snugly into his lap, and shifted again to cup his ass. Hitched closer still, Roy was not at all surprised to note that he was now fully hard.

Roy’s robe slipped from his shoulders to pool on the bed, and Edward’s lips finally left his as the
younger man settled comfortably on his back with Roy between his legs. Roy leaned down to kiss him again, once, quickly, then pulled away to lick and suck at his throat. Edward arched under him as Roy trailed his way down, over toned, twitching muscle, over tanned skin etched with silver scars, tasting, savoring, finally reaching his goal.

Roy tongued his way down the straining length of Ed's cock, taking the powerful jerk of Ed's hips as encouragement. Roy's hands slid under his lover’s knees with a brief, reassuring squeeze to the right, pushing them up and back. Ed's hands slid from Roy’s hair to hold his legs up himself, giving Roy the freedom to explore. His mouth left Edward’s cock and moved lower, sucking, teasing with the faintest scrape of teeth, until his tongue dragged slowly and deliberately over his lover’s entrance.

"Roy." Edward’s moan was low and needy.

"Hm?" Roy licked him again, tonguing a lazy circle and pressing in, just a little.

"Don't...don't fuck around. There's no time. I can't...."

"It's okay," Roy murmured amused, sure that the Führer’s schedule was the farthest thing from Ed’s mind. "There’s plenty of time."

Edward’s eyes were glittering amber as he watched Roy sit up and slick his fingers. At the first touch he shuddered from head to toe in anticipation. Roy stroked Edward’s thigh with his free hand, slow and soothing, fingers tracing aimless patterns as he prepared him, slowly, patiently, one finger, two, three. Then Roy hooked his fingers just so, and Edward clamped down, pushing into the touch, cursing softly under his breath.

“Fuck... Roy... Come on, dammit!”

Roy’s grin was back, dark eyes smoldering. "Hold on. Here I come."

Roy ran a slick hand over his cock and lined himself up. Edward’s eyes dipped half closed as Roy slid inside, but they never left Roy’s face. They never did when they were together like this, Edward taking in Roy’s features as if committing them to memory. Roy began moving, slowly at first, then with more force as Edward wrapped his legs around Roy’s back, stroking faster but still long and smooth, hitting that spot inside on every stroke. Edward was bucking up to meet him, thrust for thrust, tightening his legs and digging his fingers into Roy’s shoulders, holding on for dear life.

“Roy,” Edward whispered, his voice sounding broken, and Roy dipped to mouth wet kisses down the man’s throat.

And then Edward reached his end, coming against their stomachs with clenched teeth and a quiet, breathless cry, Roy’s release hard on the heels of his lover's.

Lying on his back, Edward's warmth against his side and one of Edward's legs tangled with his own, Roy glanced over at the clock on the nightstand. It was as bad as he expected. He had less than ten minutes to shower, shave, and dress. And still he lingered, loath to leave the comfort of his lover’s arms.

“Go,” Edward whispered. “Hawkeye’s going to be pissed if you're late again.” Then he rolled out of the bed to check out the breakfast cart.

The bed wasn’t quite so cozy without Edward in it. Roy dragged his ass off the mattress and across to the bathroom, snagging up his robe on the way and dropping it over Edward’s shoulders. He showered and shaved in record time, then threw on a bathrobe. Emerging from the washroom in a billow of moist warm air, Roy found the serving cart placed strategically between him and the closet,
a steaming cup of coffee and four scones slathered with the ideal amount of jam awaiting him.

“I won’t be around for a week or two,” Edward said as he headed past Roy to the bathroom. “I’m going to Aquroya. My train leaves at nine.”

Roy knew of Edward’s plans to visit the Sinking City to do some investigating for Brigadier General Breda, but hadn’t expected that he would be leaving so soon.

“I’ll miss you,” Roy didn’t say, because it was far too obvious. “Give me a call tomorrow night,” he said instead, because it meant exactly the same thing.

Edward shot him a smile as he closed the bathroom door, because he had become very good at reading between Roy’s lines.

Roy gulped down his coffee while dressing and grabbed up the scones in a napkin to enjoy on the ride to Central. Then he left his rooms to be met by two body guards at the top of the stairs. Winston stood at the front doors, Roy’s coat, hat, and muffler at the ready. Outside the Führer’s roadster idled, Jean Havoc lounging against the front fender. The blond man looked up, surprised to see his commander stepping out the door more or less on time, and quickly got rid of his cigarette. With a lazy salute he moved around to the passenger’s side of the car, eyeing the bulging napkin with interest.

“Front seat or rear, Sir?” Havoc asked.

“Front, if you please, Major General.”

Havoc opened the door and Roy slid into the warmth of the vehicle, set the napkin in his lap and unfolded it to reveal the scones. The bodyguards bundled into the back of the car as Havoc settled into the driver’s seat. He snapped on his seatbelt, giving Roy the hairy eyeball until he did so as well. Then he threw the car into gear to get rolling.

“General Hawkeye is going to be pleased with your punctuality, Sir,” Havoc ventured, casting hungry glances at Roy’s scones as he drove down the long driveway.

“Then she’ll be pleased with me for the next two weeks, possibly longer,” Roy said, biting into the first biscuit and sighing with satisfaction. Isa was amazing.

“I heard the boss was going out of town to do something for Heymans.” Havoc grinned. “Would you like to join us for poker this evening? We wouldn’t want you to get too lonely.”

“Third floor conference room, twenty-two hundred hours. I’ll supply the beer. Snacks are up to you and Heymans,” Roy said. “And just a reminder: I don’t take personal checks.”

Havoc snorted as he turned the roadster onto the main road, attention now firmly on his task. Driving had been particularly challenging these last few days.

A blizzard had descended on the city three days before and had raged for a solid forty hours. Power had been knocked out, roads had been closed, and business had ground to a halt despite the platoons of soldiers armed with shovels to do battle with the drifting snow. Central was accustomed to snowfall, but this had been uncharacteristically extreme, the cold northern wind pulling heavy snow in from frozen Drachma. Roy had been stranded at Headquarters for two days, coordinating relief efforts to free the city and surrounding areas from the storm’s icy grip, only able to return home the previous evening. Even now the roads were slick and treacherous outside the city limits. Roy envied Edward his assignment to Amestris’ warm and sunny south.
Brigadier General Breda had made the arrangements to send Edward to meet with a man in South City. The anonymous man claimed to have information about a possible rebel stronghold just outside the city, hinting that it was the group’s headquarters. Since the insurgent’s plot - now dubbed the Purist Movement by the media - had been exposed, many such tips and leads had flooded the Intelligence Division, most of which had been unconfirmed through investigation. This particular lead, however, was promising. The informant had knowledge of details about the Purists that had not been released to the general public. Breda decided that they had to send someone whose loyalty was beyond question, and at the moment, that list was limited. If the tip turned out to be as good as it sounded, they couldn’t risk the insurgent cadre discovering their command centre was compromised. Edward had volunteered his services, and Breda had agreed to send him out to the meticulously planned, prearranged meeting with the anonymous man.

He had also assigned Major Kain Fuery to accompany him.

Breda had insisted that Edward not take this assignment alone, enforcing his insistence by means of Ed’s contractual obligation. Although Ethan’s cadre seemed to be lying low at the moment, the military was still on high alert. Unidentified traitors could conceivably strike at any time, and no one was permitted to take foolish chances. Fuery had been stationed at South Headquarters in the months before the Promised Day. He had contacts in the nearby Sinking City as well, and was therefore the perfect candidate to team up with the former Fullmetal Alchemist. Another bonus to having Kain along for the ride was that while Edward didn’t give a copper crap about minor details like reporting one’s ongoing progress to superiors, Kain did. Breda hoped to be kept more consistently in the loop with the Major on hand. It also didn’t hurt that the two young men got along very well, and Edward had not kicked up much of a stink about being forced to partner with Kain on this secretive assignment.

And the secrecy surrounding this operation was almost pathologically strict. The rebel informant was understandably nervous. If the meeting went as expected, this man would be exposing his faction from the inside. If his duplicity was discovered the consequences would be dire. For that reason, the informant insisted he remain anonymous, and had also insisted on dictating the particulars of time and place for the meeting. Placing so much control in unknown hands was disconcerting, but considering what they hoped to gain, Breda had reluctantly agreed to the terms. Furthermore, to try to avoid attracting too much attention, Edward and Kain had decided to head for Aquroya separately, and a day apart, each to visit with an old friend.

Overcautious? Perhaps. But too careful beat not careful enough every time.

Aquroya was three days away by rail. Factoring in another day to meet the informant, and at least two or three more to investigate the tip, Roy was resigned to at least a week and a half without Edward. Resigned, because as much as he missed him when he was away, Roy respected Edward’s lifestyle just as Edward respected Roy’s. The younger man had spent his formative years wandering the across the country, and unlike Alphonse, that appeared to be his natural inclination. Edward liked to be in motion. It was just that simple. And that was fine with Roy. They both had their lives. It didn’t mean they valued each other any less. In fact, as far as Roy was concerned, it affirmed a very strong friendship, firmly rooted in trust and mutual respect.

Yes, as much as Roy would miss his lover, there was something comforting about his absence as well, specifically, that it wouldn’t be for long. He looked eagerly forward to his return, certain that Edward looked forward to returning just as keenly. It was something Roy knew he could count on.

For now the Führer had to keep busy. Given his chosen profession, that likely wouldn’t prove to be at all difficult.
Five days later, and Roy’s prediction had been absolutely and unequivocally correct: he had been kept inordinately busy. So busy, in fact, that apart from when he was actually sleeping – and he hadn’t afforded much time even for that - he hadn’t managed a minute alone for days. At his wits end from constantly rebounding off one crisis to crash helplessly into the next, he had finally put his foot down and ordered his staff out of his office, not to disturb him under any circumstances for the next half hour.

The first thing he had done once safely behind the closed doors of his inner sanctum was pull the drapes against the late morning sunshine, shutting out the world. He needed solitude, surrounded by dark mahogany and the scent of old leather in this comfortable space, to regain his composure. Alone in the quiet of his office for the first time in days, he took a few moments to drop his official façade and groan long and loud in frustration.

It had been a troubling week, and as usual, it wasn’t the big issues that gave Roy the most trouble; it was the ever deepening drifts of small issues that were doing their best to smother the Führer’s spirit. The year’s end was approaching, and never were these issues more pressing that during the holidays.

On paper the Amestrian government was essentially a Unitary State organized as a Parliamentary Republic, the Führer at its head. In reality however, it had been a totalitarian state for well over a century. Backed by the military, the Führer at that time had given the elected assembly an ultimatum: submit to his will or be dissolved. Those who resisted simply disappeared as the Führer took total control according to his inhuman master’s instruction. Parliament remained and elections took place, though the electoral candidates were handpicked from a short list of people unquestionably loyal to the regime. The legislature was there to maintain control over non-military aspects of Amestris, and ensure its smooth functioning while the Führer was otherwise occupied running a perpetual war machine. An illusion of democracy, and a thin one.

From the beginning of his rule, Roy had gradually begun to change that. His government was progressively releasing the reins of power, allowing elections to proceed without interference, delegating more power to Parliament, and making the executive more accountable to the legislature. It was Roy’s ultimate goal to make the position of Führer President an elected post with a limited term, subject to the will of the people. Due to the need to push through Führer Mustang’s reforms, open elections were still not quite in place, but it was only a matter of time. Freedom of speech was no longer a meaningless phrase. Public debate was now encouraged instead of suppressed, and many eloquent speakers were rallying support for their ideals even among those currently holding parliamentary seats.

And of course, as all good politicians do, they frequently took advantage of their new found freedom to express their views and vie for public recognition as vocally - and often obnoxiously - as possible.

A time-tested fast track to notoriety in every politician’s arsenal was negative criticism of the current government – now even more effective since such condemnation no longer earned the critic a jail term or worse. Roy was rather proud of the fact that he had fostered an atmosphere in which people felt safe enough to voice opposing opinions. On the downside however, it meant that he had to defend his policies to all and sundry. In general Roy actually enjoyed getting into it with skilled rhetoricians; it honed his own considerable skills in that arena, and clarified his stance. On the other hand, he found it particularly irritating to have his initiatives called into question by those who were
simply looking for a clumsy verbal brawl. The Führer was more than up to the challenge, but had better things to do than get into pissing contests with posturing wannabe policy-makers who couldn’t make plausible arguments to save their lives. Still, it was part of the game, and Roy sucked it up and soldiered on, shutting down the particularly obnoxious with elegantly brutal efficiency. Unfortunately, for every challenge he answered, five seemed to spring up to replace it.

And gallingly, it was one of the Führer’s favorite personal endeavours that was currently spawning spiteful critique and giving him the most grief.

The Winter Solstice had a long tradition of celebration in Amestris, marking the end of the calendar year. In fact, it predated Amestris as a nation entirely. The now secular festivities originated with the people of the east, the Isbalans and people of Lior among them, originally as a celebration of the rebirth of the sun on Yeom Fudel Dowehla, or Day of Longest Shadows. Those who worshiped Leto heralded his return on that day, and it was celebrated in Ishbal as the turning of the year. For both cultures it was a time to reflect on the past, give humble thanks for lessons learned, and to share hope for a peaceful and prosperous future.

A future that Roy hoped to ensure for all Amestrians.

In an effort to foster a more inclusive atmosphere, the Führer had personally embraced some Eastern traditions for the holidays. His favorite was the lighting of a candle in a western facing window at sunset to aid Leto in His struggle with the darkness of the world. Roy also took to wearing the silver teardrop pendant given to him when he had left control of the reconstruction of the Ishbalan region in the hands of its native people, by their newly named Grand Cleric. This year, however, Roy had bigger, more public plans to add some warm, desert flavor to the celebrations, hoping to shine a positive light on their eastern brothers. In the weeks leading up to the festivities, lamposts sported bright banners of deep red, orange, and yellow. Central Square rang with lively maqsuum rhythms that pulled the feet, and the city’s appetite was whetted for food and drink spiced with cumin and cardamom. A delegation of Isbalan Clerics had also agreed to attend Central’s grand midnight vigil on the steps of Headquarters, and to offer a blessing to the nation and all her people when the hour struck.

But this, as with all things related to the present social and political climate of the country, ran afoul of cultural obstacles almost immediately, and was the most prominent source of the Führer’s current frustration.

The first shot fired at the Führer’s initiative came from an editorialist for the Central Times, one Ross Limberg – an ultraconservative irritant very familiar to the current administration. Limberg expressed his outrage that the Führer would attempt to ‘taint’ a time honored Amestrian tradition by including the customs of ‘outsiders’. These inflammatory comments ignited a public debate that raged for two days. Detractors of Roy’s proposal held Limberg up as a true patriot, declaring that the Führer was guilty of attempting to ‘poison’ Amestrian traditions with his multicultural schemes. Supporters of Roy’s plan decried Limberg’s claims, insisting that Limberg and his champions were the real poison, their outrageous claims only serving to foster ill will towards legitimate Amestrian citizens whose only crime was their ethnicity. Roy had allowed the debate to unfold without interference, and had been relieved to watch as the general public swung into strong alignment with the Führer’s office on this issue, but regardless, Roy had no intention of backing down. After all was said and done, Ishbalans and every other minority group in the country were Amestrians, and small minded ‘patriots’ had no right to imply otherwise.

But it wasn’t over yet.

In Central it was customary to welcome the midnight hour with an alchemically enhanced fireworks
display. This went totally against the beliefs of the Ishbalan people, simply because alchemy was involved.

One of the reasons why the Ishbalans had been so overwhelmingly outmatched during the rebellion had everything to do with their belief that the practice of alchemy was a slight to their god, Ishbala. Their clerics deemed it an act of hubris to use alchemy to alter what God produced, mere mortals attempting to improve a higher being’s perfect creation, much different from the sweat and toil of honest physical labour. Consequently the people of Ishabal had developed very few alchemical philosophies or advancements over the course of their history. While not strictly forbidden, the study was frowned on, and therefore few Ishbalans took up its practice.

The most notable exception to that rule was the elder brother of the infamous Scarred Man of the East, otherwise known simply as Scar. Scar’s older sibling had been driven to study the taboo practice as a means of salvation for his people, and it was this unnamed scholar who first determined that something was chillingly wrong with the Amestrian form of alchemy. By studying both Amestrian alchemy and Xingese alkahestry, the Ishbalan man had been able to combine them into complimentary arrays that incorporated the strengths of both. In the process he had also accidentally discovered the existence of Father’s nationwide transmutation circle, and his extensive research had proved instrumental in thwarting the homunculus’ plans to use it. It was a testament to their commitment to right a terrible wrong that the Ishbalan clerics used their countryman’s proscribed research as a means to save the people who had nearly wiped out their entire race.

Nevertheless, during the three and a half years Roy had spent in the Ishbalan region seeking to restore what he had had a hand in destroying, he’d had to do what was necessary by means other than alchemic. Although using alchemy to accomplish their tasks would have been much easier, it would have been disrespectful to do so. The local priests acknowledged the value of alchemy and alkahestry and made no official objection to its use, but many Ishbalans still had a strong aversion to it in large part because of the brutality they had suffered at the hands of Amestris’ State Alchemists. The practice of alchemy had since become more common in the region, a trend supported by the current Grand Cleric – Scar himself - as a means to speed reconstruction, and unofficially, as a possible means of defense. Roy thought it a fitting tribute to the scarred man’s older brother.

Involving the forbidden practice in a holy ceremony was another matter however. The current Führer had assumed that proposing the use of conventional skyrockets would solve the problem, but that was not the case. To do so would involve purchasing the fireworks from a different manufacturer, which resulted in a very vocal protest from the usual supplier. The last thing Roy wanted was to cause even more ill feelings toward Amestris’ eastern citizens.

Winter Solstice was a week away, and with the way things were going, the Führer would be hard pressed to resolve the issues he faced before that evening’s celebration. He slumped down in his chair, leaned his elbows on the desk, put his face in his hands, and heaved a heavy sigh.

It seemed that everything he touched these days caught fire in the worst possible way.

The phone on Roy’s desk rang, startling him. A glance at his desk clock told him a mere fifteen minutes had passed since he had left strict instructions that he not be disturbed. All he had asked for was a respite of half an hour. Just thirty. Stinking. Minutes. Was that really such an impossible request? He snatched up the receiver.

“This had better be good,” he snapped.

“Sir.” Breda was undaunted by his commander’s intimidating greeting. “We have a situation in Aquroya.”
“A situation?” Roy noticed that the hair on the back of his neck had suddenly stood up.

“Yes Sir,” Breda confirmed. “Intelligence and Security are meeting in my office in five.”

“On my way.”

Roy hoped this didn’t mean what he feared.

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When the Führer and his guards strode into Breda’s office two minutes later they were met by Hawkeye, Havoc, and a few of their trusted aides. Breda wasted no time on formalities.

“My command received a report from South Headquarters’ Aquroya Branch ten minutes ago, reporting that at approximately 11:30 a.m., an abandoned warehouse on the waterfront underwent a catastrophic alchemic event that resulted in the building’s complete destruction. It was the site where Edward and Kain were to meet with the Purist informant.”

Roy glanced at the clock. It was now 12:45. “Any news from Kain and Edward?” Roy held his figurative breath.

“No Sir. According to the timeline, they were likely inside the warehouse meeting with the informant.” A battle hardened soldier, Breda kept his demeanor professional. “As you are aware, much of Aquroya is built over water. The collapsed building was over a branch canal, and the structure crumbled directly into deep water. The investigating team is having great difficulty determining whether or not anyone was inside the building at the time. As yet, no casualties have been recovered.”

The Führer certainly was aware of the southern city’s unique construction and was not surprised that rescue efforts were hampered as such.

Beautiful Aquroya was known as the Sinking City for a very good reason. Under Aerugoan rule until Amestris’ aggressive campaign of expansion, the city was built on a chain of small, sandy islands between the mouths of the Travisia and Padua rivers on the northern shore of Lake Venti. Most of the buildings in Aquroya were not built directly on the islands however. Instead, many were built upon wooden platforms supported by wooden stakes driven into the ground, connected by numerous canals and bridges. The weight of the wooden platforms and the grand structures they supported had over the centuries caused the city to settle slowly into the lake. Coupled with the gradual breakdown of the supports themselves, the city was indeed sinking.

At the moment, however, the eventual fate of Aquroya was the farthest thing from Roy’s mind.

“Do we have any additional information from the site?” the Führer wanted to know.

“Very little, Sir,” Breda responded. “Aquroya Headquarters was not aware of Kain and Edward’s mission, so they have very little to contribute on that score. Barring some unrelated accident, we have a couple of theories. First, that the insurgents somehow found out about the traitor in their midst and acted to eliminate the threat. Second, that the meeting was actually set up by the insurgents in order to target whoever made contact. Given the high level of secrecy around the mission, I’m inclined toward theory number two.”
“Is it possible that they were after Edward or Kain in particular?” Hawkeye asked with a frown.

“It’s possible.” Havoc tackled that question. “The conspirators couldn’t predict who specifically would be sent to meet with their operative, but they could be fairly certain it would be someone highly trusted by the Führer, given the bait they offered. They would have been on the lookout, and once Kain and Edward arrived in the city, it would have been fairly obvious why they were there.”

And if that was indeed the case, Roy could only imagine their elation to see just who had shown up. Reliable information on the rebels’ leaders at large had been enticing bait indeed. Bait that had netted two close friends of the Führer himself.

Breda continued. “I have informed Brigadier General Enfield, the local commander, that the incident is likely due to a covert Intelligence probe, and the sensitive nature thereof. He will keep us apprised of developments as they happen.”

Like magic, the telephone by Breda’s elbow rang.

Breda immediately snatched up the handset. “Talk to me.”

The heavyset General listened for a moment, eyes flicking to Roy’s before interrupting the caller to pass the phone to the Führer.

“Führer Mustang here,” Roy stated briskly.

“Sir,” a vaguely familiar voice began, all business. “This is Lieutenant Colonel Storch, Investigations Division, South Command.”

As soon as he heard the name, a matching face sprang to Roy’s mind. Lieutenant Colonel Storch had been Führer Bradley’s personal secretary before Riza Hawkeye had been assigned the job in a failed effort to neutralize Roy and his team. Loyal to Bradley, Storch had been captured on the Promised Day, but had made a deal with General Olivier Armstrong, offering a public testimony to collaborate the rebels’ story of a thwarted insurrection in exchange for his safety. The disgraced soldier had since transferred to South Headquarters, there to fade into obscurity, and good riddance.

“Report, Lieutenant Colonel,” the Führer snapped.

“Brigadier General Enfield had taken personal charge of the investigation into the High Street disaster, and is in the field,” the Colonel stated. “I have been assigned as a liaison between Aquroya Headquarters and Central command.”

“Your report, Colonel,” the Führer snapped again, impatient.

“We have received a telegram from an unidentified source,” the Colonel cut to the chase. “The message states that the arranged meeting was a trap for Edward Elric, and they have him in hand. They want to make a trade: Elric for Gerald Ethan. Details to follow.”

“Can we confirm that Elric was taken?” Roy asked, wondering how his voice could sound so steady when his guts were suddenly ice.

“No Sir,” Storch stated briskly. “In fact, our commander believes it highly unlikely that anyone survived the building’s collapse. We suspect the insurgents realize that we will have great difficulty recovering Elric’s body, and hope to use the uncertainty to their advantage.”

No. Roy refused to believe that Edward could be brought down by falling bricks and a few feet of water. Nor was he anyone’s prisoner. Roy simply could not accept either prospect. At the same time,
the thought of Ed gone forever struck him, a feeling of loss almost too much to bear. It closed around him like freezing water; it dragged his heart under and clenched tight around it. Roy pushed the pain down deep, and in doing so felt rage swell to cover it. He pushed that roughly down as well. He owed it to Edward and Kain to keep himself in check and his head clear.

Storch continued. “Attempts are being made to trace the telegram to its origin. In the mean time, we are awaiting further contact from the rebel group.”

“Keep me posted, Colonel,” the Führer instructed tersely.

“Sir,” Storch acknowledged.

Roy hung up and pinched the bridge of his nose. Anger frizzed along his nerves and a headache lurked behind his eyes, waiting to burst onto the stage, but he couldn’t afford the distraction right now. He quickly outlined the conversation with Lieutenant Colonel Storch to his gathered staff, all the while trying not to regret the strict guidelines he enforced around interrogations. None of the insurgents, Jerald Ethan included, had been subjected to physical torture during questioning, as had been the standard operating procedure of previous Führers. Führer Grumann had outlawed that practice, and Führer Mustang had enthusiastically upheld that position – until now.

Now he would have taken great pleasure in visiting Jerald Ethan’s cell to personally set about prying loose his every secret in the most painful manner imaginable. It was a desire very difficult to suppress.

When Roy finished dictating the details of the conversation, his gathered staff remained silent, digesting the report. Breda’s expression was grim, but Roy couldn’t guess what he might be thinking. Riza was composed, seated at Roy’s right hand, gauging her commander’s expression and ready to follow any order. Havoc’s brows were knit, visibly as angry as Roy felt. In fact, cold clear anger gleamed in the eyes of everyone seated at the conference table. Their comrades in arms had been targeted in a most cowardly manner, and sooner or later, the traitors would pay.

A young Colonel under Brigadier General Breda was the first to comment. “What are your thoughts, Sir?” she asked of her Führer. “Will you comply with the rebels’ demand?”

“That would be a grave mistake.” A Colonel attached to Lieutenant General Hawkeye’s office cleared his throat self-consciously. “To do so would in effect declare an open season on our citizens. The rebels would take to kidnapping anyone they considered suitable leverage in an effort to force the government to its knees.”

“Agreed,” a Lieutenant Colonel on Breda’s side of the table concurred. “We can’t show the rebels, or other malcontents for that matter, weakness of this or any kind.”

“We don’t even know if they actually have our people,” another Colonel pointed out.

“Does it really matter?” the first Colonel asked. “We must stand firm on our position either way.”

“Our standard response is to immediately reject demands of this nature,” the second Colonel stated firmly. “It is my recommendation that we hold to it.”

“Unless we choose instead to turn the situation to our advantage,” Breda said quietly.

That stopped the discussion cold.

Roy knew immediately what the heavyset man was about to suggest. In fact, if he had been thinking clearly, he likely would have suggested it himself.
If they allowed the rebels to believe that the Führer was giving in to their demands, the Führer’s forces might just be able to turn the tables and apprehend more of the traitorous group – perhaps even the elusive mastermind himself.

“It won’t be easy,” Roy cautioned his Intelligence chief. “They won’t be fooled if we surrender too quickly. At the same time, if Edward and Kain are still at large, we don’t have much time to set our plan in motion, and neither do the Purists.”

The best part about having sharp minded subordinates was that it was rarely necessary to explain his thinking in any great detail. Everyone around the table was nodding thoughtfully, ready to make recommendations on how they might proceed.

And the all-consuming need to go directly to Jerald Ethan’s cell and burn information out of him, slowly, where the rest of the imprisoned traitors could hear his agonized screams, remained. The way Riza sat tense in her seat proved that she was well aware of his struggle; her expression was troubled. She had seen him at his worst and knew what he was capable of when rage overcame him. Ever his stalwart protector, she lent her support the only way she could at the moment, by mere proximity.

The phone at Breda’s elbow rang and the Führer snatched it up.

“Führer Mustang here,” he snapped. “Report!”

“Uh, Sir?” a startled, and very familiar voice asked uncertainly.

“Major Fuery?” Roy wondered if his ears were deceiving him, and he suddenly had the attention of everyone in the room.

“Yes Sir,” the Major acknowledged, sounding a little more confident. He covered the mouthpiece to muffle what sounded like a wet cough. “I’m calling from a public phone booth in Aquroya,” he explained. “The arranged meeting didn’t go as planned, and we have a situation.”

Roy was well acquainted with the military shorthand for a monumental screw-up. “So we have been informed. While we appreciate immediate information from the scene, why are you calling us directly?” he asked, confused. Central was much too remote to efficiently organize support for an away team in Aquroya.

“A security measure, Sir,” Fuery said. “I’m not sure who to trust here in Aquroya, and I know the telephone lines in Brigadier General Breda’s office are secure.”

Likely because he had secured them himself. “Fair enough. What information can we safely relay to Aquroya Command to arrange for backup?”

Fuery thought it over. “At the moment, nothing, Sir. Edward took off after the alchemist and I couldn’t keep up. I thought it best to check in, but I need to try to find him.”

Alchemist? “I think you’d best start this report from the beginning, Major,” the Führer instructed.

“Sir!” Roy could almost see the young electronics expert come to attention in that distant phone booth. “Upon arrival at Aquroya Station early this morning I proceeded to meet with Edward Elric at our prearranged rendezvous point. We then went to covertly observe the location on the Lagotimmo docks designated by the anonymous informant as our meeting place. The structure appeared to be an abandoned warehouse in a poor state of repair. We noted no suspicious activity. At eleven o’clock we entered the premises as per instruction.”

Fuery sighed deeply, and Roy knew the story was about to get interesting.
“The state of the interior confirmed our observation that the building was not currently in active use,” Kain continued. “It was mostly empty, and the few crates and boxes were covered in a thick layer of dust. At first we thought that we were alone. Then we were hailed very cheerfully by someone from an upper level gallery overlooking the warehouse floor. Looking up, we discovered a number of men armed with rifles. The rifles were pointed directly at us.”

So it had been a setup. Like Breda, as soon as he had heard that something had gone seriously wrong in Aquroya, Roy had suspected as much. The question was, what had the traitors hoped to accomplish? Roy felt black rage rising again like an implacable tide. The nature of this ambush confirmed that the traitors had planned to catch someone in Roy’s inner circle, but were they out to capture, or kill? The anger tightly controlled, Roy urged his subordinate to continue his report.

“The man who hailed us explained we had walked into a trap, and that we were their prisoners. He also mentioned that the leader of their cadre had instructed his hit team to kill the Führer’s contacts outright, but as the ranking officer on the scene, he had decided a change of plans was in order, given who they had managed to capture.” Kain hesitated, then went on. “He said . . . pardon me Sir, but to quote him directly, he said that ‘the Führer would likely jump through hoops to guarantee the safety of his little fucktoy’.” By his tone, the Major was uncomfortable sharing that tidbit of information.

“I shudder to imagine Edward’s reaction to that observation,” the Führer murmured.

“He didn’t react at all, Sir,” Fuery stated. “While the man was talking, Ed put his hand on my back and nudged me forward just a bit. It was one of the signals we prearranged; simply an indication of which way to run in case something went wrong.”

The prospect of a trap had been discussed in the planning of the mission, and was one of the reasons that Edward had not been allowed to attend the meeting alone. It had initially been suggested that a partner with more combat ability be assigned, such as Alex Armstrong for example, but in the end the enticing bait of reliable information had been too tempting. It was decided that should the informant turn out to be legitimate, the secrecy of the meeting might be compromised by the arrival in Aquroya of two well known allies of the Führer. The situation required someone inconspicuous, but formidable in their own right.

Kain Fuery was the perfect candidate. No longer the timid Sergeant he had been before the Promised Day, the quiet young man still preferred the company of his treasured electronic equipment to fieldwork, and kept a low profile. Although his bravery was never in question, his military commission as a Major and subsequent officer training had given him new confidence as a soldier and career officer. Still gentle and unassuming by nature, Major Fuery was often able to slide efficiently beneath the notice of Roy’s adversaries’, much to their later dismay. As well, Hawkeye herself had seen to the young Major’s training in the firearms department, and she had every confidence in his abilities. Kain Fuery was no flyweight, regardless of his appearance.

The bespectacled Major continued his narrative. “We then discovered that the leader was an alchemist.” Roy could hear the grimace in Fuery’s voice. “He had obviously preset his arrays, because he slapped his hands down on the railing and the wood of the warehouse floor around Edward and I leaped up into a kind of cage-like formation.” The young man huffed. “He was too slow though. We were already charging toward them to take cover underneath their position and he missed us. They had to lean out over the gallery’s railing to target us, and the first sniper to do so got one of Edward’s throwing knives straight through his forearm. I clipped the second one with my sidearm. They stayed out of sight until Edward started taunting them. We wounded a couple more who got angry enough to chance trying to shoot us.”
“Edward has never suffered from an overabundance of tact,” Roy observed wryly. In fact, his abrasive rhetoric in tight situations was a perfected skill which the blond man used openly and proudly.

“Diplomacy is definitely not his forte, Sir,” Fuery granted. “Not that it mattered in this case. I don’t believe we could have talked our way out of the situation.”

Roy agreed. “How did you manage to escape?”

“The alchemist couldn’t see us, but Ed got him so riled up that he started transmuting spikes and beams at random hoping to hit us with something, using the floor and walls as material. We avoided the attacks as best we could, making our way toward the exit, but so much of the building got transmuted that the structural integrity was compromised. It was lucky that so much of the floor was missing at that point, because when it all started to come down, we were able to jump through a hole into the water before the building collapsed completely. We swam out from under it just in time to avoid sinking debris.”

A close call, and a dangerous move. “How did Edward manage to swim with a steel leg?” Roy wanted to know. “I would have thought it too heavy even with your assistance.”

“I was surprised as well, Sir, but he showed me when we got out of the water.” Roy could tell the Major was grinning. “His automail leg was rigged with some kind of compressed air cylinder. It inflated a bladder around the leg, making it buoyant enough not to drag him under.” Fuery sounded quite impressed.

So was Roy. Over the years, Winry Rockbell had made quite a name for herself as an accomplished automail engineer. This was further proof that she deserved her accolades. Edward’s friend had come up with a very effective solution for one of Edward’s greatest weaknesses.

“Where is he now?”

“I’m not sure.” Kain said, once again all business. “Last I saw he was chasing after the alchemist. I need to . . .”

The rumble of a distant explosion was clear over the phone lines, and cut Kain short.

“I think I might have found him, Sir,” Kain said without a hint of sarcasm. “I’ll call you back.”

The dial tone told Roy that Kain had hung up on him. Not that he minded. Keeping up with Edward Elric was a daunting challenge Roy was quite familiar with.

The Führer’s staff sat patiently, waiting for details of the conversation. Judging from the expectant looks he was receiving, Roy’s side of the dialog must have been less than informative. When Major Fuery got back from Aquroya, the Führer was going to assign him the task of coming up with a way to hook a speaker up to a telephone so that others could hear both sides of a conversation.

Roy quickly brought his officers up to date.

“The traitors likely don’t yet know that Edward and Kain have reported their escaped from the warehouse to us,” Breda’s Colonel said slowly, the wheels turning. “Perhaps we can still implement Brigadier General Breda’s plan.” The Colonel glanced at her General with a raised eyebrow.

A Colonel under Havoc’s command agreed with a nod. “It’s even more feasible now that we know they definitely aren’t holding our people hostage. The risks on our end are negligible.”
Roy came to a decision. “Contact Lieutenant Colonel Storch in Aquroya and tell him that we will negotiate with the insurgents for Elric’s release,” he said, and Breda gestured to his Colonel to follow that order. “Lieutenant General Hawkeye, you will direct your staff to make arrangements for a high security escort to Aquroya by rail. Reveal no details, but transfer Ethan to solitary confinement as quietly as possible. We want this to look good.”

The Further sat back and watched as his orders were carried out, listening to suggestions and authorising other measures that would make their ruse look as genuine as possible. Outwardly calm, he was still seething, his anger barely lessened by the knowledge that Edward and Kain had escaped the trap set for them. Much of his anger was directed toward the Purists, but some was reserved for himself.

Roy Mustang was the most powerful man in Amestris. The supreme dictator of the entire nation. His word was law.

And his mind was in turmoil.

What good was power if you choose not to use it to its full extent when circumstances outright howled for it?

Thanks to Roy’s firm commitment to take the moral high road, dangerous criminals were on the loose, endangering innocent civilians, threatening Roy’s closest friends and allies. In the mean time, one of the leaders directing this pack of gangsters was lounging comfortably in prison, safe from harm because this was the new Amestris, brought into being by the Führer these traitors hoped to bring down. Ethan was protected from cruel and unusual punishment in state custody. His interrogation would include no physical torture. While awaiting trial he was guaranteed accommodation that met all requirements for his health and safety. Ultimately, he had the right to mount a defence against the capital offence he was charged with, and was guaranteed a fair trial and impartial judgement by a jury of his peers – all rights Ethan unequivocally denied his intended victims.

One question came repeatedly to the Flame Alchemist’s mind: how was any of this equivalent? Roy stood and paced away from the table, unable to face his subordinates as his thoughts took dark turns.

If the Führer had taken a page from his inhuman predecessor’s handbook and authorized more extreme techniques of persuasion for Ethan’s interrogation, it was very likely that Edward and Kain wouldn’t have had to put themselves in danger to get the information they sought. Instead, Roy’s clemency had resulted in what was turning into a major crisis, complete with life threatening situations and risk to the general public in the form of devastating property damage. And it wasn’t over yet. Military personally and civilians alike were endangered, and there was no assurance whatsoever that Roy could protect anyone with his so-called power when he deliberately placed restraints upon it.

Was it too late to pry what he needed to know from Jerald Ethan by whatever means necessary?

“You are doing the right thing, Sir.”

Hawkeye’s quietly spoken words pulled Roy from his dire thoughts, and he turned to note her stern regard.

“Am I?” he muttered.

“Yes,” his friend told him, firmly and without hesitation. “You aren’t responsible for the callous actions of others.”
“Of course I am,” he corrected her. “I made decisions, and others are suffering the consequences.”

“We can choose to do the right thing,” the Hawk went on as if Roy had not spoken. “But as difficult as it is, to achieve what you want for this nation, you have to chart a course that is moral and just. And as hard as it is to admit it right now, you know what I’m saying is the absolute truth. We’ve come so far. Don’t fall. We’re all counting on you.”

All Roy could manage to acknowledge her words was a short, curt nod. Of course he knew Riza was right. Of course it was hard to admit it when the low road would achieve results much more quickly and easily, particularly when his anger demanded bloody satisfaction. And of course, if he chose to take that road, he was no better than his cowardly and egotistical opponents.

The Führer took a deep breath and clasped his hands behind his back. He turned to watch his subordinates working diligently. He listened to their earnest debate over what actions might be most effective, what methods would yield the best results, working as one to resolve their collective dilemma. Occasionally one would look his way, as if his simple presence offered reassurance. His people were, indeed, counting on him.

As inadequate, as impotent, as useless as he might feel right now, it was irrelevant. His subordinates had to know that he was strong, because it would strengthen them as well.

And Roy Mustang was strong. Strong enough to face this challenge. Strong enough to take the high road. Strong enough not to falter in his belief that the means were just as important as the ends.

He was the leader of this country, from border to border. From the youngest child to the most elderly adult. From the most destitute of souls to the most affluent. From the most honorable individual to the most despicable. They depended on him to do the right thing, and trusted that he knew what the right thing was.

And he had to be strong enough to decide what was best, not for himself, but for them.

Roy Mustang wasn’t a fool. He’d led men into battle, fully knowing that some would not return. He had an obligation to all of his people, but there was no possible way he could protect every single one. He thought about the Mausers and their company, ordinary people, not working to protect Amestris because they were ordered to, but because they believed it was important, and a guarantee of safety wasn’t something they required to do so. Hawkeye, Havoc, Breda. Ordinary people. They stood beside Roy, directly in the line of fire, and always had. Kain. Edward. Ordinary people. They did what they thought best, contributing to the greater good regardless of the risk. Ordinary people. Like Roy. The only difference was position. Roy stood at the helm, poised to make Amestris a better place for everyone, just as he had promised. And all those under him, his many allies, his closest colleagues, all these ordinary people chose to stand behind him, willing to support him, ready to help bring his plans for a bright future to fruition, whatever the personal cost. The Führer had sworn to protect them, but they gave no thought to their own safety in what they chose to do. And what they chose to do was give their all.

Because they believed in him.

A calm settled over the Führer, and he let his anger dissipate. He couldn’t afford to indulge it, not when his people were depending on him, relying on his strength, counting on his guidance. He replaced it with the glow of fierce pride for his team, those near and far, known and unknown, all working to the same purpose.

The phone rang, and Havoc scooped it to his ear. Then he looked to Roy, holding it out.
“Lieutenant Colonel Storch here, Sir,” the man stated briskly. “We have received another message from the Purists. Ten minutes ago a child delivered a package to the sentry on duty at the main gate. I have it here. It contains what appears to be an automail kneecap, and a hand written note.”

Roy found it easier now to maintain his calm. “The message?”

Storch cleared his throat. “It says, ‘More pieces to follow, unless Ethan is released within the hour.’”

Was it possible that Edward had been captured after all? Kain had said he’d lost sight of him . . .

“Were you able to question the child?” Roy wanted to know.

“No Sir,” Storch reported. “She handed the package to the sentry and immediately ran off. The Sergeant who accepted the parcel said she was blond, and appeared to be about ten years old. He had no other information.”

“Do you have anything further to report?” the Führer asked, expecting nothing.

“Not about the Purists’ demands, Sir,” Storch returned, “however, an explosion destroyed a partially completed office building approximately thirty minutes ago, on a construction site roughly three miles from the earlier incident. We don’t yet know if the events are connected, but suspect so. I will contact you as soon as we have more information.”

“Carry on, Lieutenant Colonel.” Roy handed the phone back to Havoc and relayed the disconcerting conversation to his quietly waiting staff.

They didn’t have long to ponder this turn of events before the phone rang again. Hawkeye snagged it this time and handed it directly to the Führer.

The Führer was relieved to hear Kain Fuery’s voice. At least one of his subordinates’ safety was confirmed.

“Sorry about hanging up on you Sir,” the Major stated, panting breathlessly. “I didn’t want to chance a delay that might mean I would miss catching up to Edward.”

“No apology necessary, Major,” Roy assured him. “What have you to report?” He expected the worst.

“The alchemist gave us the slip again, Sir,” Kain said, dejected. “Ed is still hot on his trail, but I had to catch my breath. We know where he’s going to end up, though, so I thought I’d check in.”

“When was the last time you saw Edward?” Roy held his breath.

“About five minutes ago? I tried calling twice before this but Central Headquarters’ switchboard told me this line was engaged.”

Roy’s breath eased out slowly. “Report, Major.”

Kain was slowly catching his breath, but it didn’t stop him from following that order. “I hung up on you earlier because I heard a series of explosions, and when I investigated, I discovered Edward confronting the rebel alchemist on a construction site. The alchemist was crouched at the top of a partially finished building, launching tools and building materials at Edward as he approached. The projectiles were exploding on impact, so I suspect the rebel was transmuting them somehow.”

Roy had used that ploy himself, as a backup tactic when his gloves were damaged or unavailable due
to unforeseen circumstances. The array was simple, and in much the same way children stockpile snowballs to prepare for chilly winter warfare, a supply of impact bombs could be quickly and easily transmuted from whatever mundane items were at hand. It was a useful strategy to catch unsuspecting attackers by surprise, its only drawback being the instability of the explosive.

“It seems the alchemist had given up on his idea of using Edward as a hostage, because he was doing his best to blow him up,” Kain continued. “He came close to succeeding a couple of times, Sir. I yelled for Edward to take cover but he ignored me. I tried to target the alchemist with my side arm, but with the explosions and resulting dust and flying debris, I couldn’t manage it.” The Major sounded apologetic. “I wasn’t sure why Ed was charging the building. The structure wasn’t much more than four stories of steel I-beams and scaffolding, and I didn’t think there was any way he could get up to where the alchemist was without using alchemy himself. I was wrong.”

Roy said nothing, waiting for the revelation.

“It was the automail again, Sir,” Kain said, awe in his tone. “Edward shot a thin cable with a spike on the end out of the knee. The spike slammed into one of the beams and the cable reeled Edward right up to the top of the wall in under a second. I couldn’t believe it.”

Roy could hardly believe it himself. That explained how Edward had lost his kneecap, however. “What happened next?” he prompted.

“The alchemist was so startled he dropped the bomb he was holding. It blew up. Judging from the magnitude of the explosion, so did other bombs he must have had ready up there. The blast leveled the entire structure.”

In his mind’s eye Roy could see the scene unfold. Edward suddenly right in his target’s face. The man’s shocked reaction. The explosion. The steel framework crumpling into a twisted metal ruin. Both predator and prey were lucky to have survived.

“I’m not sure how Edward and the alchemist managed to come out of that unhurt,” Kain said, “but Edward was fine, and our target’s rate of speed as he left the scene was a good indication that he suffered no serious injury. He headed south, back toward the docks. I know the area well. He’s running straight into Long Point, and there’s no way out of there on foot, unless he manages to slip past us and double back. If he doesn’t have a boat waiting for him, he’ll be cornered.”

A huge ‘if’. Had the renegade alchemist made a mistake, or did he know exactly what he was doing? “Be careful, Major,” Roy advised. “If the man has a means of escape from that location, he may also have allies lying in wait.”

“Understood,” Kain said. “I’ll call back when I have more to report, Sir.”

Click and dial tone. The Führer handed the receiver back to Hawkeye and gave his team a brief synopsis of his conversation. Much like Roy himself, his staff was at a loss for words. The situation was too remote and changing too quickly for any plans that they made to be of any use. All they could do was wait for further word from either Major Fuery or Lieutenant Colonel Storch. Roy checked his watch. Amazingly, close to three hours had passed since Breda had called him to his office. The Führer reflected on flying time, and how fun often had nothing to do with it.

Lacking anything useful to do, Roy took a seat at the conference table once again, the telephone at his elbow. Havoc raised an eyebrow, then went to the door and ordered coffee. Ten minutes passed. Coffee appeared, along with a selection of pastry. Twenty minutes ticked by to quiet speculation. Another thirty. The coffee was gone and Roy’s hand itched to call Aquroya Headquarters for an update. He restrained himself, not wanting to take the chance that Kain might call and once again
Just shy of an hour and a half, when the Führer’s patience was at an end and Major General Breda was tabling the suggestion they move their vigil to a formal conference room for access to more telephones, the one by the Führer’s elbow rang.

“Sir! Brigadier General Enfield reporting from Aquroya Headquarters.” Roy hoped this was good news. “We received an urgent call from Brigadier General Breda’s operatives in the field, informing us that they had uncovered a Purist stronghold in the Long Point subdivision of the waterfront. We conducted a tactical operation to raid the premises and were able to take the suspects completely by surprise. A number of arrests have been made. We suffered no casualties.”

So. Kain and Edward had finally risked calling in the big guns. “Very good, Brigadier General,” the Führer said, pleased.

“Thank you, Sir!” Roy heard the proud smile in his Aquoyan subordinate’s voice as he continued. “As per guidelines issued by your office for the handling of Purist prisoners, the suspects are under heavy guard, and will be interrogated by teams consisting of no less than three officers.”

“Prepare the prisoners for transport to Central Command,” the Führer ordered. “Security protocol Alpha.”

“Sir!” Enfield acknowledged the order. “I would also like to commend Major Fuery and Mr. Elric. Their active assistance and bold actions under fire were instrumental to the successful outcome of the raid.”

Roy wasn’t surprised. “Acknowledged. Put Major Fuery on the line, if you please.”

“Sir, I had both Major Fuery and Mr. Elric transported to Aquroya General Hospital for treatment of minor injuries.”

Shit. Roy had a feeling that aside from details about the actual arrests, General Enfield wouldn’t have any information about the Purist prisoners aside from physical descriptions. Oh well, for what it was worth . . . “Did you take a report from Major Fuery or Mr. Elric as to the how they determined the location of the Purist enclave?”

“Not in detail, Sir,” Enfield stated. “Major Fuery indicated in his initial request for aid that he had intercepted a conversation via wiretap which alerted him to the possibility of continued attacks on public buildings. I forewent an in-depth report after the raid in favor of having Major General Breda’s men sent to have their wounds treated.” The man did not sound apologetic, and Roy’s opinion of his character rose.

“Very good, Major General,” the Führer said again, briskly. “I will take Major Fuery’s report personally, and have a hardcopy on your desk in short order.” Roy had no doubt that the next phone call would be from either Kain or Edward.

The handset was barely in its cradle when Roy was proven correct.

“Sir.” The Major sounded both weary and elated. “I’m happy to report that the Purist operatives in Aquroya have been captured. Their hideout is being searched, and we, that is, Edward and I, have . . . succeeded in our mission.”

Roy frowned. That was rather evasive. “Well done, Major. I understand you were sent to hospital. What is the extent of your injuries?”
“Minor, Sir, and Edward’s are as well. He’s getting stitched up at the moment.”

That was a relief. “Very good. I’ll take your report, Major Fuery.”

Kain hesitated before saying, “It’s a little hard to hear you, Sir, with so many people here in the emergency room,” discreetly informing the Führer that the Major’s location was not private, and therefore not appropriate for divulging sensitive information. “I’ll save the full report for when I get to Aquroya Headquarters.”

“Very well, Major,” Roy said, indicating his understanding. “Please give me the abridged version for now, if you please.”

“Certainly Sir.” Fuery’s tone became purely professional. “When I left our previous conversation, I proceeded down La Strada Longo, which is the lane that leads into Long Point. If you’re not familiar with the area, Sir, it’s a long, narrow, sandy point that extends into Lake Venti. It used to serve as a shallow water docking area for local barges, but is not used very much these days due to the deterioration of the foundation platforms and erosion of the point itself. La Strada Longo is the only land access into and out of the Point. The lane is lined with and a few small warehouses and buildings, mostly abandoned, with rear access directly to the lake. At the end of the lane there are five short piers for mooring.”

Roy did not know the locality, but Fuery had painted a vivid picture of a classic dead end, the ideal place for a huntsman to run his unlucky quarry to ground. The question was, who were the hunters, and who were the prey?

“I found Edward just short of the quay, scanning the surrounding buildings along the lane.” Kain continued. “When I approached him, he told me that he had lost sight of the alchemist when he’d turned into the lane, and since the man was not ahead and no boats were in sight leaving the point, Edward concluded that the man must have ducked into one of the buildings. He proposed searching the buildings while I waited outside to keep watch for the alchemist, but was concerned that he could be walking into another trap.”

A logical thought process, since it was possible – indeed, even likely – that the fleeing alchemist had deliberately led his pursuers to the Point and hidden allies with whom he might easily arrange a little surprise for the Führer’s men. If that was the case, it was a ballsy move as well, since the alchemist was also leading Edward and Kain straight to his hideout. The Purists wouldn’t wait too long to spring their trap before evacuating the premises by whatever means they had arranged. That hadn’t left the Führer’s team much time to act, and Roy found Edward’s prudence odd but reassuring. Back in the day, the blond man wouldn’t have hesitated to charge straight in and damn the consequences.

“I then noticed that although most of the buildings along the lane were a high state of disrepair, telephone lines were hooked up to a few of them,” Kain said. “I suggested that we try to narrow the search parameters by checking for any communications out of the block, reasoning that if the alchemist had intentionally fled to this location, it was probably because the Purists had a base here, and he would likely want to report to his superiors and seek further instruction. Edward agreed. Retreating to the city end of the lane, we looked for the trunk line leading into the sector while keeping an eye on Longo in case the alchemist tried to escape on foot.”

A good plan. It didn’t surprise the Führer that his electronics expert would come up with a feasible high tech solution to their problem.

“It didn’t take long to locate the switchbox,” Kain said. “The network in Aquroya is outdated, Sir, so it was easy to tap into the trunk. And we got really, really lucky.” From his tone, the Major was dying to tell his Führer exactly how fortunate they’d been, but Roy was in for a disappointment. “All
I can tell you at the moment, Sir, is that I overheard a conversation that without a doubt came from a rebel source, and was able to positively identify which building it originated from. Due to the content of the intercepted telephone conversation, we determined that the alchemist we were pursuing was not alone, and was receiving orders to ambush Edward and me if we decided to search the Point.”

“I take it that’s when you decided to call for backup,” Roy guessed.

“Yes Sir,” the Major responded. “I called Aquroya Headquarters’ Intelligence Division and informed them of the situation, being sure to mention that I was also in direct communication with Central Command, and requested a team to assist in a raid of the building in question.”

A good strategy in case possible traitors at Aquroya Headquarters concluded that Central’s operatives were working in isolation and would thus be easy to eliminate in secret, though the Purists must have realized by then that Kain and Edward were anything but easy prey.

The Major continued his report. “Brigadier General Enfield, commander of the local detachment, showed up in record time. Edward and I volunteered to act as bait to distract the Purists so that Enfield’s team could take them by surprise.”

A dangerous gamble, since it appeared that the Purists had decided to follow their leader’s order to eliminate their Central contacts once and for all.

“I’m pleased that your gamble paid off,” the Führer said.

“It was touch and go for a few minutes, Sir,” Fuery admitted. “The Purists let us get pretty deep into the building before they jumped us. We managed to barricade ourselves in a room with the alchemist we had been chasing. They had been using him as bait for us.” The Major was obviously amused by the irony.

“You locked yourselves in with him?” Also a dangerous manoeuvre. State Alchemist weren’t known as human weapons for nothing. “How were you able to subdue him?” Roy wanted to know.

“The automail again, Sir,” Kain said. “Edward’s mechanic is a genius. I don’t know how she managed to pack all that stuff in there and still keep it lightweight and functional.”

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Roy was finding this extremely entertaining. “What new trick did he have up his . . . pant leg?”

“A 1.5 inch carbine, Sir,” Kain said reverently. “It flipped out of his shin and plugged the alchemist in the thigh. The guy was so surprised it took him a moment to realize he was wounded. By then Ed had him pinned to the floor. Then it was just a matter of waiting for our cavalry to arrive. Brigadier General Enfield’s tactical squad was very efficient. They came in from both land and lakeside. We were out of there in no time.”

“Excellent, Major,” the Führer praised, and then indulged a personal desire. “I wonder if I might have a word with Edward, if you please.”

“He’s still in the examination bay, Sir. I’ll have him call you as soon as he’s out.”

“Thank you Major,” Roy said, all business again. “I look forward to your full report.”

Roy hung up the phone, the grin spreading on his face almost involuntarily as he look down the table at his hopeful team.

“Mission accomplished,” he said. “And they’re safe and sound.”
Roy was alone in his office, a tumbler of bourbon over ice cool in his hand, when Ed finally called an hour later.

“Hey.”

The sound of Edward’s voice had Roy shutting his eyes tight, glad that Ed wasn’t there to see his features twist with the pain he had been holding back since he’d first heard the possibility that his lover could be dead.

The cold, raw feeling had stayed with him, clenching around his soul as he’d followed his lover’s exploits through the backstreets of Aquroya, pursuing a dangerous foe. Even when he knew that the criminals had been apprehended and Edward was finally safe the feeling had remained, only now bubbling to the surface for release.

“How are you?” Roy managed to keep his voice even.

“I lost my kneecap,” Ed said dejectedly. “Winry is going to murder me. Other than that, I’m fine.”

“Your kneecap is at Aquroya Headquarters. I’ll have them release it to you.”

“Oh, good!” The blond man was obviously relieved. “Then I guess I’ll survive.”

“Your mission was a success.” Roy said, annoyed that what he really wanted to say was bottled up in his chest.

“Yeah.” Roy could hear the grin. “Kain’s work, mostly. I forgot how good it can be to have an awesome partner.”

Roy read Alphonse into that sentiment. “You went to the hospital.”

“Just for a few stitches. Kain and Enfield insisted.” The blond man sounded put out. “That asshole Obregon was shooting spikes and launching bombs at us. I got nicked a couple of times. Nothing serious.”

“Obregon?”

“Yeah, Jared Obregon. The Steel Trap Alchemist. Remember him?”

Another State Alchemist. And yes, Roy did remember him. A sickly beanpole of a man with a ferret face and demeanor to match. Serving under Lieutenant General Gardiner during the Isbalan conflict, he had chalked up an impressive tally of kills, though his support troops often whispered of his unnecessary cruelty. “Kain told me that a building you were standing on was flattened in an explosion.”

“Yeah. No steel beams though the gut this time.” The blond man sounded amused.

Roy was not. “Are you still at the hospital?”
“No. I didn’t want to call you from there. Too many ears.”

Roy smiled, for the first time in what felt like days. “And what could you have to say, Edward, that might require privacy?”

There was a short moment of silence before Edward responded. “Nothing, really,” he said. “Just . . . I don’t like nosey people.”

Or doctors. Or hospitals in general. “So the doctors weren’t trying to keep you overnight for observation?”

“I’m fine,” Edward told him again. “Better than fine, actually,” Roy could hear the barbed wire in Edward’s grin, “now that we know who’s behind all this.”

“What?” Roy wasn’t sure he’d heard right.

“Didn’t Kain tell you about the wire tap?”

“Yes,” Roy said, drawing out the word.

“He didn’t mention that he had cut into a conversation that Obregon was having with his boss?”

“He mentioned that he’d overheard a conversation between your suspect and his superior, and from that was able to determine which building he was in, but he couldn’t speak freely from the emergency room . . .”

“Holy shit!” Edward was dumbfounded. “I can’t believe he didn’t . . . Roy, Obregon called his boss by name. We know who it is. And you’re not going to believe it.”

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The houseman welcomed Roy and his Security detail at the door with professional detachment and took the Führer’s coat over his arm. The big house was comfortably warm, even without the benefit of an alchemically enhanced heating system. No alchemy was permitted on the premises, by this and the previous Führer’s strictest of orders, given the uncertain nature of one of the occupants.

The Führer and his party were escorted to a comfortable sitting room. The lady stood. At this late hour, she did not appear surprised to see them.

“Führer Mustang.” She greeted him unsmiling.

“Madam Bradley.” His expression was grim. “I suspect that you know why I’m here.”

“To harass my son and I perhaps?” the Lady guessed. “That is generally what you do when you visit. It seems to amuse you.”

Roy ignored the barb. “It has to do with an insurgent faction that has recently surfaced,” he clarified. “An underground movement dedicated to overthrowing my government. They have made several attempts on my life.”

That brought a slight smile to the widow Bradley’s lips. “And why might this concern me?”
“We have a signed confession from a man we arrested two days ago, naming you as the head of the cadre. We are in the process of rounding up the military contingent of your rabid group of fanatical traitors, and with a little luck, will soon be able to track down the civilians involved as well.”

Bradley was not even mildly disturbed by this revelation. “What utter nonsense,” she said lightly. “Whoever this man is, I suspect he named me in an effort to protect the actual leader of his group. Like you, he probably thought me a handy scapegoat, as was my husband before me.”

“Just before the man was arrested, he made a telephone call. To you. The phone line was being actively monitored, and you were overheard taking the man’s report, then ordering him to commit murder.”

“Ah.” Madam Bradley held the Führer’s level gaze. “I suppose, then, that the charade is over.”

“It is,” the Führer confirmed. “Your revolt has failed. Your allies are being arrested as we speak. As is their leader. Your insurrection will doubtless lose momentum without your direction.”

“If that’s what you believe, I fear you will be disappointed. I’m just a figurehead, young man,” the former First Lady said demurely. “A rallying point if you will. The movement will not suffer when my part in it is done.”

“I beg to differ, Madam,” Roy said solemnly. “We have had your phone tapped for two days, and have transcripts of a number of conversations. Conversations wherein you receive reports and issue orders, coordinating acts of treason against the State. There is very little doubt as to who was in command. I do thank you, however. Your hands-on leadership has made it quite easy to identify your lieutenants.”

Bradley was unfazed. “Ah. Well. I defer to your greater experience with disloyalty and deception,” she conceded with a wry smile. “I myself am rather new to the game. However, I seem to recall another group of conspirators who sought to depose the rightful Führer of this nation. My husband thought them neutralized, only to discover his mistake too late. Snakes can easily remain hidden in the grass at your feet, then rise to strike. Such is the nature of faithless vipers.”

“I’m sure you’re quite correct, Madam, however I have every confidence that we will be able to flush most of the snakes out of the grass,” the Führer stated coolly, ignoring the woman’s thinly veiled spite. “Those we miss will likely go into hiding, but by the time we’re done I suspect that there will be far too few to represent a significant threat.

“It is over.”

Roy gestured for two of his Security officers to step forward. “I trust handcuffs will not be necessary,” he said, eyebrow raised.

For the first time, Bradley’s composure faltered. “And what of Selim?”

“Selim will be looked after. We have arranged for his care, here at the manor. Frankly, Selim is the least of your worries right now. You will be tried for treason, Madam. A capital crime. The conspiracy you instigated resulted in loss of life for military personnel and civilians alike. Justice must be served.”

“Justice?” the older woman said, the smallest tremble of anger in her tone. “Was justice served for my husband? You conspired to overthrow the leader of your country. You rebelled against the Führer’s rule. Attacked him. Killed him. Contrary to popular belief, you and your despicable comrades in arms are the traitors. You are coldblooded killers, not heroes. You murdered him.” A
flat statement of fact. “My King. Your Führer. To whom you swore an oath of fealty. By even the
leastest definition, that makes you the traitor. What then are those who betray you?”

Roy kept his expression neutral and his eyes firmly on the Lady’s, wondering. Close to nine years
had passed since the Promised Day. The Widow Bradley had spent all of it here, in isolation with her
son, brooding over past events, thinking, those thoughts festering. What had triggered her to act after
sitting idle for so long? What had caused her to throw caution to the winds, to give up safety for
herself and her son and seek vengeance, after all these years? If he asked, would she tell him? The
Führer chose not to indulge his curiosity.

“King Bradley was not human,” Roy said softly, reiterating what the Lady had been told years
before, and likely many times since. “He had every intention of feeding your soul to his master along
with those of every man, woman, and child in this country.”

“Do you actually expect me to believe the words of a traitor?” The woman impatiently wiped away
the single furious tear that had escaped her control. “Whatever you may believe, I am not a fool. You
told me the same preposterous story about my Selim, and use it as an excuse to keep my son and I
locked in this gilded cage.”

“You were not a prisoner, Madam,” the Führer corrected her. “You have always been free to come
and go as you please.”

“And leave my son in your foul hands? You are the real monster. You, and that Elric devil. Whatever
that blond hell spawn did to him, whatever horror he inflicted on my child to steal his years away,
however he marked his demon sign on his forehead, it can’t change the fact that Selim is just a little
boy.”

Roy remained silent, realizing that any response he might make would fall on deaf ears. She had
been told what an unknown mother-to-be had suffered some three hundred years ago, how she had
been violated, how her unborn child had been torn from her, warped to serve as Pride’s vessel. She
had seen the pictures, more than fifty years old, of her adopted son appearing virtually the same age
as he was the day he had come to live with Führer Bradley and his wife. It would do no good to
argue; the understandably bitter woman had chosen to reject the evidence provided by those who she
had good reason never to trust. As far as she was concerned, Roy Mustang and his allies had
exploded into her life and shattered it beyond repair, killing her husband and nearly killing her son as
well.

The older woman was not finished. “I can’t bear to see Selim living like this. Locked away. Isolated.
No contact with the outside world. No children his own age allowed anywhere near him. He is
innocent. He deserves better than to be kept prisoner by order of a cowardly worm who fears that
loyal Amestrians might one day discover the truth and rally behind the son of the man he murdered.”

The Furher had nothing to say to that. He motioned to his guard. The Lady glared at the Führer as
the Security officers stepped up to her, one on each side. Her fierce eyes never left Roy’s as one
officer placed her hand on the older woman’s shoulder to urge her forward. Head held high, she
walk stiffly out of the room. Roy suspected that pride alone prevented her from breaking down at the
thought of her son waking up in a few hours to the news that the only mother he had ever known
was gone.

Selim Bradley had been a victim since before he was born, and regrettably, that trend would continue
as his keepers chose to err on the side of caution. The Führer would do his best to see that the boy
was well cared for, but the damage was done. Once again, through no fault of his own, Selim
Bradley would suffer great tragedy.
Roy hoped that the boy’s mother was right, that Selim was now just a little boy, but far too much doubt remained. All the same, the Führer couldn’t help but feel pity for him. Unfortunately, there was nothing he could do to spare him this new hurt. The Widow Bradley had gambled, and both she and her son had lost.

Roy had arranged for a professional nanny to care for the boy temporarily, but he had to find a more permanent solution. The task required someone who the Führer trusted, and was familiar with the child’s horrifying past. Someone who understood the danger they might face should Pride still lurk beneath Selim’s innocent surface. The child would also need someone kind and compassionate to get through this terrible crisis; someone empathetic, who could offer him comfort and help him come to terms with his loss. Not the typical qualities of the average soldier. That effectively eliminated all of Roy’s trusted subordinates.

Except for one.

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“I agree, Alex. You should be there before the boy wakes up in the morning,” Roy said, toying idly with the coiled telephone cord, his eyes on Hawkeye’s, who stood at his side. “He is bound to be upset to find his mother absent.”

“Of course, Sir,” Armstrong’s booming voice was undiminished by the medium through which it was delivered. “The loss of a parent for one so young . . .” The big man’s voice broke with emotion. “I will do my best to comfort him.”

“Thank you, Alex,” Roy said. “I can’t think of a better person to take on this difficult task.”

And that was the absolute truth. A nanny could be hired as a temporary solution, but Selim required more than simple childcare. Very few in that profession were also highly trained security guards, and Selim’s unique circumstances warranted the services of both a caregiver and a guard. Alex Louis Armstrong fit the bill to a tee. While a soldier through and through, he was also in possession of an incredibly compassionate soul. The Strong Arm Alchemist was well aware of his new charge’s past disposition, and understood the risks involved. He was also up to the task of taking the boy under his enormously kind-hearted wing. Selim Bradley would be in good hands, whatever his future held in store.

“With your permission, Sir, I would like to move into the Bradley manor temporarily,” Armstrong stated. “Initially, I believe the child will need the comfort of a familiar environment. Once he has had time to grieve, I will speak to you again about how I would like to proceed with my ward.”

“I trust you will do what is best for the boy, Brigadier General, which is why I chose to approach you, and to ask this enormous favor of you. I leave all decisions regarding Selim’s welfare in your capable hands,” the Führer stated confidently. “Please let me know if there is anything you require, or any further arrangements I can make to assist you in this difficult matter.”

“Yes Sir. Thank you, Sir.”

“Thank you, Alex,” Roy said softly. “I knew I could count on you.”

Roy hung up the phone, his hand resting on the handset, thinking.
It had been a hell of a day. A conspiracy had been shattered, the conspirators, including their leader, arrested. And it had seen the final destruction of what remained of King Bradley’s family, his wife imprisoned, facing trial for treason, his son left all alone. Father was gone, but his foul deeds still tainted everyone he had touched.

His office was pleasantly warm, but a chill made its way up the Führer’s spine. When was it going to end? How many more had to suffer as aftershocks of that terrible time continued to shake Amestris? What could Roy do to erase these lingering scars?

“You are doing the right thing, Sir.”

That was the second time in the last three days that Hawkeye had voiced that opinion. He wondered if she knew just how much comfort he took from those simple words. He said nothing, just glanced at her with a wry smile.

The Hawk returned it. “Madam Bradley gave you no choice,” she continued. “She will have her day in court, which is far more than her victims could expect. She doesn’t actually realize how lucky she is.”

Roy raised an eyebrow, and Riza stepped closer to rest a hand lightly on his shoulder. “I shudder to think how you would have reacted if she had been successful in having Edward killed,” Riza said quietly in explanation. “I remember your close brush with madness when Maes Hughes was murdered. You were terrifying. He was a very close, very dear friend, but still, just a friend. I can’t imagine how you would respond to the murder of someone you’re actually in love with.”

And then, having chucked that cinderblock straight through Roy’s picture window, Riza walked oblivious from the room, bidding him good evening.

Roy sat there, hand still resting on the telephone’s handset, frozen in shock.

In love? He was in love?

Roy tasted the idea, rolled it around in his mind, then frowned. In the realm of personal relationships, he had no tired and tested experience with romantic love, but was certain nonetheless.

Riza was wrong. He was not in love.

When Roy had first contemplated a relationship with Edward, he knew he wanted more than simple friendship with his former subordinate, and he definitely wanted more than just a warm body to share his bed. What he wanted was both the easy companionship that close friendship could provide along with the benefits of physical intimacy, and he had achieved that. Right now he felt that he and Edward were in a very comfortable place.

Hawkeye was right about Roy’s reaction to this threat against Edward. He had felt the acid burn of rage rising in him as soon as he’s heard that his lover had been targeted, possibly dead. But it wasn’t because he was in love, at least not the way Hawkeye assumed that he was. What Roy felt for Edward was a very close bond, not brotherly as it had been with Maes, but it not precisely romantic either. Yes, it was passionate. Yes, it was even tender at times. Still, it wasn’t the starry-eyed, all-consuming sort of love one certainly must feel for a life partner. Roy knew it was close. He was balanced on the edge, and with very little effort Roy knew he could very easily fall. The question was, did he want to upset that balance and launch this relationship into unknown territory?

Friendship was easy, a comfortable bond of shared trust. It was doing things together, enjoying each other’s company, yet it still left you your space. And in Roy’s line of work that was important. The
Führership was heavy with obligations that made great demands upon him, and he couldn’t afford to be held back. Roy had known that to serve Amestris to the best of his abilities he had to dedicate his life to his country completely, and that was the reason he had avoided romantic entanglements over the years. He and Edward were in perfect sync on this; Edward understood Roy’s challenges and not only gave him his space, but supported him in it. It helped, of course, that Edward liked his freedom as well, to roam the world, satisfying his craving to learn all there was to know. It was why their friendship worked so well.

Love, on the other hand, was a commitment. It made demands on your time and invaded your space. It was possessive, and selfish, and resentful. Roy had no doubt that it could also be infinitely rewarding to share it with the right person, but that was the problem. Roy was not the right person. He had already made an all consuming commitment to his duty as Führer. There was nothing left to share.

None of that mattered, however. Roy was not in love with Edward, nor was Edward in love with Roy. What the two shared was a close bond of friendship, but nothing more. They were comfortable together; they made a good team. They were comfortable apart as well, respecting each other’s personal space. And yes, Roy realized that friendship could become love. The problem was that once that corner was turned, the reverse was rarely possible. If it didn’t work out, everything was lost. Roy had made that nearly disastrous mistake with Riza and he wouldn’t make it again. What he and Edward had was fine just as it was. Roy wasn’t about to risk it by trying to turn it into something that neither of them wanted.

Hawkeye was wrong. Roy was not in love. He could understand how she had reached that mistaken conclusion; the easy familiarity he shared with Edward coupled with physical intimacy might resemble a romance of sorts. Aunt Chris had called Edward his friend with benefits - an apt turn of phrase. It summed up their relationship perfectly.

No, Roy was most definitely not in love.

He couldn’t afford to be.

Chapter End Notes

Note: I visualized Winry’s cable invention as something like a hookshot, proving that I’ve been playing way too much Legend of Zelda. :'( 
Dear Roy,

It's official. My brother is a pain in the ass.

As I'm sure you know, he turned 25 last month. As I'm sure you don't, he has been avoiding Resembool like the plague since just before the big event. He claims to hate celebrating the day that marks the beginning of his life, but the rest of us do like to make a fuss about it. Is it such a big deal to acknowledge that we're happy he's with us? A little bit of cake, a few candles, a short song of commemoration, a gift or two – what is his actually problem? Maes and Sara were disappointed that he didn't accept our invitation to express appreciation for his existence in the traditional manner. Please let him know. If there's one sure way to successfully apply a bit of emotional blackmail, it's by suggesting that he has let down his niece and nephew. And while he hasn't visited in person, Brother has been keeping in touch as promised, from wherever either Brigadier General Breda or his restless nature takes him.

I have to say that I'm still reeling from the shocking news that Mrs. Bradley was the mastermind behind the Purist movement and the attempts on your life. I can hardly reconcile the memory of the sweet, gentle woman I met in Central years ago with the ruthless killer she became. As a parent, I can't understand how she could have embarked on such an extreme course of action when she had to know Selim would suffer greatly if she failed. Everyone in town has been following the news very closely, and though it seems that you have put an end to her plot, please don't let down your guard. We can't afford to lose the best hope for a peaceful and prosperous future that this country has ever had.

Brother mentioned that he will be taking a trip to the north later this month. Please remind him that he should have Winry check to make sure his automail is suitable for the extreme cold weather he will encounter up there. I would have reminded him myself, but lately he is always in a hurry to end our conversations, particularly when the topics are personal. I suppose I can understand, given what happened, but I worry about him. Without someone to trust, he holds things inside until they fester. I used to be his only confidant; he kept no secrets from me. I found out some time ago that that was no longer the case, and I regret my reaction to this day. He keeps me at arm's length now, and that's my fault.

And there I go, getting maudlin again. Do forgive me, Roy. I'm sure Edward has given you all the sordid details of our falling out, and while I'm ashamed, I am still grateful that Edward has someone to trust again. I'm also greatly relieved he is back in our lives, and pleased to know that he is happy.

I am, as usual, including a few photographs that I hope you will share with my brother and the rest of our friends. We had a freak winter squall in Resembool, on Edward's birthday in fact, which left a substantial amount of snow on the ground. We rarely get snow here, and the kids had a great time building that enormous snowman in the front yard. And yes, that is Edward, as you can see from the icicle antenna sticking up from the forehead, and the frown. I think it's a rather good likeness, actually, though he doesn't frown quite as much anymore.

Thank you for taking good care of my brother.

Yours,

Alphonse.
Objective evidence strongly suggested that winter was finally over.

From the library's high arched windows, Roy noted that at six p.m., the sun had not yet set. The days were definitely getting longer. Winter weary eyes cast hopefully about searching for hints that warmer days were on the way, and found them. Blue skys. Sunshine. In Central winding streams of melt water wore their way along slushy sidewalks to overburdened storm drains. Water gleamed on spikes of ice, dripping fangs trimming innocent eaves troughs. The days were still mainly cold, the nights frosty, but winter's unrelenting grip on the city was definitely loosening. Shifting winds now held the promise of spring.

Last year early spring had seen Roy preparing for his diplomatic mission to Aerugo. This year his efforts remained domestic. First and foremost on his agenda were his economic initiatives, and so far they appeared to be paying off in terms of higher rates of employment, but he knew better than to assume the job was done. The Führer had plenty of new ideas up his sleeve, and with the approach of milder weather more of his plans could go into effect, most of which revolved around public infrastructure. Roads and rails always required maintenance; that was a continuous process. Roy's plans, however, were for upgrades and extensions, and they included the underground tunnels hollowed out by Sloth.

The battle with Father had effectively eradicated the central portion of the vast array, rendering it useless. Elsewhere parts of the passageway were being used locally in areas around the country that had direct access to them, mainly for storage. Extensive travel was not feasible because the network of tunnels was connected to the surface in very few places – Liore and Briggs to name two. The Führer intended to remedy that, and had a team of engineers, architects, and alchemists in place to come up with a workable action plan. Ideally, Roy hoped that someday the tunnels would become a nationwide subway system, connecting all major cities and points in between, protected from severe weather conditions such as the extreme winter storms most of northern Amestris had suffered this season. His committee shared his grand vision of transforming the underground transmutation circle into a state of the art transportation system, and had tendered a number of viable options with which to begin, all of which focussed on gaining access to the tunnels at points around the country. Baby steps, really, but they were a start. It wasn't going to happen overnight, but one day Roy knew his vision would become reality.

These backroom machinations were not what currently caught the average citizen's attention, however. At the forefront of public consciousness was the trial of Lady Bradley and her Purist followers, on the charge of high treason.

The attorneys for the defence had appealed to the court for a joint trial, and the judge had ruled in their favor. As overwhelming as the evidence against the Purists was, they had entered a plea of not guilty – by reason of extenuating circumstances. On their lawyers' advice, the Lady and her followers had opted for a trial by jury – a bold move her defence team had hoped would open the door to possible plea bargains in exchange for secrets about the Promised Day remaining secret. The prosecution refused to take the bait, however, and the tedious process of jury selection had begun. According to the head prosecutor, it appeared that the Lady intended to tell all, or at least the all that she was personally acquainted with, and her view definitely did not match the official version of that fateful day's events.

The public had been told most, but not all, of the truth about the Promised Day. One detail withheld was King Bradley's true nature. It was decided that the existence of the homunculi was best kept
secret because the possibility of creating such beings was dangerous knowledge, and most alchemist
couldn't resist diving head first into dangerous knowledge. The last thing Amestris needed was
another dwarf in a flask. Therefore, Bradley had been cast as a perfectly normal human despot,
duped by a master alchemist into believing that he was acting in the best interests of Amestris, and
that Bradley had been assassinated when he had discovered Father's true goal. Führer-elect
Grunmam had told Bradley's widow the truth about her husband however, mainly because Selim's
origin had to be revealed when she chose to be his guardian.

Roy had had grave misgivings about that decision. At the time his concern had little to do with the
Lady revealing the truth to the general public. A fantastic story of artificial creatures with incredible
power was difficult to believe even for those who had witnessed them, as, in the end, the Lady
herself had not. No, Roy's concerns had more to do with her peace of mind. He had argued that she
was as much a victim in the aftermath as her adopted son, and deserved the kindness that ignorance
of her husband's inhuman nature might bring. Roy's argument had been overridden by Olivier
Armstrong, who insisted that if Bradley's widow was going to be in charge of Selim, she should
know the truth, since, though she may not have known it, she was an expert on successful human-
homunculus relations and could put that expertise into practice with Selim should the need arise.

Roy was fairly certain that the Purists' defense would not include anything to do with Führer
Bradley's intimate connection to Father. The details of the Purist's strategy would be revealed in
court, but it was easy to speculate about what they might claim: that they were not traitors, because
their actions had been a focused attempt to serve justice to an actual traitor.

Roy had some concerns about what Lady Bradley might have to say on the subject of the Promised
Day. She had nothing to lose, and he suspected that she would do her damnedest to paint the
deceased Führer in the most tragically heroic terms as possible while vilifying his foes. Their
insurrection had not been part of the States official version of events, but without a doubt the Lady
Bradley would remedy that, and accuse Generals Grumman and Armstrong, and indeed, Roy
himself, of the crime she herself now stood accused, holding Führer Bradley up as a blameless
victim.

That argument would prove more difficult to support than she might expect however. The simple fact
that Father had emerged from a chamber hidden directly under Central Command was clear evidence
that he had been protected by the high brass, selected and lead by Führer Bradley. Further evidence
of his complicity was the constant state of war he had maintained over the years, like his
predecessors before him. Too many veterans of those conflicts had come to realize that they were
slaughtering innocents to no apparent purpose. Discovering that the true reason for their butchery
was to advance the grand designs of an ambitious monster suddenly lent method to the madness, and
to suggest that Führer Bradley had been completely in the dark with regard to Father's plans would
be ludicrous.

The most damning argument against any case the Lady might make for her husband was the
Promised Day itself. There was no possible way she could minimize what had happened to every
single living soul in the country, herself included. Roy had suffered the ordeal of being forced to
meet Truth against his will, of losing his sight through no fault of his own, but couldn't imagine the
trauma of having his soul sucked out of his body and consumed by a monster. Bradley's widow
could deny his involvement until the day she died, but it wouldn't erase what the citizens of this
country had experienced on the Promised Day, under Bradley's watch.

And as their leader, King Bradley had been held accountable for that and more by his people, even
in death.

He had never been a popular Führer; quite the contrary. His brutal and tyrannical reign had been the
personification of Wrath. War, oppression, and cruelty are no way to raise a country, and indeed, it was blatantly obvious that what was best for Amestris had never been his ultimate goal. The history books testified to the fact that his only defining contributions were military conquests, and establishing the State Alchemist program. His public policies were all about eliminating annoying little inconveniences like civil liberties and basic human rights. His grave in Central's National Cemetery frequently required maintenance due to vandalism. Bradley's widow would have an exceedingly difficult time generating public sympathy for the circumstances of his passing.

Selim was another matter, however.

The Bradley family's confinement on their estate since the Promised Day had been a point of conjecture on and off for years. The previous summer had seen a vicious media battle waged between the Lady and the Führer's office around her denied request to take her son on holiday to Aerugo. At the time, public sympathy had been firmly behind Bradley, but the Führer was in no position to back down. Pride had been the most powerful of Father's creations, and the most dangerous. Even though there had been no sign of its presence in the years since Father's defeat, everyone involved felt it was still too soon to be sure. Pride had been centuries old. It was easy to imagine it biding its time, waiting for its enemies to lower their defenses.

That justification wasn't fit for public consumption however. Many knew that something terrible had happened to Selim on the Promised Day. Few knew exactly what, or the circumstances. At the time, Führer-elect Grumman had used slow recovery from serious injury as the explanation for keeping him isolated. Now threats from vengeful victims of his adopted father were the official reason. Widow Bradley would likely attempt to turn that to her advantage, suggesting the only people nursing hard feelings, and taking them out on an innocent child, were the current government, specifically, Führer Mustang. She was sure to argue her case from the standpoint of a beleaguered mother doing everything and anything possible to protect her child from criminal persecution.

The State's prosecution team were having some difficulty preparing to refute that argument. They had plenty of evidence that both adopted mother and son had been sequestered for their own protection, in a personal residence that afforded them every amenity. In fact, their living conditions far surpassed those of the average Amestrian, particularly given the current economic climate. A gilded cage was still a cage, however, and no substitute for personal freedom. Roy suspected that the prosecutors would have to do some fancy dancing to spin a good explanation for this infringement of personal freedom. He honestly didn't think they could, particularly since, in the midst of all this, an Aerugoan merchant marine had contacted a national newspaper, stating that he had been involved in a scheme to smuggle the Lady and Selim away from their planned seaside vacation in Aerugo, a plan thwarted by the Führer's refusal to back down to public pressure.

The trial was sure to be a long, drawn out spectacle for months to come.

Protected from the sensation of Lady Bradley's high profile trial and kept carefully out of the spotlight, Selim at least appeared to be coming to terms with the absence of his mother. After two months under Alex Armstrong's gentle protection, he seemed to have finally accepted that his mother was gone from his life. At first he had asked for her every day, and each time Alex had had to gently explain that she would not return. Then the boy had suffered frequent fits of extreme anger, screaming his anguish at the world, accusing Alex of taking his mother away. More recently, the child had become badly depressed, often seeking reassurance from his guardian that he was not a bad boy, and his mother had not left because of anything that Selim had done. Alex latest report stated that the child was still prone to melancholy, but seemed to be improving, at times venturing outside to play in the lingering snow. He deemed that a good sign, news which Roy was pleased to receive. He held no grudge against Pride's innocent vessel, and Selim had suffered too much.
All in all, it had been a busy winter, and promised to be a busy spring. However, the trial and his transportation plan were both under control and in capable hands other than Führer Mustang's. As a result, all was otherwise quiet. That left Roy the time he needed to finally get to the bottom of a state of affairs that had been bothering him for nearly a year: the rift between the Elric Brothers.

Al's continuing, thinly veiled hints that Ed needed someone to talk to, and that Alphonse was no longer in a position of trust on that score, had actually been irritating Roy's curious nature ever since the first letter he had received from the young man over two years ago. Ling Yao had advised Roy to gain Edward's trust and find out what had happened from Edward himself – good advice, as far as Roy was concerned. Roy believed that he had gained that trust, and was ready for some answers. Still, it wouldn't hurt to hedge his bets. He needed Edward just a little off his guard.

Roy's plan was simple, and tonight he would put it into action.

Edward was due back from a week in North City, where he had been looking into something for Heymans Breda. Roy had received a phone call from Edward earlier that day, stating that he would be in Central by early afternoon, and he had accepted Roy's invitation to dinner at the Führer's residence.

Dinner had been arranged: tender prime rib and seasoned roast potatoes with a sweet kunafa for dessert, all lovingly prepared by Isa.

The two bottles of Shaoxing wine, given to Roy by Emperor Ling Yao when he had visited the Führer in his home last summer, were still unopened on elegant display in Roy's liquor cabinet, and he planned to make full use of them. Roy's master plan was to get Edward relaxed enough to lower his stubborn defences and loosen his tongue. It seemed fitting that Ed's royal friend should supply the lubricant.

Now all he needed was Edward.

Movement caught the Führer's eye and called him back from his thoughts. Looking down from his post at the library's windows, he was pleased to see his roadster pulling around the circular driveway to stop at the front steps. This was it. Elated, he hurried downstairs, reaching the foyer in time to see Winston taking Edward's jacket.

And then Edward looked up and greeted Roy with that special smile, melting his heart to a pool of warmth glowing in his chest. Edward met him at the stairs, curling his fist in Roy's collar to pull in for a quick, fierce kiss, blond hair scented with spring rain.

"Missed you," the younger man said, voice rough, and Roy purred content.

"Come on," Roy said, leading the way. "Dinner awaits."

Edward followed, grinning.

Dinner was a hit. Edward outlined his rather low key mission, which did not require the use of any of the tricks hidden in his sister-in-law's finely crafted prosthetic. Roy regaled him with tales of the daily business of government from the Führer's point of view. When dessert was served, Roy put the next part of his plan into action.

Usually, after a week apart, dinner was the prelude to a night in the bedroom that in no way included sleeping or much time for serious conversation. Tonight, however, Roy wanted a different kind of intimacy.

As the two men finished dessert, Winston arrived at Roy's elbow with a small tray bearing the
exquisite porcelain Shaoxing decanters and two matching cups. Edward lifted an enquiring eyebrow.

Roy answered it. "I've been starved for conversation that has nothing to do with matters of state, lately."

"Have you ever had Shaoxing wine before?" Edward asked.

"No," Roy said, "This was given to me as a gift, by Emperor Ling Yao."

Edward nodded. "His private stock. I should warn you that it's very potent," he cautioned with a smile. "If you expect to hold your own in an intelligent conversation, I'd take it easy."

The two men left cleanup to Winston and retired to the living room. Roy settled into his favorite chair by the fireplace; Edward took a seat in the chair next to him, leaning back with a contented smile. Roy placed the two cups on the small end table between their armchairs, then broke the red seal on one bottle and filled each cup.

Edward reached for one and took a sip. "Yeah. The good stuff," he said.

Roy took a sip as well.

The wine was slightly oily on his tongue, with a sweet, almost nutty flavour. Roy took another sip, and another, savoring the taste, quite different from his usual choice in liquor. He noted that it was smooth, and quite strong. Draining the cup, he judged from the immediate effects that the alcohol content was roughly equivalent to a similar serving of bourbon. Edward was watching him with some curiosity.

"I like it," Roy decided. He poured himself another, and topped up Edward's cup as well. "Ling's private stock you say?"

Edward nodded, and continued to sip.

"He has good taste. Is this wine usually served with food, or . . ." Roy left it open-ended.

"With food or alone, warm or over ice, either way is fine," Edward said. "We used to sit around with a few friends, drinking, playing cards or mah-jong, shooting the shit." His cup was empty, so Roy refilled it. "I learned Xingese drunk off my ass." Edward's grin was infectious.

"I can remember many an evening spent with Maes in much the same way," Roy said, with a twinge of loss. "At the academy. And . . . in Ishbal. Later, in Central."

"And now?" Edward asked, looking into his cup.

Roy didn't mind a little give and take. "Now, I spend most of my personal time with you. Sometimes I get together with Hawkeye, Havoc, and Breda. Have a few drinks, play cards."

Edward hummed, and helped himself to more wine.

Roy had been pacing himself, so he'd only had two cups of the wine. He was definitely feeling a warm, comfortable buzz, however, which made him suspect that he had underestimated the potency. Since Edward had had twice as much, his inhibitions were probably waving him a fond farewell, which was exactly what Roy wanted. It was time.

And Edward very considerately played right into his hands.

"So, was there something specific you wanted to talk about?" the younger man asked.
"Actually, yes," Roy said, all nonchalance. "I'm sure you know that Alphonse and I correspond on a regular basis." Edward nodded, suddenly on his guard. "Are you aware that he is worried about you?"

Edward huffed out a breath. "No. What's he worried about?"

"He is worried because you and he are no longer close, and he doesn't want you to be alone."

"What the hell? I'm not alone," Edward defended. "I have lots of friends. All over the world."

"Friends close enough to talk to when you need to get something off your chest?"

"Sure!" Edward was quick to answer, but quickly backtracked. "Not that I have anything I need to talk about."

"Oh good," Roy said. "Who?"

"Who?"

"Yes, who?"

Edward thought about that for a moment. "Ling. Izumi. And, I guess, you."

"But not Alphonse."

"Alphonse. Yeah, Alphonse too, of course." Edward said, but not with any real conviction. "But he shouldn't have to listen to me bitching. Not that I have anything to bitch about," he added hastily. "He's got a family now."

"And you are part of it," Roy amended.

Ed scrubbed his face with both hands, then reached again for his cup. "I really don't want to talk about this," he said plaintively. "Can't we talk about something else?"

No, they couldn't, but Roy didn't mind getting his answers through the back door if necessary. "Of course we can," he said magnanimously. "What did you have in mind?"

"What about you?" was Edward's suggestion. "You know just about everything about me, and aside from the fact that you're a bastard, I know next to nothing about you."

"Fair enough," Roy immediately conceded. After all, he had nothing to hide from this man who had seen the worst part of him. "I was born in New Optain on October 2nd, 1885. My father was a Major in the 5th Cavalry Regiment under Lieutenant Colonel George Henry Thomas."

"The Black Knights?"

"I'm surprised you know of them," Roy said, and Edward shrugged, waiting. "My mother was the youngest daughter of a Xingese herbalist. My parents met when my father's commanding officer sent him to fetch a hangover remedy from her family's shop. I'm told it was love at first sight."

Edward smiled, but made no comment, so Roy continued.

"My mother's family was completely against her marriage to an Amestrian, and disowned her. My father's family at the time consisted of his sister, Chris, and his elderly grandmother, who had raised him and his sister when their parents died. She passed away before I was born."
"My parents were killed on September 30th, 1889. They had gone to the theater. There was a fire. They did not make it out." Roy glanced to catch Edward's sympathetic gaze. "The neighbour I had been spending the night with was a good friend. Instead of sending me to the local orphanage, she elected to take responsibility for me, and looked after me until Aunt Chris came from Central to get me."

"I've heard that a lot of orphanages are no place for children," the other orphan in the room commented.

Roy nodded. "I don't remember much about my life before Aunt Chris," he continued. "I grew up in a brothel, which was, of course, a unique experience. At first I had no idea what was going on around me. Chris made sure of that. She walked me to school in the morning with my lunchbox and pencil case, picked me up afterward. I had plenty of sisters to help me with my homework." Roy grinned at the memory. "I learned from my classmates about the business in which Aunt Chris was engaged. Needless to say, I learned how to fight soon after."

"Bullies and other assorted assholes generally get their training early, usually at home," Edward observed.

Roy agreed. "When I got older, I tended bar for Madam Christmas. I learned far more than the proper way to mix a martini. There is no better place to learn about the human condition than from behind the bar in a brothel."

"Traveling the country hunting for a legend makes for a pretty good education in that area, too," Edward remarked. "I bet you got hit on a lot."

"You'd win that bet," Roy admitted. "The Madam made it clear that I was not for sale. There was one woman, however, who kept trying. I was twelve. She wanted to be my first."

"And was she?"

"No. My Aunt didn't want my first time to generate income. Plus, I think she was afraid I'd decide to take up that profession, and she had bigger things in mind for me."

"Yeah," Ed grinned impishly. "Like learning to set shit on fire, and taking over the world."

"Both of which I have managed to do with great success, thank you very much." Roy's smirk was annoyingly self satisfied.

Edward was refilling his cup. "I was twelve when I got my State certification," he said thoughtfully. "Thanks to you."

"Yes. At the time, I suppose I was the biggest asshole you'd ever met." Roy said wryly.

"No. I was. You were just a total waste of attractive skin."

Roy raised an eyebrow at that. Had his very young subordinate had a crush on his commander? "Why thank you, Edward. I find your skin quite attractive these days as well." He picked up the bottle of wine to discover it was nearly empty, so he drained it into his glass and opened the second one. Then he glanced at Edward.

Even in the dim light cast by the low burning fire, it was easy to see that Edward's features were flushed. His eyes were half lidded, and when he glanced Roy's way, were glassy and somewhat unfocused. It was time to do a little fishing.
"All of Central was my playground when I was a child," he said. "I suppose growing up in the country was a totally different experience."

"I guess," Edward said. "Less people, open spaces. We went to school in town, but my mom taught me an' Al to read and write way before that. We had a lot of books." He smiled. "The Rockbells were our closest neighbour. Winry was my, our, best friend. We spent so much time together that a lot of our neighbours predicted that one of us would end up marrying her. Accurately, as it turned out."

"There was a standing bet in the office about you and Miss Rockbell," Roy confided. "Wagers were placed on how long it would take you to marry her. As I recall, Vato Falman won a substantial sum. His money was always on Alphonse."

Edward grinned. "Smart man, that Falman." His bleary gaze became distant. "I actually did propose to Winry. Just before I left for the West."

Roy propped his head lazily against a palm, eyes deceptively sleepy. "She turned you down," he guessed.

Ed shook his head. "Alphonse had left for the East a few days before. Me an' Winry were on the Resembool platform, waiting for the westbound train. She was going on about automail maintenance, as usual." Ed's groggy eyes found Roy's and then drifted away. "She always does that when she's feeling sad, you know? Focuses on something . . . concrete . . . to keep her mind off what's bothering her. . . ." Ed drifted off, lost in thought.

Roy held his breath. This might be leading to the answers he was looking for.

Edward sighed. "The train showed up, and I started thinking about the trip, and how long I'd be gone, and . . . and . . . mostly about . . . being alone. And I realized that whatever happened, Winry would always be there for me. Because she always has been. She gave me a strong leg so I could stand up and move forward; she gave me a strong arm to fight with. She made it possible for me to do what I had to do, to make things right for Al." His smile was small, but fond.

"So I'm getting on the train, and she's telling me that if the leg needs maintenance, I should call and make an appointment, and I kind of . . . snapped." Ed's fond smile grew larger. "I proposed an equivalent exchange – half her life for half of mine."

Roy couldn't maintain his casual facade. "And she said . . .?"

Ed's face split into a full-on grin. "She said that alchemists were idiots, equivalent exchange was a load of crap, and never mind half of her life; she would give me all of it."

Roy felt his jaw drop. He blamed it on the alcohol. "She accepted?" he said, incredulous.

Edward shot his drinking partner an alcohol muted death glare. "Yes, Mustang. She accepted." He huffed, a disgruntled hum, and reached an unsteady hand to refill his glass, impressing Roy by managing to do so without spilling a drop.

"So . . . why aren't you married?" Roy asked.

Ed shot him a frown and tossed back the full contents of his glass. "The train wasn't five minutes out of Resembool before I realized I'd made a big mistake. I mean, think about it. Me, married? Settling down, staying in one place? I'm too much like my old man. I'd have been off roaming the world and any kids we managed to produce, Winry would have ended up raising alone. That wouldn't have been fair – Winry deserved better. An' kids need a dad that's there for them full time. I would have
been a shitty husband, and an even shittier dad."

"That's not necessarily true," Roy said. "You have a highly developed sense of responsibility. You're not Hohenheim."

"Bullshit," Ed called. "And anyway, who the hell proposes on a train platform just before they take off indefinitely? Not someone who plans to make a serious commitment to forever and always. I wasn't even sure who I was anymore, and before I could think about committing to someone, I had to figure that out."

"So why did you do it?" Roy wanted to know.

"I was a real mess at the time." Edward lifted a wavering hand to rub his eyes. "It was a stupid fucking impulse, and I guess I never learn. I proposed to her for all the wrong reasons: I was feeling lonely; I was feeling worthless, mostly because I still missed my alchemy; I had no idea where my life was going; Al had taken off to Xing the day before. Without me. And I already missed him. And . . . I was going to miss Winry, too. I really just wanted her to know how much I loved her. And I do love her. As my best friend. My sister. Not a lover. Not a wife."

"You're smarter than I am," Roy muttered. "Took me six months to figure that out with Hawkeye. What a disaster that was."

Edward croaked a low laugh. "Yeah, Al told me you guys were an item for a while," he said. "He didn't seem too surprised that it didn't last."

"Alphonse has always impressed me as a man of great intelligence; his understanding of human nature is particularly impressive," Roy noted. "He really should consider writing an advice column for the Central Times."

"He doesn't have any spare time between his wife and kids, his alchemy, and taking pictures of anything that moves," Edward tipped his head back and smiled at the ceiling. "But he'd be good at it. He'd be good at anything. Ed's total conviction about the truth of that statement made Roy smile too.

A few minutes were spent in comfortable contemplation, broken only when Edward reached for the porcelain decanter once again. If he kept up this pace, he would soon be incoherent, and Roy would have missed his chance to finally get answers to his questions. Though Roy was admittedly more than just tipsy himself, he had kept his consumption to a manageable level; Ed on the other hand was certifiably drunk. Right now the young man was at his most vulnerable: his barriers were down, his defenses off line; he was pleasantly trusting and pliant but still capable of reasonably articulate speech. Roy had to gently press on.

Splayed boneless in his armchair, Roy closed his eyes and asked, all nonchalance, "So what'd Winry say when you finally told her you weren't going to marry her?"

"I kinda didn't get the chance," Edward confided, voice low, and Roy cracked an eyelid to find the blond toying with the rim of his empty glass. "I spent almost two years out west, roaming around Creta and southern Drachma, exploring the island countries in the Western Sea. The whole time I worried about how I was going to tell Winry that I'd made a mistake, because I had to. There was no way I was going to go through with it. She deserved someone to share her life who would stay by her side, put her and their family first. Someone like Al."

Edward fell silent again, eyeing the ornate bottle on the coffee table, and Roy moved the rice wine out of his reach on the pretext of refilling his own glass, though he didn't drink. He had a feeling that
he was getting close to the root of this problem, and had to proceed carefully lest Edward get the sense that he was being interrogated.

The silence stretched, and Roy was weighing strategies he might use to gently probe without appearing to probe, when the younger man finally continued.

"I sent her maybe two letters the whole time I was gone, more proof that proposing to Winry was a mistake," Ed muttered. "I mean, don't people in love want to be together more than anything? Don't they call and write and think about each other all the time, and rush back to each other as soon as they can?" Edward's eyes swung to Roy for his short nod of confirmation. "I thought about Winry, though. A lot. About how I was going to make her cry again. About how I'm really good at that, even though I try not to be. On my way back I rehearsed what I was going to say over and over, and I still didn't know how to say it. When the train finally got to Resembool, I almost didn't get off. I thought I was about to lose my best friend. Automail surgery was less painful."

The young man fell silent again, and Roy only just refrained from growling in frustration. This was a lot like pulling teeth: hard work and painful. The older man considered just giving up and letting it lie, but he'd come too far down this road to give up now. And much like pulling a bad tooth, though initially painful, talking this out of his system would be good for Edward as well. Since Alphonse had no idea how to help his brother, it was very likely that this wound had been left to fester for too long. It needed to be exposed to open air to properly heal.

Roy threw subtlety to the wind. "What happened when you finally got to the Rockbell house?" he asked.

Edward smiled at the ceiling. "When I got there, Alphonse was home too. He'd been back for a few months. I guess I don't have to tell you how happy I was to see him. Don't get me wrong; I was happy to see Winry and Pinako too, but with my stupid mistake standing between us, it kind of put a damper on the reunion. Winry seemed really nervous, and I found out why at dinner – when Alphonse announced that he and Winry were engaged."

The Führer's jaw dropped as his brows shot up. "What?" He must have heard it wrong. It just wasn't possible for Alphonse or Winry to betray Edward that way.

He must have found Roy's expression amusing, because Edward's smile warped up even further. "Yeah, you heard right, Mustang. Al had proposed to Winry the day he got back from the East, and she'd accepted. They hadn't made it public yet because they were waiting for me to get home. Al wanted me to be the first to know."

Roy was at a loss for words. "Did you . . . what did you say, about . . ."

"About what? Proposing to Winry myself? Have you been listening? I was happy for them! Al had been in love with Winry for years. She loved him too. It was perfect." Ed frowned. "Well, almost perfect. Once again, I had managed to stain what should have been a perfect happy ending. Winry should have been happily planning her wedding and her future with the man she loved. Instead, she was worrying about me." Edward's lip curled in self disgust.

"After dinner I invited my future sister-in-law to take a walk with me. I don't know how Al missed the tension between us. Granny sure didn't. She was watching us like a hawk as we walked out the door." Edward sighed. "The first thing Winry told me was that she was sorry, which I already knew. Then she told me that Alphonse didn't know about my proposal, which I also already knew. No way Al would have asked her to marry him if he knew I asked her first and she'd accepted. Then she rushed on to explain how it wouldn't have worked out between us, which I already knew, too. She begged me not to tell Al, but she didn't have to. No way was I going to spoil this for him, like I
already spoiled it for Winry."

Ed eyed his empty glass and then looked for the bottle, out of reach by Roy's hand. Roy obligingly filled the younger man's glass half way and once again placed the Shaoxing out of reach. Edward downed the rice wine and leaned back, eyes closed.

The young man continued without prompting. "I told her about my own change of heart, and that she was right, that marrying me would have been a big mistake. I convinced her that there were no hard feelings. My biggest regret now is that to this day she believes that she hurt me. Even though I told her that I changed my mind too, she doesn't really believe me. She thinks I only said that to be noble."

Edward was quiet after that, staring into the space between the mantelpiece and the ceiling. Roy searched for the words to keep this narrative ball rolling.

"It must have taken a great deal of courage for her to do what she did," he tried, because it was true. It's a daunting challenge indeed to correct a mistake when you are sure to hurt someone you love by doing so.

"Winry was always the strongest of us all." 

Roy waited, hoping that Edward wasn't about to let the matter drop. Unless his instincts were completely off, there was still a lot more to be told, and Roy intended to hear it all.

"I suppose it must have been hard for you to keep such a huge secret from you brother," Roy ventured, very careful to keep his tone neutral. "Even harder for Winry, I suppose."

Edward grimaced. "You don't know the half of it," he said. Then his scowl faded into a misty smile. "The wedding was beautiful."

Roy agreed. He had been there. Both bride and groom had been radiantly happy; so too had the best man, standing proudly at his brother's side. Roy had been profoundly moved to witness the Resembool trio's joy that day knowing all they had gone through to achieve it, and the Flame hadn't been the only one affected. Roy still teased Vato Falman from time to time about the tears the usually stoic man had shed during the ceremony.

"Everything was great. Maes was born. Sara was born." Edward's bleary eyes were distant. "The move to Rush Valley was necessary if Winry was going to complete her training and get the recognition she deserved. Al was all for it. I gave them a hand with the move, but mostly I was on the road. The world is always calling to me." The last was said quietly, almost to himself.

"Then Mei Chang showed up." Edward's scowl was back. "She must have known that Al was married. Ling would have been sure to tell her. Didn't matter, I guess. She told Al she had run away to avoid the marriage her clan had arranged for her. Gave him a sob story, and he and Winry took her in."

Roy recalled the Emperor's account of his countrywoman's obsessive feelings for Alphonse, and how she had returned to Xing around the same time that Edward had arrived. His heart rate tuned up a notch, feeling his answers close at hand.

"Rumors started spreading around Rush Valley," Edward continued. "I was away most of the time, but when I was in town I couldn't miss the talk. That I was Winry's guy on the side, messing with my brother's wife. That it was obvious to anyone with eyes that Maes was really my son." Ed turned bleary, outraged eyes to Roy. "I had been in Drachma for six months when Al finally got in touch to
tell me Winry was three months pregnant. Maes was born a month before I made it back to Resembool." His eyes blazed with fury. "People can be such total assholes."

Roy grunted in commiseration.

"Winry got a really hard time from a lot of people, but she just shrugged it off." Edward was still angry. "Al set a few of the really nasty assholes straight, and Paninya and Garfield, old Domenic and his family, they stuck up for her, and that turned most folks around. Winry's a fantastic automail mechanic, too, so the business didn't suffer, but when her apprenticeship was nearly done, she and Al started to talk about heading back to Resembool to catch a little peace."

Roy had wondered why the Elrics had decided to leave an established and thriving practice in Rush Valley for the quiet of the rural out country. He had assumed they had done it for their children, and in a way he supposed they had. As they got older and better able to understand the sideways glances and overheard whispers, Maes and Sara would eventually have been sucked into the rumor mill. It made more sense now.

"I know it was Mei who started those rumors." Edward's lip curled. "She was hoping to turn Al against Winry." He snorted. "Al just didn't see it, though. I don't think he wanted to believe his friend was capable of doing something so low down. Every time I brought it up, he had a thousand reasons why I was wrong about her. And then . . ."

Edward looked at Roy, making the decision. Should he go on, or not? Roy returned that level gaze, hoping he had earned the trust he so dearly wanted.

Edward took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "It was late afternoon. Winry and I were in the kitchen, getting supper ready. The kids had gone out with Al and Garfield, to the park down the lane. There were swings there, and a slide, and a little merry-go-round . . ."

Roy waited for the blond man to organize his thoughts. His patience was rewarded.

"We thought we were alone in the house, just shooting the breeze, you know?" Edward scrubbed at one hazy eye. "Sitting there, all domestic and shit, and Winry said, 'Do you ever wonder?' And I knew what she was talking about. Us. Did I ever wonder what it would have been like if we had actually gone through with it, if it was me and her, married, instead of her and Al."

"So I told her that there were times when I did wonder, and every time I realized all over again how smart she was to reject me. That when I proposed to her it was the stupidest thing I had ever done, not because I didn't love her, but because I didn't love her like Al did. I told her that I was proud of her for doing what she had to do even though it must have been painful, and if she ever had any doubts, to look at Maes and Sara. They were living proof that she had done the right thing."

Roy realized he was holding his breath, and let it out slowly. He still didn't know where this was going, but hoped he was about to find out.

Edward went on. "Then Winry let out this little gasp. At first I thought it was because of what I'd just said. Then I noticed that she was staring over my shoulder, kind of pale. She looked at me like she'd just seen a ghost, and said, 'Me'."

"I turned around just in time to see that miserable little asshole running down the hall and out the front door. Me and Winry, we just sat there, waiting. We knew where she was going. She was going to Al, to tell him what she'd just heard. Shit." Edward looked up to meet Roy's eyes.

Roy returned his gaze with some sympathy. He could finally see what disaster had come. The only
"Al stormed into the kitchen not five minutes later, Mei smirking on his heels. As soon as I saw that Maes and Sara weren't with him, I knew it was going to be bad. He'd left them with Garfield."

Edward was staring into the fire. "He just stood there for a moment, looking at me like . . . like . . . he hated me. And then he said, 'Is it true?'." Edward closed his eyes. "I couldn't even say it. I just nodded my head, yes."

Roy watched silently as Edward clasped his hands tightly in his lap.

"Al lost it. Totally." Edward was pale, the memory of his brother's anger still painful. "He wanted to know how I could do something so selfish, when I didn't love Winry that way, and especially since I knew he did."

Roy said nothing, hoping that all the poison would just spill out, for good and all.

"He told me that he couldn't believe I would do something like that, when I knew how badly it would hurt him." Edward's eyes were still closed. "He said he wondered if I hated him, because I certainly couldn't love him. He wanted to know if it was because I gave up alchemy for him; did I regret it? Did I resent his happiness because I was unhappy, and wanted to take something important from him, too?"

"Winry tried to defend me, but Al was just . . ." The blond man leaned his head back to stare at the ceiling. "Al is always so, I don't know, sensible, you know?" He glanced at Roy, who nodded. "It takes a lot to piss him off, and a hell of a lot more to tip him into the red zone."

Roy knew that was the truth. In fact, he couldn't think of a single time when he had seen Alphonse actually lose his temper. Angry, yes, but through all the trials and troubles he and his brother had endured, never once had Roy heard of the younger Elric totally losing control.

"And then he said . . ." Edward shut his eyes again, as if to hide himself in the darkness, "'What were you trying to do? Ruin my life . . . again?'" Edward fell silent, eyes still closed. Saddened and subdued, he sat quietly, the memory of angry words echoing in his thoughts.

"And what hurt the most was that he was right." The blond man took a deep breath and opened his eyes, looking for his wine. "I ruined his life once, and was just lucky enough to fix it. Then I almost ruined it again, selfishly proposing to the woman he loved and wanted to marry. If Winry hadn't been strong enough to do the right thing, the smart thing, I'd have destroyed their happiness before it even got started; no happy family; no Maes; no Sara. Just me and Winry trapped in a loveless marriage, and Alphonse all alone, wishing he could have what I resented.

"I'm bad news, because I just don't. Fucking. Think."

Roy kept his mouth firmly shut on the fact that Edward had had no intention of actually marrying Winry. He knew all too well that simply by proposing, he had put his brother's happiness in jeopardy. Winry had, indeed, done the smart thing by keeping Ed's proposal, and even more importantly, her acceptance, a secret from Alphonse. If Alphonse had known, it was very unlikely that he would have asked for Winry's hand when Edward rescinded his proposal. He would have thought himself her second choice and would have doubted her commitment to him.

Al had had every right to be angry. Edward's impulsive proposal had very nearly cost them all their happily ever after. Still, Roy couldn't help but wonder what had prompted Winry to accept Edward's proposal in the first place. Clearly Alphonse was her first choice; she had accepted his proposal even though she was already engaged. And how could Alphonse be so sure that Edward didn't love her as
much as he did?

"We told him everything." Edward continued, subdued, bleary eyes downcast. "Then I left. At the time, all I wanted to do was get away. It was best that I leave, for me, and for them."

"I wonder," Roy said quietly. "I think most of what Alphonse said was said in anger. I doubt his intention was to drive you away, and he definitely regrets it, particularly the loss of your close bond."

"Yeah, he actually apologized, when I came back," Ed said with a grimace. "To me, when I caused the problem." He shook his head. "The only good part about the whole, stinking mess was that Al finally saw Mei's true colours. I heard he confronted her about all the trash talk going around town, and about trying to break up his family. Don't know how she responded, but he ended up telling her to leave." Edward picked up his cup and stared into it for a moment before draining it. "So yeah. I still think getting out of there was the right call."

"I don't," Roy said without thinking.

Ed looked up. "I do. Look, Al was pissed at me for proposing to Winry in the first place, but she also admitted that she accepted my proposal. No more secrets, she said. And that hurt him, too. With me out of the way, they had a chance to work it out. And they did. They're fine. And so am I. Everything's great."

Roy just hummed an ambiguous hum. Everything wasn't great, actually. It was obvious that lingering guilt still made Edward uncomfortable enough to keep his distance from his brother. It seemed to be getting better, however. Time would hopefully continue to heal their rift. And Roy would do his best to help.

And then Roy's thrice damned curiosity forced him to quietly ask, "How could Alphonse be so sure that you didn't love Winry just as much as he did?"

"Because he knew . . ." Edward's half-lidded eyes snapped wide open, and his mouth snapped shut, suddenly remembering where he was, and with whom. He shot a hazy eyed, indecipherable look at his drinking partner, and did not continue.

But pieces of this puzzle were falling into place, so Roy finished Edward's sentence for him. "Because he knew that you loved someone else."

Edward's jaw was clamped tightly closed, but the slight widening of his eyes confirmed that Roy was sniffing down the right trail, and the older man was just drunk enough himself for the buffer between his thoughts and his mouth to be offline. "It's me, isn't it. You're in love with me."

Edward's face confirmed the older man's hypothesis. It was a study in horror that Roy found particularly comical, and was to blame for the worst possible response he could have made. He laughed.

It was just a small, amused chuckle, not because of what he had discovered, but because of Ed's reaction to the discovery, the wine definitely playing a part. The effect was devastating nevertheless.

"Yeah, I know. Crazy, right?" Edward said, voice uneven, expression resigned.

Roy sat still, damning his stupid mouth. "Ed, no," he said, as earnestly as his tipsy state would allow. "I didn't mean . . . I wasn't laughing because . . . it's not funny that you . . ."

"Sure it is." Ed spoke calmly, standing up a bit unsteadily.
The ill-disguised hurt in Edward's eyes resonated in Roy's chest. "You're leaving?"

"Just going to bed." Edward shrugged. "I think I've had too much to drink. Would it be asking too much for you to just . . . forget it?"

"I don't think I can," Roy said slowly.

"It's no big deal," Edward assured him quietly. "Just a . . . crazy obsession. A crush. I'll get over it, and then we can both have a good laugh about it."

Roy didn't feel like laughing. He felt like kicking himself in the ass. "Ed. I don't know what to say, except that I'm sorry."

"For what?" Ed asked mildly. "You don't owe me a thing."

Roy watched as Edward walked out of the room, silent, and he remained as he was for quite a few minutes, trying to get over his shock. Then he stood to follow Edward to the bedroom, but head spinning with alcohol and the answers to so many long-asked questions, he simply couldn't move. Standing by the fireplace, steadying hand on the mantle, he worked to pull himself together, thoughts circling around and around.

That damned, unpredictable brat! How could he have hidden his secret from Roy for so long? And why hide it at all?

But the answer was obvious.

Because Roy's response had confirmed what Edward knew all along: that Roy did not return his feelings.

Roy could only imagine the humiliation the younger man must have felt to have his secret discovered, and then to have the reasons he had kept it validated by a misconstrued chuckle. An apology was all Roy could offer, however. He couldn't, wouldn't lie. Not to Edward. Not about this. He wasn't in love. All he could do now was hope that he hadn't done irreparable damage to their friendship with his thoughtless prying.

Why couldn't he have left well enough alone?

But Roy wasn't the only manipulative bastard to blame. Alphonse had been well aware of Edward's secret, and he had practically thrown them together, likely hoping that Roy might discover deeper feelings as well. No doubt his brother's happiness was Alphonse' motivation; nevertheless, he was just as much at fault for the hurt Edward suffered tonight. The younger Elric would be receiving an irate telephone call in the very near future, outlining exactly how incensed the Führer was with his thoughtless meddling.

The lamp lit Roy's side of the bed, left on so he wouldn't have to stumble around in the dark. He padded over to the far side where Edward lay curled. The blond man's breathing was deep and even, and Roy thought his lover had already fallen asleep. Not surprising, considering how much he'd had to drink.

Then Edward's eyes slit open, slivers of molten gold in the dimly lit room. He reached to stroke a finger over the back of Roy's hand before giving it a firm squeeze. Then he slowly slid a palm up Roy's forearm, warm skin against skin.

And Roy . . . didn't know what to think. As Edward's hand curled into his loosened collar to pull him down, Roy didn't know what to feel. When their lips met, Roy's breath caught painfully in his chest.
When the kiss was broken and gleaming amber eyes burned close and hot, when a tongue flicked out
to taste, when lips feathered touches along his jaw, Roy felt lost.

"I know you don't believe me, but I really wasn't laughing at you," he said quietly, tone as level as he
could make it, "It was just, you looked so horrified that I had guessed your secret and-"

"Shh," Edward's breath was hot against his throat. "It's okay. Don't worry."

The tongue licked out again, slower this time, over his throat and down, teeth nipping at his collar
bone, then lower. Buttons slipped through their buttonholes and Roy . . . probably shouldn't feel as
good as he did. Edward's light touch was comforting as it moved over his skin. Then Edward pulled
away, and Roy told himself he wasn't disappointed. A soft click, and the bedside lamp was off.

Edward's voice was soothing in the dark. "Do you want me here?"

"Yes." No hesitation.

"Then be here with me."

Roy had to ask. "Are you sure it's alright?"

Edward's soft laugh was response enough, but he answered anyway. "It's alright with me if it's
alright with you."

Roy lowered himself over his lover, giving in to his desire, Edward's hands coming to rest
automatically on Roy's shoulders as he settled on the bed. Roy braced his hands against the mattress,
his legs tangled with Edward's, their bodies pressed close. He felt Edward weave his fingers into his
hair, the short strands tight through his fingers, tugging just a little to invite Roy in for a kiss. He felt
Edward relax when their mouths met. Felt him arch into his touch as Roy's hand explored him in the
dark. His groan tasted of rice wine when Roy brushed against his growing erection, and Roy
retraced the movement to taste it again. He continued his exploration, building a picture in his mind
of curve, and texture, and heat. Edward squirmed when Roy explored him with his mouth, until
Roy's hand slipped down and brushed lazily over his cock. Edward's hips arched into Roy's
helplessly before stilling, and Roy noted with satisfaction that despite how much he had drunk,
Edward was fully hard.

As a matter of fact, so was Roy.

Roy took time to savor his lover's flavor and the blond man didn't seem to mind, humming
contentedly as Roy tasted his mouth, the hollow of his throat, the sensitive skin behind his ear. Roy
still felt an odd sense of dislocation, but the writhe of limbs, the flex of toned muscle under him, was
both a distraction and a relief.

"Yes," he hissed as both of Edward's hands tangled tighter in his hair and pulled him back into a
deep, searching kiss. Don't let go. Never let go.

"Shh," Edward whispered, his lips brushing Roy's as he spoke. "It's okay."

Was it really? The scales of equivalent exchange were tilted, badly out of balance. But this was
Edward; his lover, his friend. How could Roy doubt him? Here in the quiet and the dark, it was all
too easy to shut his fears away and lose himself in the taste of Edward's skin.

A hand closed around him, slick and warm, and Roy bucked into it. Edward soothed him, gently
kneading his shoulder, nudging him to settle between his legs, guiding him into position. As he
pushed slowly inside, Edward's appreciative groan urging him on, Roy gave himself up to the
sensation of tight heat, of hips rocking up, of the rhythm of muscles pulling tight, to come at last with a breathless moan.

Roy did not shift to the side when the last aftershock faded. Instead he stayed where he was, his chest pressed to Edward's, still deep inside the blond man. Edward didn't let him go, folding Roy lightly in his arms.

"Roy," Edward said quietly, "Believe me. Nothing's changed."

"I believe you," Roy said, struggling to make it true. "I believe you."

And he did, actually. He believed that for Edward, nothing had changed.

For Roy though, everything was different.
Interlude: Letter from Alphonse

Dear Roy,

First of all, thank you for the beautiful dollhouse you sent for Sara's birthday. She absolutely loves it! She was thrilled (and so was Winry by the way) to discover that the front rooms are an automail clinic, complete with a surgery and recovery beds, just like the one here at home. You must have gone to a lot of trouble to find all those miniature tools, but I know you'll agree it was worth it when you see the picture I took of Sara's radiant smile when she saw them. She immediately moved her dolls inside, and all her friends love to come over with their broken dolls, so she can fix them. It's just the cutest thing I've ever seen! I know you're busy with running the country, but I do wish you could come for a visit and see for yourself. I know both Maes and Sara would love to meet the kind and caring person who sends the most amazing and thoughtful gifts on their birthdays, their dear Uncle Roy.

Brother is visiting, as I'm sure you know. I told him you and I had spoken about what happened, but he just shrugged and patted my arm. Just so you know, he doesn't appear disappointed or upset in any way, and I'm sure he isn't. As for me, his reaction, or lack of one, makes me sad, because it means that he knew all along that his was an impossible dream.

That said, I can't apologize enough for my behaviour. As I told you in our telephone conversation, it was never my intention to cause either of you any distress. Please believe that I thought a simple friendship would be of benefit to both of you. I can't deny that I hoped you might realize deeper feelings for my brother, but I was content to know he had someone to rely on. That something so simple should become so complicated was an outcome I never remotely anticipated, but given the parties involved, I suppose I should have. My brother wasn't the only capricious variable in the equation. I hope you can forgive me; I would hate to lose a friendship that means so much to me.

I'm keeping this short, because frankly, I have nothing else to say. I am of course enclosing a few photos, and hope you'll share them with all our Central friends. The one of Edward, smiling so fondly at me as I took his picture, is my current favorite. I can't remember the last time he cast a smile so honest my way, and it gives me hope that we can be close again. I suspect you may have something to do with it, which makes me feel both happy and ashamed. Sara wasn't the only one to receive a gift from you it seems.

Once again, I am truly sorry.

Your friend,

Alphonse.
Ten o'clock in the evening, and the stacks of paperwork on his desk were largely untouched. The Führer leaned back in his comfortable leather chair, eyeing the unfinished work distastefully. He had made himself a promise that today he would work diligently to clear his growing backlog, and had honestly tried. Since early that morning, he had tried. The masses of file folders, many stamped with a large, red 'urgent', stood as a mocking testament to his failure. It had been a long time since Roy had been so unproductive.

Halfway through the file open in front of him he had realized he was barely retaining a fraction of what he had read. Back in the day he would have been attempting to eliminate the problem the easy way – a few files slipped behind the radiator, a couple more under the seat cushions on his couch, some 'lost' to the fireplace – risking Hawkeye's wrath. But those days were gone. The Führer didn't deal with day to day minutia which could be easily swept under the rug and ignored for a time, such as the allocation of toilet paper in the barracks. He dealt with much larger issues, decisions which could not be postponed, like the allocation of armoured troop carriers along the Drachmann border. A week of inertia saw the paper stacked on his desk grow to epic proportions, and the prospect of conquering that mountain with any efficiency grew more hopeless by the hour. Sometimes Roy longed for the days when he could get away with being irresponsible, if only for a little while. Particularly when life took troubling turns.

Troubling turns like the fact that his former subordinate was in love with him, and evidently had been for quite some time. It had been a week since Edward's confession, and Roy's distress over his discovery was increasing, not abating.

They hadn't spoken of it again, and life went on much as it had before. Edward appeared unaffected by the exposure of his secret; there was no strain on their relationship in that quarter. Nevertheless, for Roy at least, it was a dark cloud looming over them, impossible to ignore.

As much as he wanted Edward in his life, now that he knew the young man's secret, Roy felt as though he was taking something that was not rightfully his. Every touch was weighted now, colored with the knowledge that Edward deserved to have his feelings returned, and that those feelings were wasted on Roy.

And now that he knew, Roy wondered how he could have been so blind.

Since that night he had replayed all their interactions over in his head, and realized he should have seen the signs. So many hints Roy had overlooked. Words stumbled over. Telling glances. Innocent touches more intimate than they should have been. It was all there in black and white, if only Roy had noticed.

The most revealing scene often played over in his mind. West City. The Mews. Roy had asked Edward why he stayed with him, even though he had to put up with everything from character assassination to actual attempts on his life. Edward had turned it back on Roy, and promised to explain if Roy could do the same.

Roy no longer needed an explanation. And he could not offer a complimentary one to Edward in return.

He wished he had figured it out sooner.

But even if he had, what would Roy have done? He had been in pretty deep almost from the
beginning. And while he might not be in love with Edward, he did care deeply for him. Roy knew he should scale back the physical aspects of their relationship, tune it down to the friendship Roy had assumed they shared, or break it off altogether. He feared he wasn't strong enough to go through with it however, not just because it would hurt Edward, but because it would hurt Roy, too. His life was much richer with the younger man in it. Roy was loath to go back to the darkness, now that he had basked in the light, and despite the insistent nagging of his conscience, as yet he had been unable to do so.

As unfair as it was, as unbalanced, as inequivalent, Roy couldn't bring himself to do the right thing and let Edward go.

At the moment Ed was gone however, from Central at least, not on assignment this time but to visit his family. Roy suspected that he also wanted to give his lover time to come to terms with this new development in their relationship. Edward knew him well enough by now to see past Roy's carefully arranged façade and know that he was uneasy. Still, Edward often left to range the country at a moment's notice. Perhaps Roy was mistaken.

The reason didn't matter, of course. Either way, Roy missed him. Now more than ever, as Edward's absence was like a heartbreaking glimpse of what was inevitably to come.

As hard as it would be, Roy had to let Edward go. It was the right thing to do.

Havoc had invited Roy to a poker game that evening, as had become their custom when Edward was out of town, but Roy had turned down the invitation. He just wasn't in the mood for company. He would have been home by now, mind wandering aimlessly in his rooms at the manor, but he had hoped to deal with at least a few of the urgent cases gathering dust on his desk. No one but his ever present security detail knew that he was still in his office, which was why the quiet knock on his door this late in the evening was so surprising.

Opening the door to Riza Hawkeye was even more of a surprise.

"Good evening, Roy," she said as she stepped into the office, eyes falling on the stacked paperwork towering in his in-box. "I see you still haven't managed to work through your backlog."

At least her handgun remained holstered. "Yes, unfortunately. I'm having trouble concentrating." He tried on a tired smile. "I'm sure I'll be back to normal tomorrow."

Riza looked skeptical, but said nothing. She held his eyes, searching them with great intensity. Difficult as it was, Roy did not look away.

"Is there anything you'd like to . . . get off your chest?" she asked finally.

He thought about it, and nearly turned down her offer of a sympathetic ear, then changed his mind. She was a good friend, always willing to help. And she and Winry Rockbell had built a solid friendship as well, since the day Riza had accompanied Roy to Resembool, where they had found two children who had survived the unsurvivable.

So he said, "Yes, actually. I wonder if you knew that Edward proposed to Winry before he left on his tour of the west. And that she accepted."

That caught the Hawk by surprise. She stood shock-still, eyebrows raised, for a full ten count. Then she walked to the couch and sat down. Roy followed, joining her.

"Yes, I knew," she admitted. "I suppose Edward told you."
"Yes, he did." Roy considered his options and pressed on. "Winry told you?"

"Yes," Riza confirmed.

"When?"

"About an hour after the proposal."

Roy wasn't expecting that. "You must have been the first person she called."

"I was," Riza said. "But not for the reasons you think."

Roy waited for it.

"She called me, very upset," Riza told him. "She told me that Edward had proposed just before he left, and that she had accepted. And that she had made a terrible mistake."

"Edward realized the same thing," Roy supplied. "Not five minutes out of Resembool station."

Riza mulled that over for a moment. "Foolish children," she muttered. "Winry asked for my advice, and I told her to keep the engagement to herself until Edward came back from his travels, then tell him, privately, face to face, that she did not want to marry him. It would be kinder that way, to spare him the embarrassment of others knowing that she had rejected him."

Roy indulged his curiosity. "Do you know why she accepted his proposal?"

"She told me that it was a foolish impulse. She had been watching him for two years, slowly going through the painful process of coming to terms with the loss of his alchemy. She didn't want to be the cause of further hurt, because she really does love him, but as a brother, not a husband. I told her that she should tell him that, too. He deserved to know how she really felt."

"Good advice," Roy granted.

"Yes. Except that Alphonse came back from Xing before Edward returned, and immediately asked Winry to marry him, right there on the Resembool platform. Winry couldn't say no to the man with whom she truly wanted to share the rest of her life. She accepted Alphonse' proposal."

"What a mess," Roy said sadly.

"I suppose Edward told you that Alphonse found out about his proposal?" Hawkeye asked cautiously.

"He did." Roy watched as Riza nodded thoughtfully. "And that he and his brother had a falling out over it. That was three years ago, and the effects still linger. I'm glad it didn't affect Al's relationship with Winry."

"Ah." The Hawk folded her hands in her lap and gazed intently at her friend. "It did, actually. In defending Edward, she admitted that she had accepted Edward's proposal. Alphonse was terribly hurt by that, and angry with her for hiding it from him. It took quite some time, but she finally convinced him that Edward's proposal and her acceptance had been a foolish, impulsive mistake on both their parts, a mistake they both regretted. She explained that she'd hid it to avoid just the situation they were now faced with. She also pointed out that yes, she had accepted Ed's proposal, but if she had really wanted to be Edward's wife, that is who she would be. But she wasn't. She was Al's."
"What a mess," Roy said again.

"Yes," Riza agreed. "But it seems to have been resolved. Al and Winry are fine, and Edward is back in their lives. Their bonds are strong, and have been tested time and again. I seriously doubt that they will remain at odds over a mistake long resolved. Particularly considering that their friends won't let them." That was said with a smile.

Roy returned it, because Hawkeye was right.

"Contemplating the Elric family's problems is not the reason you've been so distracted lately, though, is it." Riza cut straight to the chase.

"No." How to proceed. Directly, Roy decided. "Edward is in love with me."

Riza frowned. "Yes," she said slowly, quizzically, as if his revelation was common knowledge.

"The feeling is not mutual," he elaborated.

The Hawk's face froze, expression unreadable, sharp eyes locked to Roy's. He knew that she had mistakenly believed her old friend to be in love as well, and he waited patiently for her to process this disclosure.

"Yes, it is." Her response took Roy by surprise.

He shook his head. "I don't love him," Roy said, to clarify.

"Yes you do." Riza stated firmly, then before Roy could deny it again, she said, "It's quite obvious, Roy. You love him."

This was ridiculous. "As a friend, yes. As a lover, in a purely physical sense, yes. Romantically, as someone with whom to share everything of my life, and everything of his life, I'm sorry, but no."

"You already share that connection, Roy," Hawkeye said, exasperated. "Is there anyone with whom you would rather be?"

"No, of course not, but -"

"When he isn't beside you, do you feel his absence?"

"Most certainly, but -"

"Is there anything you wouldn't do for him?" Riza quirked an eyebrow, waiting.

"Many things," Roy said heatedly, with great conviction. "I'm the Führer, damn it! I am committed to putting the wellbeing of Amestris first, for the good of all."

"And do you think he would ever expect you to do otherwise?"

That took the wind out of Roy's belligerent sails. "No. No, he wouldn't. But that's my point. Edward deserves more. He deserves someone as devoted to him as he is to them. I can't be that someone."

The Hawk stared at her friend for a moment before countering. "You're afraid."

"What?" This was outrageous! "What could I possibly have to fear?"

"What indeed?" Riza shook her head. "I suspect I might be to blame. Did my rejection hurt you so
badly? To be honest, Roy, it was Winry who got me to really think about you and I, and our relationship at the time. When she called me, so upset about accepting Alphonse’ proposal while she was still engaged to Edward. When she told me how much she loved both brothers, and how Edward was her best friend, her brother in truth if not in blood, but how it wasn’t the kind of love a woman feels for a husband. When she told me how she wished she had refused him outright, because the hurt she didn’t want to cause him would now be far more painful. In explaining how she felt about Edward, I realized I felt much the same way, about you. And so, not long after, I told you it was over. But you already knew we had made a mistake."

It was true. He had known for awhile that they were just going through the motions, only acting in accordance with what was widely expected.

"It still hurt," Roy admitted quietly. "And most of that pain stemmed from the belief that our friendship was over as well. I count myself incredibly lucky that that wasn't the case."

Riza treated him to a rare smile. "Do you really think me so shallow, Roy?"

"Of course not," Roy told her. "But -"

"We have been friends for a long, long time." Riza's smile turned distinctly fond. "Since the day you showed up on my father's doorstep with all your belongings stuffed in a ratty duffel bag."

"He wasn't too pleased to see me." Roy recalled Berthold Hawkeye's scorn and harsh treatment, which had only reinforced his teenaged apprentice's determination to learn all his master's secrets.

"No, but Grandfather insisted, and you soon won my father over." Riza eyes gleamed with mirth. "And I was happy to see you. I had been isolated in that house since my mother passed away, some ten years before. Our only regular visitor was Grandfather, very rarely."

Of this Roy was well aware. And the two teens, Riza a few years Roy's junior, had become fast friends immediately. She had shown the willful orphan that peace could be found in the most unexpected places, and he had shown her that there was more to life than her father's heavy handed protection.

Riza had changed greatly over the years, however, from that shy and idealistic girl. Isolated in her father's deteriorating manor, she had led a sheltered life. Ishbal soon changed that, shattering her youthful romanticism and replacing it with stern pragmatism, and shy Riza had become stern, stoic Lieutenant Hawkeye. One thing unchanged, however, was her colossal strength of will, and her drive to support and protect her childhood friend. Ishbal taught her to accept responsibility for her actions and she expected no less of her friends and colleagues, which was why the Flame Alchemist appointed her as his adjutant. He trusted her to be both his conscience and executioner, with authority to shoot him down, both figuratively and literally, should he ever stray from the narrow path of honor.

"With all we have been though, did you really think that leaving your bed meant leaving our friendship behind as well?" Hawkeye cocked a disparaging eyebrow at her friend. "You had nothing to fear. You have nothing to fear now, either, if your relationship with Edward doesn't work out."

Roy shook his head, feeling foolish. "I suppose not," he said sheepishly. "But your point is irrelevant. None of this changes that fact that I'm not in love with him."

"You are."

A deep breath quelled the urge to snap. "Riza." His tone was patiently gentle. "I'd know if I was.
Don't you think I'd know?"

Riza looked him over with a critical eye. "You need a drink."

Roy shook his head. "I really don't think -"

"Trust me, Roy. You need a drink."

The man frowned, then shrugged. "Alright." He turned toward his liquor cabinet.

"Not here," Riza said.

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It was nearly midnight when they arrived at Whispers, but as far as the patrons were concerned, it appeared that the party was just starting. The Führer and his trusted General along with their ever present bodyguards were quickly passed through the VIP entrance into the exclusive, members only foyer. Mounting the stairs to the lounge, Roy briefly recalled the evening he had introduced his aunt to Edward, and how that evening had ended. It seemed such a long time ago.

Riza did not lead them to the bar as was their custom, but to a private table by the floor to ceiling windows overlooking the busy dance floor in the main part of the club. It was quiet in the lounge, the music from the club below muted by the thick glass. The two soldiers sat across from each other. A waiter appeared at Roy's elbow and he ordered his usual, the bar's best single malt whiskey, neat. Roy decided he was in trouble when Hawkeye ordered the same.

The drinks arrived. Riza lifted her glass, watching Roy expectantly. He sipped, savoring the rich, smoky flavour, wondering why his friend had brought him here, and why he felt so awkward. The two sat in silence, watching the kaleidoscopic shifting of the dancers below. Riza finished her drink, and signaled for another. When it was set in front of her and the waiter had retreated, she finally spoke.

"It took me quite a while to realize I was in love with Miles," she started. "We worked closely together in the initial stages of the Ishballan Reconstruction and developed a very good professional relationship, which rapidly evolved into friendship. One afternoon we were sitting on the terrace of the Grand Cleric's home, shaded by a colourful canvas awning and sipping sweet chai. We were off duty, and I was grateful for the chance to relax, the heat particularly oppressive that day. I mentioned that I had always seen the desert as desolate, sterile, and wondered why anyone would choose to live in such an environment." Riza's expression was wistful. "Miles smiled. Then he looked out over the town we were slowly rebuilding to the barren landscape beyond, and told me what he saw. Golden sand shimmering with heat. Red sandstone cliffs sculpted by the wind. A sky of clear, perfect blue. And life: stunted plants, their roots sunk deep into the packed soil, tenaciously seeking what they needed to survive; beasts perfectly adapted to the harsh conditions, thriving; men and women tempered by hardship, strong and proud. This was his home, and it was beautiful. All I needed to understand it was the right perspective."

"A fresh perspective can provide valuable insights," Roy agreed. "It can't change cold, hard facts however."

"It can shine new light on previously hidden aspects of those facts." Riza sipped her drink. "They might then be revealed as neither cold nor hard. It might even become clear that they are not facts at all. Would you like to hear the rest of my story?"

"Of course," Roy said, intrigued.
"The relationship I had with Miles changed after that day." The Hawk fingered the rim of her tumbler thoughtfully. "I didn't realize it at the time, but thinking back, I saw that day on the Grand Cleric's veranda as the turning point. We began to spend more time together. The tone of our relationship gradually changed from professional to personal, our conversations straying from our careers into more intimate topics: our pasts, our hopes, our dreams. I was comfortable with him as I have never been with anyone else; I could set aside my armor and relax in his company. I still didn't see him as anything more than a close friend, however, until you announced that our tour of duty in Ishbal was complete. We were going back to Central.

"And Miles would stay behind in the Ishbalan capital as our appointed liaison."

"Ah."

"They say that one never really knows what they have until they lose it." Riza quirked the smallest of smiles. "I would like to state for the record that those of us marginally more intelligent sometimes come to recognize what they have when its loss is looming before them. The prospect of moving on and leaving Miles behind, and all that implied, hit me like a slap in the face. I felt as if I was being asked to give up something just as important as breathing."

Roy grinned. "It appears that underneath your strict, pragmatic exterior there beats the heart of a poet."

Riza raised an eyebrow. "A poet? No, nothing quite so romantic," she said solemnly. "I analyzed my reaction and came to the only logical conclusion. But I am also an optimist. I believe anything is possible. That's why, when I became conscious of my feelings for Miles, I weighed my options and took a chance."

Roy leaned forward, expectantly.

"I knew I was in love, but I had no clear idea how Miles felt," Riza said. "I suspected that he had feelings for me as well, but looking at it realistically, I didn't have much to offer, particularly since I had no intention of renouncing my sworn duty to protect you." Roy smiled ruefully at that. "What man would want a relationship with a woman who is devoted to the protection of another? Perhaps one in ten thousand. And even if Miles was that one man, I was about to leave for Central. Would he be interested in a long distance relationship? There was only one way to find out: I had to confess, and let the chips fall where they might."

"And you found out that Miles was indeed that one man in ten thousand." Roy smiled.

"Yes." Riza locked eyes with her Fuhrer. "We took a chance, and overcame the obstacles. My life with Miles is not a dream come true. It is an incredible gift I never even knew I wanted. I consider myself very fortunate that I was able to recognize what I was feeling, and the courage to acknowledge those feelings."

Apparently Riza wasn't going to let this go. "I'm not in love, Riza."

"You are. I know you are. You have all the classic symptoms. Somehow you just don't see it." Her expression became calculating, and she leaned forward to rest her elbows on the table, twining her fingers. "Let me ask you a few questions."

"Riza-"

"How long can you go without thinking about him?" she asked voice low.

"What?"
"You heard me. You think about him all the time, don't you."

"That's absurd."

"Oh really?" Riza eyes glinted dangerously in the subdued light. "Then why has your paperwork been gathering dust for the last few days? Why are you so disturbed about what happened?"

Roy stared at her. "Do you really want to know?" he asked after an intense moment. "It's quite simple, really. I don't feel . . . that this is right any more. Everything has changed."

"The only thing that's changed is your perception," Riza stated.

"And my perception is that I am taking what isn't mine." Roy glared at his friend. "Don't you see, Riza? I'm already in a committed relationship – with my country. He deserves someone who is free to return his feelings."


Roy lurched back in his seat and rolled his eyes. "I want that for all my friends. Hell, for the whole country, truth be told." Then he grimaced. "And if I really wanted what was best for him, I'd break it off."

"But you can't," Riza jumped on that like a predator on easy prey. "Another classic symptom. You're so wrapped up in him that you can't imagine him gone from your life. He is your safe harbour. He is your haven, your home. Deny it."

"That's not love; it's all about physical intimacy," Roy argued. "Long term it inspires a deep level of trust. Of course I feel comfortable with him. Frankly, I don't think I've ever had a more satisfying sexual relationship. In case you didn't realize it, consistently having excellent sex is supremely fulfilling."

Roy's personal disclosure didn't faze Riza in the least, much to his disappointment. "Yet another classic symptom," she noted. "Strong physical attraction. Open your eyes, Roy."

He opened his mouth to snap a reply, his temper fraying at the edges, but Roy was saved from responding to his friend's insistent counsel by the arrival of his aunt, an eddy of cheap perfume and cigarette smoke heralding her arrival at his elbow.

"Good evening, Madam," Roy said as he rose to stand politely, the greeting echoed by Riza. "Riza. Roy-Boy." Chris took in the tense atmosphere. "What brings you to my humble establishment?"

"I did," Riza said, matter of fact. "Roy is having an epic crisis of understanding, and I need backup."

"I did," Riza said, matter of fact. "Roy is having an epic crisis of understanding, and I need backup."

"Oh?"

"Riza is mistaken," Roy countered, looking down at his friend. "My perception of the situation is crystal clear. My trusted General is channeling Maes Hughes, however. She is happily in love, and generously wishes the same for me. Whether I want it or not."

"I am not 'channeling Maes Hughes'," Riza said with a spark of heat. "I am trying to remove a gigantic, bug-shaped misconception from your ass. Strangely, it's affecting your vision."

Roy snorted. "I'm not the one who can't see the obvious."
"Children, children, please!" Chris chided them. "Would you mind telling me what brought all this on?"

"Edward is in love with me," Roy said gloomily.

"Duh," was his aunt's eloquent riposte.

Somehow Roy overcame the urge to bang his head against the table. How could he have missed what appeared to be patently obvious to everyone else?

"So what's the problem?" Chris wanted to know.

Riza cut over Roy's reply. "Roy claims that the feeling isn't mutual."

Chris turned to her nephew, one eyebrow raising the question. He nodded solemnly to confirm his friend's statement. The madam's expression remained neutral.

Then she burst out laughing.

She laughed long and loud, a deep, hearty laugh. Just when Roy thought she was done, one look at her nephew's dour expression would set her off again. Soon mirthful tears were leaking from her eyes. The Führer hoped she would soon regain some semblance of decorum. Not only was she becoming alarmingly red in the face, but she was attracting a lot of embarrassing attention.

Roy waited until his aunt was able to get herself under reasonable control before saying, "I fail to see what's-

"You don't realize . . ." She broke down all over again, bracing a hand on the table until her laughter petered out.

Roy's temper was beginning to kick in. He opened his mouth to bid his aunt and his General a good evening, ready to leave, but his aunt knew him too well. Still chuckling, she clutched plump fingers around his forearm and tugged him toward the bar, motioning for Riza to follow.

Towing a reluctant Roy along, the Madam paused only to flip up the swing top at the end of the counter, passing quickly behind the grinning bartender. Slipping into the cool, dimly lit stockroom, Chris lead her captive past stacked boxes of liquor, ranked wine coolers, and crates of various description which could have held anything from pretzels to pistols. At the back of the room a narrow stairway ascended two short steps to a nondescript door. The Madam dipped her free hand into her cleavage to retrieve a key. Door unlocked, she guided her disgruntled nephew inside.

Roy had been in his aunt's private suite of rooms many times, of course. So had Riza for that matter. The Madam's boudoir was lavishly furnished and eminently cozy. Pictures crowded the polished mantle. Knickknacks and keepsakes adorned every sidetable, ranked around the bases of mismatched tiffany lamps. Sofa, loveseat, and three oversized armchairs were arranged about a large coffee table clustered for conversation, and this sitting room saw plenty of it. This modest parlor was the hub of Chris Mustang's information network; informants and supplicants alike gathered here when granted audience. Madam Christmas had no reason to seek out her prey. In time, all things came to her, a giant spider in the middle of a vast web.

Chris released Roy's arm and momentum carried him to her overstuffed couch, where he grudgingly sat. Riza took a seat beside him, while Chris settled on the matching loveseat opposite. Both women narrowed their eyes and brought their formidable debating skills to bear, Roy in their sights.

But Roy was no slouch in the verbal wrangling department either. He was a seasoned veteran of the
dialectic arena, and well prepared to defend his position. He had no intention of caving to these obvious intimidation tactics, incensed that his aunt and his friend believed that he was incapable of knowing his own mind.

Riza set the terms of engagement.

"You claim that you are not in love with Edward," she stated for the record.

"Correct," Roy responded. "He is a friend. A very dear friend, but just a friend nevertheless."

"I don't sleep with my friends," Chris joined the fray.

"I do," Roy stated confidently. "Edward is not the first. Riza can testify to that."

"At the time, we believed that we were in love, however," Riza clarified.

Roy shrugged. "Sometimes I sleep with people for purely physical reasons; there is no romantic connection. The fact that Edward and I are close friends is just an added bonus."

"Have you slept with anyone else since you started this purely physical, friendship oriented relationship with Edward?" Chris cross examined.

Roy rolled his eyes. "You of all people should know that my reputation as an unrepentant womanizer was invented to cause our enemies to underestimate my potential as a threat. I have never indulged in more than one lover at a time."

"That's quite the elaborate 'no', Roy-Boy," Chris noted. "Sounds like a committed relationship to me."

"We have never made a formal commitment," Roy said, perfectly calm.

"So you would have no objections if Edward took other lovers." Riza wasn't pulling any punches.

Roy wanted to say no. He really, really wanted to say no. "Yes," he admitted, uncomfortable. "I would have objections. I know that he would never betray me that way, however."

"Betray you? It's just casual sex with a friend, Roy. You have no formal understanding." This from Chris.

Roy had nothing to say to that. He remembered very well how he had reacted to Edward’s friendship with the Cretian Princess, jealousy short-circuiting his better judgement. He chalked it up to a natural reaction however, sparked by primitive territoriality.

Reading her Führer's mind with uncanny accuracy, Riza released another salvo. "You and Edward had a falling out, recently. You overreacted to his friendship with Princess Ekaterina, and he decided to cut ties with you. You worked very hard to make amends for that; at the time, it appeared to me that you were quite lost without him."

"As I would be without you, my friend," Roy said softly. "As I have been without Maes."

Chris would not be swayed by sentimentality. "Are you trying to say that friendship and love are mutually exclusive?" The notion seemed to amuse her.

"Of course not," Roy denied it. "I'm sure that friendship is a necessary prerequisite for love. I can't imagine falling in love with someone who is not my friend."

"So why not Edward?" Chris' grin was smug.

"Because it isn't love." That wiped that smug grin away. "Love is . . . a deep and demanding commitment. Love is selfish, and resentful. Love is greedy. It wants what it wants, no compromise, no quarter. What Edward and I have is not like that."

The two women exchanged glances.

"You seem to have a somewhat distorted view of love," Riza said slowly.

Chris nodded in agreement. "You're only taking into account the negative aspects. Like everything in life, the negatives must be balanced by the positives."

"Sometimes love is greedy," Riza acknowledged, "but it is also compassionate. I feel a measure of resentment when Miles is engaged in his duties, and I'm sure he feels the same when I'm busy with mine. But we understand that we are doing what is important to us, and refuse to stand in the other's way. Don't and you and Edward feel the same?"

"I . . . yes. I do feel that way. I would never try to prevent him from doing what he feels he must, and I know he will always do whatever he can to help me reach my goals. He has proved it time and again."

"I wish I could agree with you, Riza, but I can't. It's not love. It's not. I just don't feel it."

"What exactly do you expect to feel?" Riza asked, exasperated.

"I don't know," Roy said, leaning forward again to meet his friend's frustrated eyes. "Something . . . electric, a deep pulse of passionate need, an all consuming, burning passion."

"Can you honestly say that you never feel that for him?" Chris cocked her head to the side, knowing that Roy could say nothing of the sort.

"I . . . sometimes feel that way," he admitted. "But most of the time I just feel . . ."

"Calm? Safe? Happy?" Chris grinned when her nephew nodded slowly. "Love is not a single feeling; love is a spectrum of emotion. It isn't rigid, Roy, and everyone experiences it in a different way. Love is flexible. It evolves. And just as being happy doesn't mean feeling giddy all the time, being in love isn't a continuous feeling either. There is an ebb, and a flow. Sometimes it is shining close to the surface. Sometimes it simmers hidden in the depths of your soul. But it is always there."

Was it really that simple? Roy felt his resolve begin to falter, and was surprised to discover that he wanted to lose this argument. He wavered on the edge of indecision. Friendship. Or love. What was this?

"I don't know," he said to himself, out loud.

"Think, kid, think!" the Madam said, making Roy feel all of three years old. "You are comfortable with him more than anyone else. You can't concentrate on your duty right now because his wellbeing occupies all your thoughts. You want to let him go, but can't bear the thought of being without him."

"I . . . am often without him," Roy said, wondering at his desperation. "He loves to roam the world. As his friend, I would never stop him from doing what makes him happy. As a friend, I can easily handle his absence. As long as he always comes back, a guarded part of his soul amended. Roy shook off the thought. "If I was in love, I imagine I would resent his absences even if I chose to endure them for his sake."
"Then imagine him with someone else," Chris said curtly, and a giant frozen lump leaped into Roy's throat, because he could. "That will eventually be your reality. You told him you didn't love him?" Roy nodded, numb. "Then the natural process has already started. He will hurt from that for a while, but the hurt will fade, and he will slowly fall out of love with you. Your friendship will not suffer I think; he seems to hold his friends very dearly. But he will gradually come to spend less time with you, drifting away bit by bit. And then someone else will fall into step beside him, and gain his trust, and then his heart."

Chris and Riza watched the play of emotions on Roy's face, watched as he struggled with his rapidly eroding but still stubborn denial.

"Thinking about him with someone else cuts you straight to the bone," Riza observed quietly. "A friend wouldn't feel that. I'm your friend. Maes was your friend. Does it hurt to see me happy with Miles? Did it cause you pain to see Maes and Gracia together?"

Perspective tilted, and Roy felt his resolve slip, and crack, and shatter. He closed his eyes against the rush of pure realization that engulfed him.

And saw Edward right in front of him, smiling so honestly, eyes sparkling by the fire in an Aerugoan palazzo. Was it really only a year ago that the young man had come back into his life? It seemed like much longer. A lifetime. So much had changed.

Roy did not want to go back to the life he'd had before Edward had crashed down the walls to let in sweet fresh air. He had been alone. Now he wasn't. He didn't want to be alone anymore. He wanted Edward.

And he wanted all of him. Forever.

Roy sampled the idea of having someone to belong with, tasted the notion of being with someone who belonged only to him; someone with whom he dared to share all his deepest thoughts, his guarded hopes, his secret dreams. As well, he would likely be arguing with this particular someone for the rest of his days – and why did the thought make him smile so broadly? This someone would no doubt continually vex him with annoying habits, but Roy had his fair share of quirks with which to be annoying in return. He savored the thought of having someone stomping around in his personal space undaunted. Someone who had never been afraid of him or anyone else, someone who was passionate about everything he did. Someone who refused to stand on the sidelines, who wanted to stand not behind Roy, but beside him. Someone Roy wanted to stand with, yes, for the rest of his life.

Roy remembered his thoughts that night in that quiet alcove in Aerugo so many months ago, knowing with great certainty that Edward would never hold him back. What he hadn't realized was that Ed would bring out the best in him, becoming a force driving Roy forward. Edward had a talent for challenging those around him to change their perspective, usually with a snap of impatient anger. Having Ed in his life these past, challenging months had been like waking up from a long sleep to the brightness of a new day. The thought of falling back into that dark, lonely void suddenly terrified him.

Roy opened his eyes. Chris looked smugly satisfied. Riza looked relieved. The truth must have been shining from his eyes. He could no longer deny it.

Roy loved Edward.

The thought was exhilarating and soothing all at the same time. He was about to embark on a daring adventure into the unknown, but that was fine. His best friend would be by his side. All he had to do
was wait for Edward to come home so he could tell him.

His lover's reaction was sure to be worth the wait.
Interlude: Letter from Alphonse

Dear Roy,

Edward came to visit this week for a few days. He has gone now, to Dublith for a week or two. Our teacher lives there, and she has always been a rock in our turbulent stream. I still rely on her to put things into perspective for me when my life seems out of balance, and I suppose it's the same for Ed. I know he has been drifting aimlessly for a long time now, since well before you discovered the extent of his feeling for you, so you have no need to feel responsible. In fact, since you have made it clear that you don't feel the same, he may now be able to put at least that behind him. For his sake, I hope so. He has so much to give, and he deserves to find someone free to give back.

I'm sure you remember from a previous letter how surprised I was that Edward had decided not to accompany Ling on his return journey to Xing. He surprised me again this visit by telling me that he had changed his mind. He told me that he was going east with the Emperor's retinue after all, and was planning to stay for an extended period. I suppose it's rather easy to guess what brought on this sudden change of heart. I thought that his developing relationship with you might be the reason he had decided to stay in Amestris, but you made it plain that it would not be developing any further, and clearly Edward has accepted that. The last time he disappeared into the east I didn't hear from him for two years. I hope I don't lose touch with him so completely again, because that would be a terrible shame.

I think it's also a shame that you would reject the notion of anything but friendship, albeit with physical benefits, with my brother out of hand, not only for him but for you as well. Years ago when I first met you, it didn't take me long to see past your carefully contrived persona of lazy, shallow narcissism. I came to know you as a remarkably dedicated commander who had made it his personal duty to protect his friends and subordinates. Consequently however, your role as sole protector brought out your innate stubbornness, and that, coupled with your pride and fiery temper, often served to tunnel your vision and short circuit your judgement. You were a solitary man; devoted to the common good for all, yet standing alone. While you and my brother were together, however, I sensed a change in you, a change that suggested you were no longer quite so willing to isolate yourself, and that it was a change you were relieved to welcome.

I know as well that while you were together, my brother was happy. In fact, he was happier than I have ever seen him. He was settled in a way he hadn't been since our mother passed from this world, was at home with you as he had never been with anyone but me and the Rockbells. He has had feelings for you since well before it would have been appropriate for you to return them, and time has done nothing to diminish them. It is unfortunate that you don't feel the same way, but I know he accepts that without resentment, and does not regret a single moment you shared. He will hold those memories close, because that is his strength. I hope that you will remember him with fondness as well.

Whatever comes to pass, please know that I wish you only the best, and remain

Your friend,

Alphonse.
Hawkeye was going to be pissed.

Roy had been keeping his head down under a stylish black fedora for two solid days. His neck hurt. His back hurt. His ass hurt too, thanks to the positively sadistic manufacture of economy class seats. When he got back to Central, the Führer was going to initiate a formal tendering process to find a new supplier for passenger train seating. As far as he was concerned, sitting on narrow, poorly padded benchseats for extended periods of time was a cruel and unusual punishment Roy would not wish on his worst enemy. The people of Amestris deserved better from their acclaimed world-class transportation system.

Four days ago he had received Alphonse’ letter. Three days ago he had discovered that Emperor Ling Yao had left Creta’s capital for Drachma, and would board the Transsibirskaya in a fortnight. If Edward planned to join the Xingese Royal’s retinue, he would have to leave Dublith in the next three days – four the latest - and head directly to Petrograd. No time to return to Central. No time to discover that his lover had finally realized his true feelings. No knowing when he might return. No one was answering the telephone at the Curtis’ home or their shop; messages sent through the local military detachment returned undelivered.

Roy lived with so many regrets; he couldn’t bear to shoulder another. The thought of losing what was quite possibly his last chance at an honest, committed love, of hurting both Edward and himself simply because he couldn’t contact his lover before he left for Xing, caused Roy actual, physical pain, stabbing him straight through the heart.

Two day ago, Roy had lost an argument with himself, and had embarked on the most irrational course of action to which he had ever willfully committed in his entire life.

He had set out for Dublith. Alone.

There was no time to plan an itinerary and assemble an entourage, and he really didn’t want to speak to his heart’s desire with an official audience, so he had chosen to slip away on his own. Considering his options carefully, he had decided to make a break for it during the lunch hour rush when the compound was busy with hunger distracted soldiers. He managed to sneak out of Headquarters through the window of a first floor bathroom, leaving his uniform jacket and his ever-present bodyguards behind. The Führer had then slipped into the nearby enlisted barracks to secure clothing more appropriate for anonymous travel. He had made careful note of the name on the locker he had ransacked. Roy would definitely reimburse Warrant Officer Steyr, M. for the unauthorized use of his light brown, double breasted camelhair coat, brown tweed slacks, and black fedora when he returned.

Thus disguised, getting to Central Station had been as simple as catching a cab. The cabby had hesitantly mentioned how much his fare resembled the Führer and Roy had laughed, confiding that he often got that reaction. Booking a seat on the first train heading south had not been a problem either.

The Führer had boarded the train in Central Station determined to find Edward, confident that he would indeed do so. Now, minutes from his destination, that confidence had been severely eroded. His common sense had kicked in about an hour into the journey, nagging him, asking very incredulously what the hell he was doing, wondering if he had completely lost his mind. Extremely relevant questions indeed.
Roy hadn’t been out in public like this since the time he spent as a lowly circus clown, and even then he hadn’t been alone. He knew his actions were irrational. He was the Führer of Amestris. People were counting on him, yet he was willfully putting himself in danger. And for what?

To follow his heart.

As hard as he had reasoned with himself, it all came down to that. The great Roy Mustang, Flame Alchemist, Führer of Amestris, brought low by an emotion so simple, so basic, that an infant masters it before all others. After years of holding himself aloof, of smiling fondly at the bizarre antic of others hooked through the heart, here he was.

Somewhere out there on another plain of existence, Maes Hughes was laughing his ass off.

Roy had been picking up newspapers at various stops along the way, but there had been no mention of a missing Führer. Fortunately, it appeared that his team was keeping Roy’s disappearance a closely guarded secret, though they were no doubt searching for him. He had been rational enough to leave a note so that they would know he had left of his own accord. ‘Gone fishing. Will be back in a few days.’ At the time, he had thought it terribly amusing.

Hawkeye was likely beyond pissed right now. The guns would be coming out for sure.

But Riza wasn’t the only one nursing a grudge; Roy was nursing one of his own - with Alphonse. Edward’s sweet, gentle sibling had ruthlessly and systematically manipulated the entire situation. Well, not how Roy had botched it of course, but Alphonse had encouraged everything else. He’d known that Edward had feelings for his former commander. Had he known all along that the reverse was true as well? Everyone else appeared to. Surely it would have been blatantly obvious to someone who could read people like an open book - Alphonse Elric, puppetmaster extraordinaire. The thought curled Roy’s lip into a self depreciating grimace.

The train lurched slightly as it curved onto the side spur that would bring it into Dublith Station, and Roy’s stomach did the same. He looked out into the late evening darkness, watching the sparse streetlights gradually increase in number as the train approached the busy little city. He was almost there.

Not for the first time he considered just how foolish this mad dash to find Edward was. Roy had attempted to telephone the Curtis residence many times since setting out on this crazy journey, without success. Why weren’t they answering their phone? What if they weren’t home when he got there? Could he continue to remain anonymous if he had to book into a hotel? Roy had already had a few close calls on this journey. His uncharacteristic wardrobe coupled with two days worth of stubble on his chin was a poor disguise. He wished that he’d given more thought to possible concealing accessories. A large eye patch would perhaps have been useful. At this point the only thing that saved him was the ludicrous notion that the Führer of Amestris might be traveling alone, coach class no less.

And that still left the most important questions of all unanswered: had Edward already left for Drachma? And if he had, what was Roy going to do then?

In the last two days Roy had questioned his sanity many times, and now he did so once again. What the hell had he been thinking? He wasn’t the type to go haring off on a moment’s notice, pinning his hopes on the wind. He was a man of action, yes, but he always had a plan. Yet here was, his only plan contingent on finding Edward at his teacher’s home and no idea what he would do if Edward was not there.

Hawkeye was going to be so pissed that she might actually shoot him this time. He would certainly deserve it.

The train was definitely slowing. Consequently, Roy’s heart rate was ramping up. He reached into the pocket of the coat folded in his lap to reassure himself that he had not lost the small slip of paper on which he had written the address for Curtis Meats. It was still there, nestled safely under his ignition gloves. Edward had once mentioned that the Curtis’ home was at the rear of their butcher shop, and Roy planned to make his way to the residence’s back entrance, hoping darkness would help maintain his anonymity.

Dublith was much warmer than Central at this time of year. Roy slung his borrowed coat over his shoulder and stepped off the train onto the brightly lit station platform, noticing a few double takes cast his way. His disheveled appearance complete with travel rumpled clothing served to throw off suspicion however, and no one approached to remark on his uncanny resemblance to the current Führer of Amestris.

Finding the Curtis’ butcher shop proved more challenging than expected.

Roy had decided to hang back from the crowd of disembarked passengers leaving the train station. Unfortunately, when he stepped out to the street alone, he was disappointed to discover not a single taxi. This late in the evening on a week night, there was little pedestrian traffic as well, and it took walking quite some distance before Roy was able to get directions to the address he indicated. Regrettably, he had been walking in the wrong direction, and had to retrace his steps before he could finally make headway to his destination. As a result, it was very late when he finally found himself on the sidewalk in front of Curtis Meats.

The shop was, of course, closed. Peering into the darkened windows through cupped hands did nothing to remedy the situation.

Making his way down a narrow lane beside the small storefront, Roy easily located the rear entrance to the Curtis home in a common alleyway. He was elated to note that a welcoming light shone above the door.

He knocked and waited, head up and hat clutched in his hands, for the first time in two days hoping to be recognized.

The door opened, and from the look on Izumi Curtis’ face, he clearly was.

The last time Roy had seen Edward’s former teacher had been at Alphonse’ wedding, and even in her joy for the happy couple, she had been thoroughly intimidating. The look of stunned incredulity now pinning Roy was fierce.

“Roy Mustang?” she said in disbelief.

“Yes,” Roy confirmed. “Sorry to stop by unannounced. May I come in?”

Izumi’s hand fisted into Roy’s collar to pull him roughly into the house, peering out into the dark alley before slamming the door.

“Are you crazy?” she snapped, dragging Roy to the large kitchen table and shoving him into a chair. She strode around the small, neat kitchen, snatching curtains closed as she eyed her guest distastefully. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“I tried calling,” Roy feebly defended.
“We’ve been away,” Izumi said, peering down her nose at the Führer. “Spring flooding. I’m often asked to help. It’s what responsible alchemists do. ‘Be thou for the people.’” She frowned. “You still haven’t told me what you’re doing here.”

“I’m looking for Edward,” Roy said. “Is he here?” he asked hopefully.

Izumi frowned. “He was. He’s gone.”

Roy’s shoulders slumped. He was too late. “Did he say where he was going?” he asked anyway, disappointment clear in his voice.

Izumi’s eyes narrowed as she examined the disheartened man in front of her. “Maybe,” she allowed after a moment. “Why should I tell you?”

“Because I need to see him. I have something important to say to him. Something he needs to hear.”

Izumi’s gaze was intense, and Roy resisted the urge to squirm. After a few moments the woman stepped around to pull out a chair opposite Roy. She sat down and leaned an elbow on the table, propping a hand under her chin.

“If you want me to tell you where he went, you’ll have to convince me that it’s a good idea,” she said. “I’m waiting.”

Roy rubbed his hands over his face, stubble rough against his palms. Well really, why not? He didn’t need Izumi to tell him that Edward had left for Drachma. He already knew. So he would satisfy her curiosity, and then beg the use of her phone to let Hawkeye know where he was. He had lost this desperate race, and it was time to face the music. All he could do now was hope that when Edward returned from the East, it wasn’t too late.

“When we met in Central, on the Promised Day, I wasn’t able to see you,” Roy started. “My sight had been taken by Truth.”

Izumi nodded curtly and waited for him to go on.

“At the time, I was too busy to really process what that meant. We were the only thing standing between Amestris and total disaster, fighting to prevent the end of the world. There was no time to think about anything but that.” Roy’s wry smile was wasted on the stone faced woman. “Later, however, recovering in hospital, I had plenty of time to think. I put up a brave and determined front of course, but spent most of the time trying to convince myself that I wasn’t terrified of the dark. I knew I would carry on, even though it was going to be difficult, but I had lost something important, and it was devastating. I feel the same way right now.”

“Edward.” It wasn’t quite a question.

Roy answered regardless. “Yes.”

“As a friend.”

“That too.”

Izumi narrowed dark eyes. “I see. Don’t you think you’re a little old to be chasing after attractive blonds half your age?”

“Maybe,” Roy said, stung, “but I have no choice. I am already caught. I don’t just want him in my life, I need him now.” He smiled wryly. “At the risk of sounding pathetic, I am not complete without
“Are you trying to tell me that you are in love with Edward?” Izumi’s head tilted and she raised a skeptical brow at Roy’s slow nod. “From what I’ve heard, the two of you have been at odds since the day you met. Your relationship has been a long, drawn out competition from day one.”

Roy smiled. “My friendship with Maes Hughes started out much the same way. I was a young freshman at the academy covering my lack of confidence with arrogant bravado. He was a sophisticated upperclassman with no time for stupid cadets. We competed against each other at every opportunity. Then one day we discovered that we both believed in the same thing: justice. Our friendship grew from that realization. I never thought him any less than my equal. Friendship was as far as our relationship could ever go, because while I am not at all particular about what gender attracts me, Maes was always as straight as an arrow. We were still as close as two people could be.”

“And now Edward has become a replacement for your lost friend?” The woman was unconvinced.

“He has become so much more: companion, confidant, lover.” Roy smiled fondly. “As a friend recently phrased it, ‘an incredible gift I never even knew I wanted’.”

“Are you sure the all powerful Führer of Amestris actually wants to settle down with his former subordinate?” Izumi was stern, her demeanor unyielding. “I wonder if you might just be looking for a trophy appropriate to your position; an eye-catching young man, the former Alchemist for the People, yours to show off in public to garner popular support. Edward is not interested in power or privilege. With your differential in status and position, how could you possibly maintain an equitable relationship? It will never work.”

“But it has been working,” Roy said, warming to the argument. “I’ll admit we hit a few rough spots in the process, but have been able to overcome them, together. With regard to the public, we have not hidden our relationship nor have we flaunted it; it is ours, and no one’s business but our own. As for position, I understand now why Edward refused to work for me. He wanted me to accept him not as a subordinate, but on equal terms. Unfortunately, I fear that may never be.” Roy noted the subtle shift of eye that signaled Izumi’s displeasure, and he hurried to continue. “He has always been the better man. Even at twelve years old, so much the better person. He inspires me to be a better person as well, but I have a long way to go before I reach his lofty standard.”

Izumi was unimpressed. “It sounds to me like even you believe you aren’t good enough for him.”

Roy’s smile was rueful. “Perhaps I am not. Nevertheless, he loves me. And I love him.”

The sharp gasp from behind had Roy jerking around to see Edward and Sig Curtis standing in the doorway with armloads of paper bags. The shocked expression on Edward’s face was mirrored on Roy’s own.

Roy turned an accusing glare on Izumi.

“I sent them out to run a few errands when we got home,” the woman said with an unrepentant shrug.

Sig nudged Edward forward and the two returned errand runners put the bags on the table. Sig and Izumi immediately set about unpacking the large assortment of provisions and putting them away, hampered by Edward standing frozen, staring at Roy.

“What,” Edward cleared the rough edge from his voice. “What are you doing here?”
“Looking for you,” Roy responded.

“Where’s Hawkeye?”

“I imagine she’s in Central, making discrete inquiries as to my whereabouts, and planning my untimely demise.”

“You took off on her?” Roy nodded. “She really is going to kill you.”

“Hence the planning. Hawkeye is far too intelligent to murder me outright, though I’m sure under the circumstances, no reasonable court would convict her.”

“Why’d you do it?” Edward asked with a confused frown.

“I had to see you.” Roy glanced at Sig and Izumi, who were still bustling around the small kitchen, busily stowing things away. “I need to tell you something important.”

“That you love me.”

Roy had wondered if Edward’s startled gasp was simply surprise at finding Roy in the Curtis’ kitchen, or if he’d heard what Roy had said to his teacher. “Yes. I’m sorry I didn’t see the truth sooner,” Roy said softly. “I’m sorry I hurt you when I discovered your secret.”

“Hurt me? You didn’t hurt me,” Edward said, “I didn’t tell you how I felt because I knew you weren’t ready to hear it. I decided it would be best to keep it to myself.”

Roy wondered what had possessed him, believing that Edward could be hurt by something like this. He was courage personified. He had lost his leg, and then had turned around and willingly given up his arm to save his brother’s soul, knowing exactly what he would face. How could Roy ever imagine that Edward might be brought down by something as relatively simple as rejection? How could he . . .

“. . . until you realized that you were in love with me, too,” Edward finished.

Roy’s thoughts came to a screeching halt, complete with acrid tire smoke and twin rubber streaks on the pavement of his ego.

“You knew?” he finally managed to choke out.

“Well, yeah. It was pretty obvious. You just needed some time to figure it out.” Edward shrugged.

Roy was torn between either wrapping Edward in his arms or wringing his neck. He refrained from acting on either impulse.

Finished with the task of storing groceries, Izumi briskly steered her former student into the chair next to Roy, then plunked back down in the seat across from him, Sig standing cross armed behind her.

“I don’t understand why you felt it necessary to slip away from your staff and come charging down here by yourself,” she said to Roy. “Why couldn’t you just wait until Edward got back to Central?”

“I didn’t know how long it would be, before I saw him again,” Roy replied. He turned to Edward. “I know you’re planning to take the Transsibirskaya to Xing with his Imperial Highness, and I can live with that. Just please. Keep in touch. And come home to me.”

“You were planning to go back to Xing with Ling Yao’s entourage.” Roy’s suspicions were perking up their perceptive little ears. “Weren’t you?”

“No,” Ed said, frowning. “Who told you that?”

“Alphonse,” Roy gritted. It appeared that Ed’s little brother had taken one last manipulative kick at the can.

“That little brat. That’s why you rushed down here?” Ed asked, frowning darkly. “I told him a month ago that I wasn’t going back to Xing with that squinty eyed moocher.”

“But, but the route, through Drachma on their new rail line, new territory to explore, so much to see, I thought . . .”

Edward snorted. “I made that trip a few years ago. On horseback. Trains are for pussies. How the hell can you explore anything when you’re hurtling past it at 50 miles an hour?” Then his brows knit together in abject perplexity. “Wait a minute. Alphonse . . . lied to you.” Edward was incredulous.

Izumi was staring at Roy as if he had suddenly sprouted a second head. Then she quirked a crooked smile. “You know he can’t hold still.”

“I do,” Roy said solemnly.

“And you’re fine with that.”

“I am. I will never hold him back.”

“Then I guess I’m fine with you.” Izumi leaned back in her chair and glanced up at Sig, who grunted his approval.

Roy smiled. “Then, with Edward’s permission, I’d like to make our relationship official.”

“I don’t want to hold you back either, Roy,” Edward said, cautiously. “We’ve been fine so far, letting people think what they want. Are you sure making us public won’t cause problems?”

“I’m more than sure. I’m also sick and tired of people making asinine assumptions about your worth to me,” Roy stated, adamant. “I don’t plan to call a press conference, but unless you object, I do plan to answer any queries straightforwardly and directly.”

“Hm. That would be new.” Edward saw the question in Roy’s eyes, so he answered it. “I’ve never given a flaming fuck what people think. I’m with you because I want to be with you. So if you want to tell people, go ahead. I don’t care either way.”

Roy’s grin was relieved. “I will, then,” he said. “Even if it’s just to keep your many admirers at bay.”

Edward rolled his eyes. “I’m not the one with the reputation. You, however, get hit on all the time.”

“Not really,” Roy said. “The Führer of Amestris gets hit on all the time. Roy Mustang, on the other hand, has only been hit on once this last year. A proposition he is profoundly thankful that he accepted.”

Edward snorted a low response that sounded suspiciously like ‘dork’, but how could Roy feel stung by such a mild, and possibly accurate insult when Edward followed it with a smile that shone straight through to Roy’s heart?
Edward had not finished voicing his concerns however. “Picture this, Mustang. You, at some swanky, high society soiree. Your politician pals are all there with their gorgeous wives and girlfriends. Now imagine me there with you. I probably wouldn’t look all that great on your arm at some classy political gathering. And that’s even before I open my big fat mouth,” Ed said with a grimace.

“I happen to think you’d look amazing on my arm anywhere, anytime.” Roy told him, thinking about the dashing figure his lover had cut at General Walther’s ball. “And by the way, you owe me a waltz.”

“What the hell? I never promised to dance with you!”

“You would have, if I’d had a chance to ask,” Roy stated confidently.

“Yeah right.”

Roy’s voice dropped to a purr as he leaned closer to the younger man. “Yes. Because I would have explained, my dear Edward, that dancing is the only acceptable physical expression of love that couples may make in public. Consider this: the leader respectfully invites. The follower generously responds. The two join together in harmony, tentatively at first, learning how they might fit comfortably together, then bolder, moving as one with the music to direct them, each attuned to the other’s movements, step and slide, rise and fall, guided by rhythm and tone, reaching their crescendo in warm embrace, then parting, satisfied.”

“You make it sound like dancing is for perverts.” Edward’s grin was decidedly wicked.

“And what if it is?” Roy asked, all innocence. “I believe I can make a solid case for the contention that perversions are the spice of life.”

“I suppose I wouldn’t mind dancing with you,” Edward mused speculatively. “Rumor has it that you’re a great dancer.”

“I am,” Roy said unashamedly, leaning closer still. “My dance card has always been full.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Edward did not pull away. “But now that I know what dancing is all about, that card has got to go. I won’t like it if you’re out dancing with someone else.”

“I’ve been waiting all my life for the perfect partner. I just didn’t realize it. Believe me, Edward. I want to dance only with you, for the rest of my days.” Their faces were barely a hand’s width apart. “What do you say?” Roy asked lowly.

Edward’s response was almost a growl. “I say we go find a dance floor right now.”

The rough scrapping of her chair as she stood reminded the two men that Izumi was still at the table, and how had they managed to forget?

“Yes ma’am,” Roy said, all sincerity. That had been his intention, after all.

“Where are you going?” Edward asked, just out of curiosity.
“Somewhere far enough away that we won’t have to listen to the two of you consummating your union.” Izumi grimaced at the thought. “Yock Island sounds about right. I hope.”

“Like me and Al didn’t have to suffer plenty of sleepless nights listening to you and Sig whenever we stayed over,” Edward muttered, earning a lightning slap upside the head.

It didn’t take long for the Curtises to prepare for departure. Roy sat passively at the table as Sig and Izumi bustled around the house, throwing odds and ends into a pair of backpacks. He was grateful for their generous gesture; booking a hotel would have been problematic. Edward sat still as well, and Roy wondered if it was for the same reason. Roy knew if he got up, he would be drawn helplessly to Edward, and he wouldn’t be able to hold himself back despite the presence of Edward’s intimidating teacher. The Curtises were soon standing on the doorstep, Izumi with an almost wistful expression as she took a final look at her former student, Sig as stoic as ever. Then they were gone, the door swinging shut behind them, and there was nothing to prevent Roy from doing as he pleased. Edward grinned as Roy moved to the door and locked it for good measure.

He was taken by surprise when he turned to find Edward right behind him. The young man caught his older lover by the shirt collar and shoved to pin him to the door before claiming Roy’s willing mouth with a fierce kiss. He broke it all too soon.

“This has got to go,” Edward said, stroking a finger along Roy’s stubble roughened chin. “Your face is going to give mine rug burn.”

“I left in rather a hurry,” Roy said, scraping at the two days growth of facial hair. “No time to pack my toiletries.”

“That explains the furry teeth,” Ed mused. “Well, I guess I’ll have to take matters into my own hands.”

“You’re going to brush my teeth?”

“No. I’m going to give you a shave.”

Roy didn’t get a chance to argue, not that he cared to. Edward disappeared from the kitchen, soon returning with towels, a cake of hard soap, a paddle strop, and a small leather case. Unzipping the case revealed a shaving kit complete with badger brush, whetstone, and an ivory handled straight razor.

Roy plucked the razor out of the kit and flicked it open. “Yours?” he asked.

“Yes.” Edward set a kettle on the stove to boil and put a towel in a shallow basin.

Roy tested the blade with the edge of his thumb. “Is this Damascus steel?”

“Yes.” Edward put the brush into a cup fetched down from a cupboard; then he picked up his whetstone and splashed cold water over it.

“Where did you get it?” Roy asked, envious. Blades of this caliber were rare and valuable.

“Damascus. Have a seat.”

That figured. Roy sat. Edward sat beside him. He took the razor and gently honed it on the stone. Roy watched as his lover whet the blade to a fine edge. By the time Edward was finished with the strop, the kettle had reached a full boil. Edward got up to pour hot water into the brush cup, then into the basin to wet the towel.
“I suppose you know that it used to be the height of refinement to be shaved by someone else,” Roy remarked.

“Really.” Edward gently eased Roy’s head back and then wrapped the warm, wet towel around his face, leaving his nose clear.

“Now learning to shave is considered a milestone on the journey to manhood.” Roy’s voice was slightly muffled by the thick terrycloth.

Roy felt the towel pull away and Edward’s lips press briefly against his own.

“Relax,” the younger man said as the towel settled back in place.

Roy did. Eyes closed under the towel, he listened as Edward move about the kitchen, heard the sound of something being poured into the sink, then the distinctive sound of a badger brush lathering in a cup. The towel was unwound, Roy’s head was tipped back to rest comfortably against Edward’s midriff, and a grinning Ed proceeded to brush thick foam onto Roy’s face.

It was more pleasant than Roy had expected it might be. He had been to many a barber for shaves in the past; all enjoyable but decidedly clinical experiences. This was different. Amber eyes focused on his task, Edward’s touch was sure but tender. The brush moved in gentle circles, working the lather into Roy’s beard, lifting the hairs up away from his face. The soap had a clean, fresh scent reminiscent of nuzzling into that sensitive place just behind Edward’s ear. Yes, this was very pleasant indeed. Soon Roy’s face was covered in a layer of stiff foam, and Edward laid the brush aside to take the razor in hand.

As the blade touched Roy’s skin, Edward spoke.

“Did you really think I would run off to Xing without at least saying goodbye?” he asked quietly.

“I did,” Roy admitted. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking straight. I was afraid that you would leave before I could tell you that I loved you, and that when you came back . . .” He couldn’t finish.

Edward tilted Roy’s head to one side and continued to stroke the razor carefully along Roy’s chin.

“You’re kind of an idiot.” Edward’s smile was fond. “In the first place, I would never take off on you without a word. And in the second place, I didn’t fall in love with you yesterday. I’ve been in deep for a long time. Even if it had turned out that you didn’t feel the same, I don’t think I could just . . . stop.”

“How long?” Roy asked.

“Long. Believe me, you don’t want to know.” Was that a slight blush across Edward’s cheeks?

Roy let it go. “When did you realize that I loved you?” It still rankled that everyone else seemed to have known before Roy himself.

Edward thought it over. “I started to suspect while we were with the circus, but when it all blew up in West I thought I was mistaken. I knew for sure after you cornered me at Gracia’s.”

The razor continued to stroke smoothly over Roy’s skin, carrying soap and hair away. When every inch was uncovered, Edward rewet the towel and damped Roy’s face, then lathered it up again for a second pass.

“When did you finally realize?” Edward asked.
“A few days ago. Hawkeye talked sense into me, with help from my aunt,” Roy told him.

Edward’s grin was crooked. “And this is how you repay her.”

Roy did not respond, but had the good grace to feel guilty. He was well aware that he owed his old friend a heartfelt apology for his irresponsible and downright foolish behavior. Serious groveling would definitely be on the agenda. Still, given what he had believed had hung in the balance, Roy knew he would do it all over again.

It wasn’t long before Edward completed his task. With the still warm towel he wiped away the last of the soap, then patted cold water on Roy’s face to finish the job. Roy ran a hand over his now smooth and perfectly shaven chin as Edward gathered his tools to clean them.

“The bathroom is at the top of the stairs,” Edward said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder to indicate the direction. “Towels are on the top shelf of the linen closet. Sig’s robe should be hanging behind the bathroom door, and my toothbrush is in the cup by the sink.”

Roy saluted Edward’s back and turned to carry out his implicit orders. He followed the darkened hallway out of the kitchen past a small sitting room to a narrow flight of stairs. The bathroom was at the top as promised.

Teeth first. Before too long Roy’s stolen clothing lay discarded on the bathroom floor as he stepped into the shower. The warm water spilled over his shoulders and down his back, slowly loosening knots of nervous tension, and he discovered that he was still on edge. Wedding night jitters? He snorted at the thought and tipped back his head. Closing his eyes, he let the warm cascade soak his hair.

The rattle of curtain rings sliding along the rod alerted Roy that he no longer had the shower to himself. Edward stepped over the edge of the tub to join his lover under the spray. Roy wasted no time, reaching for the band holding Ed’s hair in its high tail and sliding it off, letting wet, heavy gold fall loose around Edward’s shoulders. Running his fingers through to sweep it back, Roy felt his edginess fade, replaced by a flare of desire. Edward stroked his palms over Roy’s shoulders, following their graceful contours, brushing fingers over the hard line of his collarbone, and Roy’s horizon was narrowed to just that, and the heat in an amber gaze locked to his own. No darkness lurked behind that intense regard. Not anymore. There were no secrets left therein to guard.

Edward reached out, tracing a thumb along Roy’s smooth jaw, then cupped a hand to the back of Roy’s head, slowly drawing him in. Ed’s lips over his pulled a growl from deep in Roy’s chest as his hands found their place at Ed’s hips, gripping to pull him closer. He ran his hands up Ed’s slick back to tangle fingers in golden hair, cradling Edward’s head and changing the angle to deepen the kiss. He nudged Ed backward to press him against the tiles, pinning him there, mouth to mouth. The shower sprayed over Roy’s shoulders and back, and the grind of Ed’s erection against his own made him gasp.

Roy wanted him right here, right now, warm water pouring over them both, eddies of steam curling around them. His hands traced along Edward’s flesh, smoothed over muscled arms, shoulders, chest, then lower, pressing over his navel, then lower still.

Edward’s mouth left Roy’s, and with a groan Ed tipped his head back against the tiled wall. Roy took advantage, scraping his teeth up his lover’s throat to nip behind his ear; he couldn’t get enough.

“Edward,” Roy’s voice was low, and coarse. “Touch me.”

Edward smiled a smoky smile, then reached slowly out, and down, past Roy’s hip to the soap dish.
He pulled a washcloth from the shower rod and soaped it up. The warm, sudsy cloth moved across Roy’s chest and shoulders. It wasn’t what Roy had had in mind, but it was soothing after his long trip. A sigh escaped Roy’s control.

“I guess your trip was pretty rough,” Edward said, slowly washing his lover. “You’re obviously not used to traveling coach.”

"I suppose I’ve become rather spoiled,” Roy agreed, feeling his tight and tired muscles gradually uncoil. “I had forgotten just how uncomfortable those seats can be.”

Edward hummed in commiseration as he finished washing Roy’s chest and arms. He shifted their positions to stand behind Roy, the shower spraying Roy’s chest to sluice away the soap. The warm soapy cloth started moving across Roy’s back and shoulders. Roy stood still, head bowed, enjoying the soothing motions as they dipped lower. Edward’s hands curved over Roy’s hips, and the cloth brushed against his cock.

Warm terrycloth wrapped around him, gently massaging Roy’s length. The hands continued their steady motion, one stroking below, one moving up Roy’s chest, tracing scars, kneading muscles, brushing his nipples until he came, pressing back into the chest behind him, letting the strong arms around him support his body. He relaxed there a minute, barely conscious of the hands that continued to wash the rest of him. When the shower had thoroughly rinsed him, Roy turned to return the favor.

Edward stopped him with gentle palm to Roy’s chest and leaned in close enough to brush Roy’s lips with his own. “Wait for me in the bedroom,” he murmured, eyes heavy with desire.

With no little reluctance, Roy stepped out of the shower. Pulling Sig’s robe from the back of the door, he shrugged it on and left the bathroom, feeling like a toddler in the outrageously oversized robe. The master bedroom was easy to find, just across the hall. Like the rest of the Curtis’ home, the bedroom was spotlessly clean and comfortably arranged with well cared for furnishings. The bed drew his eye; a king sized four-poster, no doubt alchemically reinforced to accommodate Sig Curtis’ enormous bulk.

And more than enough to serve as Roy and Edward’s playground for the night.

Roy lay down on the bed without bothering to pull back the covers, folding his hands behind his head, and settled in to wait. He couldn’t have kept the grin off his face if he’d tried, and he wasn’t trying. As expected, he didn’t have much time to kill. Edward came into the bedroom in his robe, damp hair loose and brushed to a shine, skin freshly scrubbed. It seemed a shame Roy’s plans included getting him dirty again. Well, not a shame, to be honest. In fact, Roy would find it immensely satisfying to get them both as messy as humanly possible, and he had all night.

Edward sat down at the edge of the bed, beside Roy’s hip. He tilted a warm smile, expectant eyes on Roy.

And the enormity of the situation finally struck home. This was going to be forever. *Forever.* Was this what he really wanted?

Stupid question.

From a fire-lit alcove in Aerugo to the streets of Central, trekking the mountains of Creta and navigating the political minefield of West, through one deadly crisis after another, spinning wildly from chaos to calm and back again, there had been one constant: Edward by his side. And now, for the first time, Roy felt as if he was finally where he belonged. No doubt. No uncertainty. In fact, Roy
had never been more certain of anything in his life. Somehow, against all odds and despite everything he had never done to deserve it, he had somehow found his way home.

Edward was his. He was Edward’s. And Roy wouldn't have it any other way.

Edward reached out to settle a hand on his nape and Roy instantly shifted closer, smiling in anticipation. Edward leaned in to nudge up under Roy’s chin, offering a teasing nip, and with a pleased purr Roy slung an arm around his lover’s waist to pull him closer still.

Not close enough for Edward. He manoeuvred himself astride his lover’s lap, and Roy shifted back on the mattress to accommodate him. Edward rewarded that consideration by proceeding to devour Roy’s mouth with a kiss so hungry that it left Roy reeling. Edward pressed Roy down onto his back and peeled open his oversized bathrobe, trailing kisses along Roy’s collarbone, pausing to gently suck below an ear. A kiss to the center of Roy’s throat was followed by one dropped against his stomach, and another just below his navel.

"Mm," Edward hummed, flicking out his tongue. "You taste good," Edward purred as Roy loosened his lover's robe and slipped his hand inside. He stroked it up Edward’s spine, his palm settling at Edward’s nape to urge him back into kissing range, and the purr deepened to a growl. Edward lifted his head just enough to give Roy a wolfish look, hungry but controlled, and Roy decided that it was time he took control. Applying more pressure, he pulled Edward in.

Edward’s kisses always left Roy breathless, no less so now, but Roy had no intention allowing himself to be distracted. Ed hummed something content into his mouth, restless hands following the contours of Roy’s chest, and clutched at his shoulders as Roy tilted to smoothly switch their positions.

Edward was perfectly happy to have Roy looming over him. Never breaking the kiss, he rolled his hips against Roy in a way that sent pleasure shivering up his lover’s spine. Roy answered by rocking his hips into Edward with an appreciative rumble.

Edward’s head fell back, and he groaned as he stared up at Roy, who grinned as he swooped back in for another kiss. He spread Edward’s robe wide; then Roy’s mouth was on Edward’s throat, his collarbone, sliding down in a way that made Edward arch under him. Roy tongued the tensed muscles of his stomach, grinned and lightly bit when they jumped and fluttered under his mouth. Grinning as he rode out the ticklish twitching that followed, Roy gave Edward a heavy-eyed look and pushed himself down the rest of the way to lick and suck the skin just above his lover’s sex.

Fisting one hand in the sheets, Edward reached down with the other to brush his fingers through the dark silk of Roy’s hair, watching soberly as Roy got closer to his destination. Roy took his time, nuzzling into the coarse hair at the base of Edward’s cock, enjoying his lover’s scent. Then, glancing up very deliberately, Roy met Edward’s gaze with a roguish smirk and lowered his head, licking slow and wet along Edward’s twitching erection, from tip to base. Edward struggled for control as he tightened his hand in Roy’s hair, holding Roy’s head down, right there. Roy’s tongue dragged against him, slowly tracing a path that made Edward hiss and curse. Again, pressing into the slit this time, and it was more than Edward could take; he thrust upward, and Roy opened his mouth with a purr, swallowing his lover’s erection all the way down.

Roy found the needy sound Edward made in response to his actions highly gratifying. He pushed his head up against Edward’s fisted hand and eased down again, strokes kept shallow by the hard grip on his hair. Ed took the hint and loosened his grip, but left his had where it was, carding his fingers gently now through Roy’s hair, and Roy hummed encouragement around his cock. Edward responded with a barely controlled thrust, and another, and after that he couldn't stop.
"Roy," Edward groaned in warning, but Roy didn't try to hold him back, staying with him until he emptied himself, shuddering from head to toe.

It was far too good for Roy to let him go, swallowing around him, tongue teasing Edward back to hardness before he had a chance to go soft. Roy finally released him, moving up to straddle Ed’s waist, leaning over the edge of the bed to snatch up Sig’s discarded bathrobe, searching the pocket where he had stashed the hand lotion from the Curtis’ bathroom. Edward watched, eyes dark with need, as Roy slicked two fingers. Then he reached under and thrust them in, hard, to be rewarded with the view of golden eyes rolling back. Roy curled his fingers just so and Edward ground down, breath hitching sharply.

"Come on, Roy," Edward all but whined, "I need... need... fuck!"

Roy knew what he needed. One more thrust, and Roy pulled out his fingers and lifted Edward by the hips, shifting him back. Edward hooked his right leg around Roy’s waist and reached to guide Roy’s cock where he wanted it. With a contented groan, Roy sank onto him. It'd been almost two weeks, and Edward was tight and hot around him, almost painful. Roy knew he should take this slow, but Edward was already rocking up to take as much as he could, and Roy was only human.

Leaning in, Roy braced himself on his hands and thrust in, hard and deep. Everything felt different, more intense, stronger, beyond anything he’d ever experienced. It was so, so good, just to feel Edward underneath him, just to see Edward’s face sheened with sweat, writhing wantonly with pleasure, just to know that this was his. Roy pulled back, almost all the way, and drove forward. Edward wound his leg more tightly around his lover, sharp teeth scraping his shoulder encouraging Roy to do it again. And again. And again as Edward’s fingernails dug into Roy's back, thigh flexing over Roy’s hip, both men panting brokenly. And once more, as Edward’s mouth opened wide in a soundless cry as he came, the sight dragging Roy over the edge with him.

It took a while for Roy to finally pull free and roll to the side, but Edward didn’t complain, seeming quite content to have his lover draped over him. They lay side by side, comfortable, at ease.

That was, until the telltale rumble of an empty stomach broke the silence.

Edward levered up on one elbow, grinning, and put his ear against Roy’s midriff. He listened for a few moments, until another quiet growl issued.

“It sounds empty,” Edward pronounced as he sat up. “I think it wants steak.”

“I think you want steak,” Roy corrected.

“You know what I want,” Edward said, meeting Roy’s grin with a small one of his own.

“I do.” Roy leaned in and placed a gentle kiss on his lover’s lips. “I’m yours, for as long as you’ll have me.”

“Well, that takes care of forever, then,” Edward said, resigned. He rolled off the bed and pulled his robe closed around him. Glancing over his shoulder as he headed for the door, he asked, “Rare, medium, or well?”

“Rare. I’m in a bit of a hurry.” Roy’s grin was decidedly lecherous.

Edward’s own smile widened. “Still a pushy bastard,” he observed as he left the room. “You’re never going to change.”

Roy slid out of the bed to follow, considering those words.
Edward was wrong, of course. Roy had changed.

He had always been a solitary soul. Only child. Early orphan. Alchemist. Since Ishbal he had been driven to atone for his crimes and to see that no one was ever forced to commit such atrocities again; his world had been a narrow path limited by that goal. He would never have entertained the notion that he might share that burden; it was his alone. Now, however, a whole new world was coming to life, fresh aspects blooming all around him. Always had he led and others followed. Now he had someone to walk beside him. Always had he sought to protect those under him. Now he had found his match, someone who could stand strong on his own, and lend Roy his strength as well. Roy was no longer a solitary man; he was one half of a perfect whole.

It seemed such a small thing, to be in love, as simple as turning around to face the sunrise, and yet Roy felt like a new man. Edward was a warm wind gusting into Roy’s sails, altering his lonely course. He didn’t know exactly where they were going, but as with any journey, getting there was half the fun, and with Edward by his side Roy knew it certainly wouldn’t be boring.

This was only the beginning.

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As promised, Roy placed a call to Hawkeye’s office in Central first thing the next morning. Well, second thing, truth be told. As expected, the conversation involved profuse apologies as Roy expressed his regret for causing her undue worry. Roy knew Hawkeye was not buying his earnest expression of humble remorse; she was well aware that he did not do humble. It was also difficult in the extreme to convince her that his best option was to stay with the Curtises to await her arrival instead of sequestered at Dublith Headquarters. He finally persuaded her that two Truth-gifted alchemists adept at combat alchemy, a seasoned bare knuckle brawler in peak physical condition, and two accomplished martial artists – one attuned to the Dragon’s Pulse, and in love with his Führer - were perfectly capable of ensuring his safety. The Hawk wasn’t happy about the situation of course, but there was little she could do about it from a distance. She reminded him quite ominously however, that she wouldn’t be distant for long.

Thus, when Hawkeye arrived with a veritable platoon of security personnel a day later, Roy kept careful watch on his old friend, ready to dive for cover should it appear she was inclined to back out her service pistol and teach him a .38 caliber lesson. Fortunately, all she shot him was a cold-eyed glare.

Edward was no help. He clearly found Roy’s dilemma highly amusing, demonstrating as much by interjecting a quiet ‘meow’ followed by an unmistakeable whipcrack sound whenever Riza issued an implicit command which her unusually compliant Führer jumped to follow. Roy wished he could find a chink in the younger man’s armor as effective as attacking his lack of height had been, back when he had lacked it. Alas, as Edward was now nearly as tall as Roy, those jabs no longer had the desired effect. Roy’s only consolation was that he had the rest of his life to discover his lover’s vulnerabilities. And when he did, he would definitely make up for lost time by exploiting them to the fullest.

And much to his disappointment, Roy then learned that Edward would not be returning to Central with him. The younger man had planned a trip to Liore, with a hastily added last minute detour to Resembool for a little chat with his brother. Roy would have liked to be in on that conversation, but Hawkeye made it clear as crystal that it was out of the question.
“The honeymoon is over, Sir,” she stated briskly. “It’s time to go home. You already had an enormous backlog to clear before you embarked on this spur-of-the-moment vacation. Now it is of epic proportions and needs to be addressed immediately, which is why I have brought a number of the most urgent files along. You can see to them on the train.” The woman narrowed her eyes. “I certainly hope this grievous lapse in judgment on your part will not be repeated. I’d hate to be forced to . . . restrict your mobility to any great extent, but I will do what I have to.”

Riza pulled back the slide on her sidearm and chambered a round. Roy got her point.

Curtises did not see their Führer to the railway station. They were happy enough to see the back of the large, military presence that had inconsiderately invaded their home, and not inclined to prolong interactions with them. Edward was another matter. He was there to see his Führer off despite the official fanfare generated by the presence of such an esteemed visitor. When the stationmaster signaled the all aboard and the train whistle announced its imminent departure, Edward leaned in close to Roy’s ear.

“Two weeks, tops,” he promised quietly. “Think you can handle it?”

“Two weeks. Two months. Two years. It makes no difference,” Roy said, just as quietly. “A day without you is an eternity. I can handle anything, as long as I know you’ll be back. I meant it, Edward. For me, this is forever.”

Edward smiled, and Roy’s soul lit up in response. “Forever,” he pledged. “For me too.”

And then Edward kissed him, lightly, lips soft against his. Not goodbye. Never that. This kiss was filled with all that was to come. Roy felt its warmth on his lips for hours after the train was underway. A sweeter kiss there never was.

Until the next.
Dear Roy,

Thank you so much for the lovely gift you sent for Sara's birthday. Wherever did you find the miniature pair of coveralls? In her favorite colour, with her name embroidered on the back no less! She absolutely loves them! Not only does she wear them everywhere, including to bed, but we have a hell of a time getting her to take them off at all. I swear she would wear them in the bathtub if we let her – which we won't despite all the crying and pouting – though Granny suggested that it would certainly solve the problem of laundering them as well. Sara looks completely adorable in them, as you will see when I develop the pictures. I am including the thank you note she wrote, along with the picture she drew of herself wearing them. I'm sure you'll note that her seven-year-old handwriting and drawing skills far surpass Edward's, even now.

Election Day is fast approaching, and I suppose you must be feeling a little stressed. I just thought I'd let you know that as far as I can see, you have nothing to worry about. Everyone out here in the boondocks declares, quite smugly in fact, that you're 'a shoo-in'. We listened to the Presidential Candidates' debate last night on the radio with a few of our neighbours, and everyone agreed that you won it hands down. The other candidates couldn't touch you on the issues, and their attempts to drag you down using your war record backfired when you accepted responsibility for your actions so honestly, and without reservation. With the polls indicating that this will be a landslide victory, I suspect that your opponents may be getting desperate. I do hope you will be careful. We all know from bitter experience how desperate men and women will sometime resort to desperate measures.

That said, the family and I are looking forward to a trip to Central in the near future, to attend your official inauguration as Amestris' first honestly elected Führer in over a century. Since they were too young to remember your last meeting, Maes and Sara are particularly excited to see you, though not because of your lofty position. They want to meet the voice they hear on the radio; the leader who made this country safe for all; the dear, close friend of our family; and most importantly, the man who always remembers their birthdays – their wonderful uncle Roy.

Edward will be home soon, as I'm sure you already know. I got a telephone call from him yesterday when he arrived in South City, going on and on about what he discovered on one of the tropical islands south of Aeurgo in the Narrow Sea. I'll leave it to him to tell you all about it. He told me that he plans to head directly to Central so he can be there for you on Election Day, but I think he needs to be there for himself as well. As much as he enjoys seeing the world, it is quite obvious that extended time away is hard on him these days. Ever since that day you showed up in Dublith to confess your feelings, he seems to find it increasingly difficult to remain at large for long periods. He tries to play it very cool, but it's quite obvious he misses you terribly. From the sound of it, I think he will be staying in Central for a while. He said he needs to organize his research data to prepare a proper abstract, still using Hunter Thompson as his pen name of course. The lengths to which he'll go to stay out of the public eye never cease to amaze me. And the fact that he will put up with public appearances for your sake is quite telling, isn't it?

Sorry to cut this letter relatively short, but we are all heading into town this afternoon, and I want to make sure it gets into the weekly mailbag. A circus has come to Resembool, and I hear they have some truly amazing acts – a fire eater, a trick rider, an Eastern man who sleeps on a bed of nails, and of course a troop of clowns. Maes and Sara are so excited they are almost bouncing off the walls in anticipation. I plan to take plenty of pictures, and will be sure to send a few your way with my next letter.
As for this one, I have only one photograph to share. I found it the other day while looking through a box of old letters. I'm not sure where it came from, but I'm fairly certain that it was taken by Maes Hughes, as he is the only member of your old command absent from this candid shot of daily life at the office. As you can see, everyone else is there, Brother and I included, all of you looking so painfully young and not just a little desperate, myself inscrutable in the armour. I always get a strange feeling when I see pictures of that cold steel body of mine, remembering what it was like to live with only sight and sound, all other sensations absent; a bleak existence. My memories are always coupled with great relief and gratitude that my brother was able to restore me to flesh. At the time I sensed that my transformation had not just been in body. My soul had been transformed with my salvation as well, and I thought it an experience quite outside normal human existence. I have come to realize, however, that every single human soul undergoes change to varying degree, sometimes in a single instant of perfect clarity, sometimes over time, always as an ongoing process natural to conscious, living beings. We are inevitably altered by our experiences and the new perspective they provide; it's part of being human. I am pleased not to be the only one saved from an insulated existence contained in cold, unfeeling armour, as are you I imagine. I am also profoundly grateful that my brother at last has a place in this world where he feels he belongs, in the form of someone with whom he can share his life. Thanks to you, I can finally say that our quest to regain what we lost has successfully ended. The next one, of course, has already begun: the rest of our lives.

Please say hello to Edward for us when he gets home. I do hope that after a few days you will be able to pry yourselves apart long enough for him to come visit us here in Resembool. We miss him, too.

Yours truly, with deep affection,

Alphonse.

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