Transmutated Flowers

by Xoira

Summary

Once upon a time, a child named Icarus fell prey to his arrogance, wanting to reach the sun,
and his life was the price for his hubris. Once upon a time, a girl and her brother fell prey to their arrogance, wanting to bring the dead back, and their bodies were the price for their hubris.

They all tried to play God, and they all paid the consequences.

Notes

My deepest apologies to everyone who gave kudos, suscripted or bookmarked the previous version of this story. But my computer gave me troubles so I had to erase it.
"Alchemy. It is the scientific technique of understanding the structure of matter, decomposing it and then reconstructing it. If performed skillfully, it is even possible to create gold out of lead. However, as it is a science, there are some natural principles in place"

The sound of pencils, brushes and chalk was loud in the quiet room. In the center on the floor, two siblings, one girl and a boy were sitting, drawing something that to the untrained eye, would seem like a merely fancy circle. Nothing further from the truth.

"It is finished. Brother?"

The boy nodded meekly. He had been as eager as his sister to do this, but now he was having a bad feeling. The thunder-laden rain did not help either, it only managed to increase his uneasiness.

Years later, the boy would recall that night and would wonder if the rain had been their first omen of their upcoming misfortune.

Ignorant to his inner doubts, the girl continued "This is perfect. Let's do it"

Only one thing can be created from something else of a certain mass. This is the Principle of Equivalent Exchange

They placed their small hands in the transmutation circles. In one second, their carefully-drawn transmutation circle was letting out a golden light and for a moment it almost seemed like they actually were going to do it, and the next, the golden hues turned red, and everything started went to hell.

"But exist a taboo. Human Transmutation"

It wasn't supposed to go like that. Anything but that.

The girl can't remember what happened in that interval of time... She just can remember blinking and feeling the phantom pain in her right arm, turned into a bloody stump. Funny how she didn't feel the arm being cut off, as if the limb had detached itself.

Normally that would be young girl's main worry, except...

"Brother!!!!!!!!!"

Her brother was nowhere to be seen.

She was heavily injured but at least she was there, bloody stump and all. But her baby brother wasn't. It seemed like he had just disappeared. The only things in the room betraying her brother's presence were his carelessly tossed clothes on the floor.

A ragged breath caught her attention. In her terror she had forgotten about the transmutation. The mist was clouding her vision, but still her moisty eyes managed to look a raised arm in the polluted
"It's Mom! She'd know what to do, She must know!"

The mist slowly dissipated. And the girl's heart shrank at the sight.

It wasn't their Mom.

It wasn't even human.


The thing they had created was a grotesque mass of charred meat, it looked like someone had grabbed a pig and peeled off the skin, leaving the muscles and fibers to view. Its form was undefined, leaving to wonder what intended to resemble. The creature was breathing heavily, sounding like a mix between regular pained sounds and the coughs of a newborn. And the eyes were nothing like her Mom's dark green. Those were a glowing red, downright demonic...

" and no alchemist should ever incur in it"

...Not even the unforgiving storm could stifle the heartbreaking scream that filled the night...
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

The Beginning

Chapter Notes

English is not my first language, so feel free to point out any mistakes

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A difficult birth, no doubt. But finally, after seven hours of constant pushing and pain, Trisha Elric could finally see the little girl cuddled in Pinako's arms.

"It's a girl Trisha"

Trisha smiles. She doesn't care if the baby is a boy or a girl. The baby is perfect regardless. In fact she already decided the name. Edward for a boy. Elizabeth for a girl.

Pinako gently places the baby on her arms, and opens the door. She barely manages to step aside as Hohenheim enters like a possessed man. But instead of being annoyed, Pinako feels quite amused. In all these years she had never witnessed him to lose his cool, until now.

"Look Ho-ho" Pinako feels like rolling her eyes at the cheesy pet name Trisha has for Hohenheim "She is such a pretty girl, isn't she?"

And she truly is. She is still rather red skinned, like most newborns are, and her face is scruched in an ugly frown as she cries her lungs out. But she has a lot of hair for a newborn, blonde apparently, and the way she moves her little body seeking warmth is frankly lovely.

Hohenheim inspects the girl. It's too soon to know how she is going to look, but he'd like if she looked like Trisha. Trisha is as perfect as an imperfect human can get, and he doesn't want his daughter to look like a monster, such as himself.

"Come on, carry her" Hohenheim doesn't think eh ever had held a baby before, specially not one who only has 20 minutes of being alive, at most. But with some help of Pinako, who noticed his awkwardness, he manages to get the girl on his arms

"Soo..." he clears his throat "any ideas for names?" he says looking at the women in the room. Pinako snorts and Trisha laughs a bit.

" Wellllll..." Trisha answers, obviously mocking his awkward voice tone " I like the name Elizabeth"

Elizabeth. It's a pretty name. Relatively common, yet very classy. Worthy of a princess. Because that's what his daughter is to his eyes. A princess. Hohenheim smiles at the thought. A princess born from a slave. Oh, the irony.
"Elizabeth it is" he says while pressing the baby to his chest, and at the action, he feels like he's drowning, a sea of emotions overwhelming the core of his very being. The baby, unaware of the man's emotional breakdown, just pressed her little head closer to his chest, her father's gentle heartbeat lulling her to sleep.

"You sure don't waste time, don't you Hohenheim?" Pinako says with a sassy smirk on her lips, a long smoking pipe between them.

"I have no idea what are you talking about" Hohenhein responds evenly, yet the shadows of a laugh betrays him. Just mere months after Trisha gave birth to Elizabeth, Hohenheim impregnated Trisha again. So now, 9 months after, a little more than a year after Elizabeth's birth, they are once again reunited for the delivery of Trisha's second child. This time Sarah and her son are the ones attending Trisha, not Pinako. Last year her son and his wife were in Briggs for a emergency during Elizabeth's birth.

Hohenheim doesn't look as worried as he did during Elizabeth's birth. Probably because he already know the gist of this stuff, or probably because this delivery hasn't been as difficult as the last one. Or who knows, maybe he was worried because it was Pinako the one attending the birth. She hopes that's not the case because if it's she is gonna throw a wrench to his face. Pinako ain't doctor but she know how to attend a pregnant woman, damn it! She is a popular midwife in Resembool.

Finally, Yuriy and Sarah come out the room, and a crying baby is being held in her daughter-in-law's arms. Hohenheim receives the baby with a faint smile, and Pinako can't help but smile herself. During many years, she had been worried for Hohenheim. She and her late husband seemed like the only friends that the hermit man had. She wasn't too happy at first when she found out that Hohenheim had hooked up with her daughter-in-law's best friend. For fuck's sake, he had met Trisha when she was 7! Yet, Pinako, who had known the man more than anyone except his own wife, could tell how smitten he was with her, and how much he loved his kids. Parenthood and marriage suited him well.

"It's a boy Hohenheim" her son announces with fanfare.

Hohenheim inspected the boy the same way he did with his daughter. His hair seemed a few shades darker than Elizabeth's hair, more like Trisha's. He was crying loudly, but less loudly than his daughter did.

"A name Hohenheim?"

Hohenheim turned to her and breathed "Alphonse." He hadn't thought in a name for the baby, not really, but it doesn't matter, this child is an Alphonse, he just knows it.

He tenderly kissed the boy's head as a promise. The baby cooed, and Hohenheim chuckled, already feeling so much love for his baby boy. His little Alphonse.

Hohenheim stares at the photo in the wall. Everyone but himself was smiling carefree, heck he has two enormous pools of water coming out of his eyes "You have the biggest sad clown face my Dear" Trisha chuckled while fondly pecking his cheek and brushing the tears on it.

God, he doesn't deserve her.

He has studied everything he could about his condition. But so far, no results. He sighs to himself. He is basically looking for a way to kill himself. He had never pegged himself as suicidal.
Death is the most terrifying enemy ever. And the one you can't defeat. Hohenheim should be content with him being the only human who has successfully cheated Death, but in reality, Death is solace for him. He doesn't want to live in world without his wife and his children. He knows that the Afterlife exist, so the only he has to do is die to be reunited with Trisha and his children when their time comes.

Trisha understands him and even helps him to pack his belongings. She tries to make him say goodbye to his kids, but he know that that would only weaken his resolve, and Trisha knows that too. And he'd probably start wailing too, embarrasing himself in front of his wife. Although, since the photo, Trisha proclaimed that his sad clown face produced her a serious case of giggles.

Another one of the many attributes he loves about her. Her humor.

Hohenheim and his wife are in the door, and it should be easy enough, just slip through the door, not before giving an incandescent kiss to his wife, the last one they'd share in a very long time. But the universe is cruel, because just in that moment Elizabeth and Alphonse are standing in front of them, all drowsy and adorable in their fluffy pajamas.

Hohenheim's first instinct is throw his arms around them and Trisha and never let them go. But he closes his eyes, containing the pain from the hole forming in his chest to strengthen himself. He opens them again, with absolutely conviction this time, and sends a fleeting gaze to Trisha, hoping to convey in a single gaze the thousand things he wants to say, and he leaves his home, without looking back.

"Please wait for me"

Chapter End Notes

As I already said before, this fic will be a mix between FMA '03 and Brotherhood, so if you didn't like '03, this fic may not be for you.
She never told anyone, but when she was pregnant with her second child, Trisha had been very worried. Elizabeth was a very fussy girl, always demanding attention. She worried that she would despise the baby for stealing her attention, even though the children's books she read told her that sibling rivalries in early childhood were perfectly normal and even encouraged.

At the end it resulted that her worries were unfounded. Since the moment she and Van first introduced Elizabeth to the new baby, the little girl seemed to be quite besotted with her new brother, and Alphonse seemed to be as fond of his sister as she was of him.

However, that did not mean that everything was happiness between them. Like any other siblings, they also fought, although it was rare. And as they both started going to school, those little childish quarrels were almost gone.

Still, they had their moments.

"Mwahh!" a big cry was heard in the room behind the kitchen, where Van Hohenheim's study was. Trisha ran there and saw Alphonse loudly bawling, and her daughter in front of him with a big frown in her round face.

"Alphonse, baby, what it is?"

"Li hit me!"

Trisha turned to her daughter, who averted her eyes to the nearest wall. "Liz, why did you hit your brother?"

"Because he mentioned him"

"Him?"

"Yes, him" Elizabeth replied with a embittered tone of voice, waving her hand towards the books of alchemy all over the wooden floor

Trisha's stern frown melted into one of worry, not playing fool and pretending she didn't know who her daughter was talking about "Honey, please. You can't stay mad with him forever"
"Yes, I can" Liz thought to herself. She didn't affirm or deny her mother's statement, keeping her eyes in the floor. Trisha exhaled. She so wished to be able to tell them why exactly their father is not in home with them, but she can't. She made a promise to Van, and she intends to fulfill it.

"Well, enough of that, It's almost lunch. I made stew. But Liz, apologize to you brother first"

The girl mumbled a semi-coherent apology, but it was enough to satisfy her brother. Trisha sighs, because not matter how obedient her daughter is, changing her opinion about her father is a battle that she never is going to win.

Elizabeth "Liz" Elric knows two things about herself: One, she is the shortest girl in the class (much to her disgrace) and two, she is smart. Her teacher and mother always tell her so.

That being said, she doesn't appreciate being taken for a fool. So she definitely doesn't appreciate how her mother keeps insisting in that her father is going to come back. She doesn't know that if her mother is just trying to reassure her or trying to fool herself, and she doesn't care.

More importantly, Liz thinks that her mother seems unaware of the damage that her words do to her brother. Alphonse was too young when Hohenheim left, so he still has an idealized version of him in his mind, and her mother's constant insistence in her father's "inevitable" return only makes Alphonse all gleeful and hopeful.

But Liz knows the truth. Her father will never return. Her memory keeps intact the details of the last time she saw her father. The disappointment, the coldness of those golden eyes, so alike to her own, as he flew outside the house without sparing them a second look, all that is printed in her mind as if it were yesterday.

So yes, she tends to lose her temper a bit every time Alphonse brings up their father. Specially if he asks when he is gonna come back, even if she knows that he really doesn't know better.

Granny Pinako always says that time heals everything and helps to forget. Liz hopes this to be the case, because that means Alphonse is going to grow up and realize the sorry excuse of a father they have, and Mom is going to forget about him too, maybe with the romantic help of someone else. Elizabeth definitely isn't eager for her mom falling in love again and remarrying, but if that's what her mom needs to finally take her mind off that bastard, so be it.

Life gets in the way, though.

Granny Pinako's son, a man called Yuriy came back to town. He temporarily lived in the North Area; but now he moved back to Resembool, this time with her wife Sara, who is also from Resembool, and his daughter Winry, a year older than Elizabeth*. Even with a spectacularly bad second encounter (not first encounter, because the first time they met they were babies, Granny has photos to prove it) with Winry innocently mocking Liz's height, and a lovestruck Alphonse declaring his undying love for the older girl, the three of them become tight as thieves. They were "The Unholy Trinity" as their school teacher called them. They became even closer after Winry acquired Den, basically their warhorse and guardian for all their aventures.

That year Ishval Civil War breaks out. Liz recalls the nightly ushered conversations between her mom and the Rockbells; about how many casualties that war was causing, about how many civil alchemists were being arrested due to creating transmuted gold for the ones in need, since the conflict in Ishval was draining a lot of the State's resources, or about how they were afraid that the war may extend towards the rest of the country, while she, Winry and Alphonse were outside; playing tag or
trying to catch frogs.

Even with her greater-than-most-kids-her-age perception, Liz wasn't fully able to grasp what War fully entails. At least until Winry's parents left to help the wounded in the front lines. Winry cried in protest, and sometimes Liz hugged her, telling her that their parents were going to come back sooner than she thought, she just had to be patient...

Three months later, two men in uniform came to the Rockbells' house. Winry's parents had been killed in action.

That was around the same time Alphonse and Liz had already been inbound in Alchemy, courtesy of Hohenheim's books. Initially it was a way to cheer out Mom. Liz can't forget the first thing they transmuted something for her: a flower. It was ugly and didn't look like a real flower, but it was good enough. Knowledge of Alchemy was defiled by the memory of Hohenheim, but their Mom's smile was worth it.

Now they had extended that to Winry too. They couldn't even being count the amount of times they transmuted dolls for Winry. And not just dolls, but stuffed animals, darts, stacking rings, and even dress-up clothes, all in a vain effort to made her smile. Probably they should do the same for Pinako. Granny is strong, but one night she spent the night at her home, Liz could swear that she heard sobs coming from the old lady's room.

*Time heals everything...and helps to forget.*

Next year things appeared to have gained some semblance of normalcy. Winry was still sad about her parents, but at least she didn't cry every minute she was alone. But unknown to them, Tragedy was ready to strike again.

One day that Al and Liz came back from school, they found their Mom, inconcious in the floor. After an agonizing second of terror, she finally found out her voice.

"Alphonse, call Pinako now!"

As being pressed by a switch, Al ran to the Rockbell, while Liz stayed, trying to wake up her mother. She was so pale.

That same night a medic came to their house, and after a throughly examination, he had a private conversation with Pinako,

After he left, Pinako got close to them and told them the truth, clearly and bluntly; but her voice still carried a lot of gentleness.

"Your mother is very, very sick. The doctor says that she...she may not gonna make it..."

"Nooo! You lying!!!" and she flunged to Pinako, ready to...what? Hit her? Scream more at her? It doesn't matter, because Pinako merely grabbed her raised wrists and pulled her in a forced hug, and all false anger that Liz may had feeling was replaced by a deep sadness and hot tears of sorrow. Alphonse just stayed seated in shock. Numb in his grief.

Their mother died a week later, not before speaking to them for the last time. Her last wish? A transmuted flower.

Her mother died in Spring, when the crops in the latitudes of Resembool are ready for harvest. The
owners of cattle take advantage of the season to kill pigs, salt their meats or make oil out of them. The green fields full of bright yellow corn are the first thing that tourists see.

Liz can't help but think about how unfair life can be. How can Mother Nature be so lively and happy, when the woman who brought her to this world was being buried in the cold ground?

Alphonse didn't cry when his mom died. But in the funeral, he finally seemed to break out his numbness and realized that his mother was dead, and isn't never going to come back. He throws himself to the coffin in pure despair savoring for the last time the image of his beloved mother's face, with an expression that's just too peaceful and still to belong to a living human being.

Liz gently pushed him off the coffin. Her eyes are dry, her tears were already been spent in the last few days, watching helplessly how her mother's life was being stolen in front of her very own eyes, and now she only feels empty. To distract herself, she gently smoothes her brother's hair, and traces the texture of his dark coat. She took the liberty to iron his suit, like her mother would do if she were alive, but judging by the wrinkles still present on it, she didn't do a very good job.

The funeral was a quiet affair. Trisha was a reserved woman. And many of the friends and acquaintances of her youth alienated themselves from her after she hooked up with the local hermit.

Elizabeth growled. Seems like Hohenheim just can't leave her mother in peace, not even in Death.

Alphonse got the right to thrown the first handful of dirt, but Elizabeth got the last.

According to the doctor who attented Trisha, who also attended her funeral, her mother was always very prone to sickness, even as a child. A fever produced by the heat was enough to defeat her weak immune system.

Elizabeth can't see how this is any relevant now.

Her mom's fragile health was what had prevented her from taking the reins of the farm that she inherited from her father. So she chose to lease her land to the local farmers, leaving her with a steady income that allowed her to be a full-time housewife devoted to her family. Her mom's land was placed in a financial trust with Pinako as the trustee, and the rest of their inheritance was enough for them to pay food, bills, shelter and a good education, so at least that's one worry less.

Alchemy is her coping mechanism, but she takes times off her alchemy books and reads her mom's cooking books instead. Al is a growing boy, he can't be sustained with only boiled eggs and coffee. Luckily for them they already had that one covered up, since they get their three meals from Granny, at least till Liz manages to place something on the stove and not burning it in the process.

Granny offers them to move to her house, but Liz refuses. Why? She doesn't know. Perhaps it's because she refuses to leave the past behind. Even if the walls of her home make her feel claustrophobic, even if the ghost of her mother lives inside her mind. Even if her baby brother is the only thing that keeps her going nowadays.

Liz always has been a bit of a masochist.

Days become Weeks, and the Weeks become Months. Spring becomes Autumn, and Autumn becomes Winter.

The siblings are huddled in front on their mother's tomb. Since their mother's death all those months ago, they had taken to religious bring a bouquet of flowers every month anniversary of her demise.
"Sister, I'm hungry. And I'm cold. Let's go home"

Elizabeth nods absently. Granny and Winry must be already waiting for them.

"When our dad..."

"Do not call him our dad! He is not!" For a moment Liz forgets that she is in front of her mom's grave so she should be more respectful, caught in her anger as she is. But how can't she not be angry, after she sent pleading letters to their father to all Amestris; and he didn't even bother to came for her funeral.

Al falls silent, and Liz doesn't even gets guilty for it, with her mouth trying to form the words that her mind wants to spill.

"We can bring her back. There is... a way..." she finally croaks.

It's an idea she has been breeding all this time. It's dangerous. It's difficult. It's forbidden...

...And it's also the only chance they have to regain what they lost.

Al needs a mother, a real one, not a sister who is desperately trying to fill the glaring void that now exists in their home.

Al wipes his tears to look at her more clearly. He knows what she is talking about. They had been reading the same alchemy books after all. Of course he knows exactly what she is talking about.

"We...can't do that. The books say that no alchemist should ever try that"

"Which is why it would be our secret" she rebuttes.

Al stares at her for a long time, but eventually his hesitation shapes into one of hopeful security "I'm with you Sister. Let's do it"

The unyielding conviction Al has on her words fuels her own conviction too. Both siblings leave the cemetery in much higher spirits than before, already creating castles in the air, their high pitched voices filling the otherwise silent road to home.

"Yes, we are going to bring her back like this" she says snapping her fingers, and giving a small smile to her brother she adds "Who knows, if we're lucky, maybe we could bring back Aunt Sarah and Uncle Yuriy too!"

They have nothing lose after all, so what can go wrong?

Chapter End Notes

* I made Winry a year older than Fem Ed/Liz. I'd be changing some of the characters' canon ages for story purposes, or just because I feel like it :)
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

The Beginning of the End

Chapter Notes

English is not my first language, so feel free to point out any mistakes.

My, these chapters are so boring. But whatever. It's not like much can be changed in the very first chapters. Hope you enjoy anyway.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"We will bring her back"

Yeah. Easier said than done.

With all their genius, with all the knowledge obtained through the books of her father, there is only so much books alone can teach you.

They need practical experience.

They need a teacher. Great.

Alchemists are known to be a very secluded group, not adept at passing their knowledge as well as taking students. She is confident that they can get the knowledge they need on their own, but that would take longer than necessary and she does not want to waste any more time.

Getting into an Alchemy faculty in some university of Amestris is not a viable option either. Given the tight leash the State keeps on Alchemists, there is just a handful of universities in Amestris that teach Alchemy, all of them under Military jurisdiction; and all their students always end up being drifted into military or government institutions. Besides any knowledge remotely related to human transmutation is banned from their curriculum, since human transmutation is prohibited by Fuhrer's mandate.

So the fact that Izumi Curtis crossed their lives seemed dictated by Fate. Or maybe it was just dumb luck.

This was not what Izumi Curtis was expecting for. What she was expecting was a beautiful vacation with her beloved husband in the South of Amestris, admiring the prairies and enjoying the good wine of the region. Not two small, bright-eyed children hanging off on her leg as if their lives depended on it.

"Sorry, I don't take students" she dryly answers. And really, what are doing two like kids like them, looking for an alchemy teacher? They should be playing with toys!
"What about your parents? Are they OK with this?" and when Izumi sees how the kids’ faces crumples, she knows she will not like the answer.

"Mrs Curtis, these kids are orphans" an older lady in the other side of the rooms anwers, and the kids seem to not take offense at the interruption, so she must be a family member or a close acquantaince.

Orphans. Another reason why she shouldn't take them under her tutelage. But they're looking at her with so much hope, that she can't find in herself to simply say "no".

"One month" she finally says with a resigned sigh. Damn those puppy dog-eyed kids.

"One month for what?" the older brother asks, his voice full of cautious excitement.

"I will take you two, for one month, if that's all right with your...caretaker" she risks a glance to the tiny lady on the room, who slowly nods "In that month, I will be testing you. At the end of the month, depending of your performance, I will be deciding if you have what it takes to be my students"

The smiles on those little faces got so wide, that Izumi couldn't help a pang of familiar longing inside her.

"One is all. All is one"

A knife and six cryptic words is all Izumi Curtis left before dumping them in a goddam island in the middle of the nowhere. One month of surviving here by themselves without alchemy, and if they can't do it, no more training. Obviously, because dead people can't get training.

Elizabeth should had thought twice before asking for training of someone who was certainly a crazy person.

In top of that, there is a another castaway in the island. Normally that would be a very good news, except that the other castaway is some deranged dude with a creepy ass mask. Who stalks them everytime he can.

Survive in the island is hard. The incredible hot days, the incredible cold nights. But Elizabeth is not gonna give up. Neither is Alphonse. So eventually they learn to not be dominated by their situation, but to gain control of it.

One night of full moon, after a long day of painful hunger and a terrifying encounter with the crazy masked dude, the answers to Izumi's riddle came to Liz's head like copious raindrops. Not even her deshydratation could impede her chappy lips to communicate her discovery to her brother, laying next to her in their makeshift bed of palm leaves.

" If you die, your body desintegrates. Your body is composed by oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, calcium, phosphorus etc. Life ends in death, your life ends in death, but the end of your life doesn't mean the end of life in general. The elements composing the human body help plants grow, and those plants feed other animals, and those animals are the food for other animals or other humans"

It's so painfully simple, really. Alphonse smiles at that, already getting his sister's train of thought.

"We are only a speck of matter in the vast universe. But our lifes, minuscule as they may be, are necessary for life of the ones that stay. Everything in the universe requires an opposite, a counterweight. Black and White. Ying and Yang. Good or Bad. Death and Life. Death is necessary
"And that... that's Alchemy"

Liz and Alphonse can hardly contain their glee. All these awful days hadn't been for naught. Finally they understand what was what Izumi Curtis wanted to teach them.

"It has been a month kids, do you have the answer to One is all. All is one?"

"The world is All!" Alphonse firmly says

"And I am One!" Liz loudly proclaims

The silence stretches more than Liz feels comfortable and she panics a little inside. Her reasoning is incorrect? Is she in the wrong? If that's the case Izumi isn't going to train them, shit...

She wasn't expecting a hearty laugh out of Izumi, and tries to steel herself in the face of rejection...

"It took you a month just to get that?" Izumi finally says. Her tone is quite jeering, but the siblings can sense something like awe hidden under it.

Liz tries to glare at her. But the effect is lost as Izumi's glare is far more impressive than hers. And she is only putting half of her effort on it anyway. The other half is busy trying to keep herself in place instead of jumping around and wildly pumping her fist in victory.

Izumi is such a drill sergeant of a teacher, that she could place real drill sergeants to shame.

Every day they have to wake up at 5:00 AM, do their chores and eat their breakfast. Teacher leaves the butcher shop in hands of her husband and Mason, and at 7:00 AM they have to be in the backyard ready for training.

Genius as they are, they have no problem absorbing everything Teacher teaches them as sponges. Well, it's not like they are novices. Every law, every formula, every scientific procedure is carefully ingrained into them with scholastic, monotone repetitions and experiments made in the small, improvised and precarious lab in the Curtis' basement.

Most of the time however, those lessons are ingrained in the middle of a sparring session. According to Izumi Curtis, both mind and body need to be in shape. Most of those sparring sessions consist in Izumi casually tossing them like small bags of potatoes. But they eventually get better, and Teacher starts to take their sparring sessions more seriously, even if compared to her in terms of fighting prowess, they are still nothing.

Liz has noticed how Teacher can do alchemy without circles. But everytime she asks how, Teacher always gets this glazed look on her eyes, and either changes the subject, or throws a punch to shut her up. It used to made her angrier, but now she understands that alchemists needs to keep their secrets. Besides some day she is gonna find out how to do that by herself. She is sure of it.

Alongside alchemy and martial arts, she has also gotten quite good in empirical nursing, since she had to learn how to patch herself and her brother after Teacher's sparring sessions. But she can take it. All those bruises, punches, and sleepless nights due to the pain in her bones, are totally worth it. 

"Just wait a bit more Mom. Just wait a bit more"
Their little house in the hills looked the same way it did when they left. The gardens are well trimmed, so Granny surely comes to take care of it, but inside, the house in pretty void, with large plastics and blankets covering the furniture. Back when Mom was alive, the house smelled like soup, garlic and lavender. Now it just smells like dust.

Hohenheim's study is, ironically, the only place in the house that smells like it has been lived on, probably due to all the time they spent there previously to their stay in Dublit.

"Water 35L"
"Carbon 20Kg"
"Ammonium 4L"
"Phosphorus 800g"
"Salt 250g"
"Nitrogen 100g"
"Fluorine 7.5g"
"Iron 5g"
"Silicone 3g"
"And another 15 more elements"

Liz closed the book containing her father's notes "Well, these are the elements composing an adult human body. And this is the equation and array necessary for its construction. We are going to join this body with her soul"

"Sister are you sure of this?"

True to be told, deep down Liz wasn't totally sure of her plan, but she wasn't one to back down, not when they were so close to their goal "Of course I am. Stop whining!"

"It's not whining! Nobody has ever done it before! Alchemy is the science of equivalent exchange. Elements may seem simple, but what about the soul? What thing can we give that can be possibly be worth her soul?"

"What is really the soul?"

"Extend your hand!" Liz snapped while cutting both their hands with the bronze penknife in Hohenheim's desk "We are compatible, so a bit of our blood, and most importantly, her blood should be enough" Liz dropped a small pint of precious red liquid in the array drawn in the floor. It was such a luck that Mom was very prone to sickness, thanks to that Resembool's only hospital had pints of her blood.

"Well everything is done. Let's do it Al" Liz says, echoing the words Al said to her the day of Mom's funeral.

"This is it"
Chapter End Notes

Good, Bad, Average? Leave kudos or/and comments!
Prologue Part II

Chapter Summary

Hope in the ashes of Failure.

Chapter Notes

English is not my first language, so feel free to point out any mistakes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Alphonse woke up suddenly, his eyes clouded by the mist in the room. He attempted to run a hand through his hair, only to feel his hard hand. He observed his hand numbly, and now his hand was metal. Both hands really. And when he saw below to check on himself, he saw that it was his whole body. At what time did he put on that armor? But he did not feel like he was wearing an armor, he felt like ...

A small sound caught his attention, and he turned to see one of the worst images he had seen in his short life. His sister, lying on the floor, bathed in blood, and without a leg and without an arm. Horror filled his soul.

He quickly ran to his side. It was like going back in time to the moment they found Mom lying on the floor, immobile. No, actually this was worse. At least Mom looked normal, not covered in her own blood and slashed.

In his limited knowledge in medicine, Alphonse remembered that it is good to put pressure on the wounds so that the victims don’t bleed, so he made some improvised bandages with her same clothes. He tried to feel her pulse with his fingers, only to find ... nothing. Or rather, not feel anything. What the hell?

The only sign that his sister was still alive was the fact that he could see how her chest was feebly rising due to her breathing. He awkwardly put her in his arms, his mind attached to the fact that his sister had always been small, but now she looked so fragile, and without two of her limbs she almost did not weigh anything.

Alphonse ran as fast as he could, trying to ignore the fact that he did not feel the adrenaline that anyone should feel in a situation like that. His heart did not gallop at full speed, nor did his forehead was dripping sweat. The only part of him who felt the terror of his situation was his mind, not his body. What had happened to him?

"First Liz. Then you" he reminded himself.

After what seemed like an infinite journey, Alphonse finally arrived at the Rockebell house, knocking as fast and as fast as he could without winnow the door.

"Who the hell is knocking at this hour?" Granny.
When the door opened, both grandmother and granddaughter had their jaws in the ground. In other times, it would've been comical. But in that moment, Alphonse merely kneeled to be close to their height, uncovering the bloody body in his arms, barely protected from the rain with a frayed blanket. He flinched at their gasps.

"Granny help her. Please, help her"

Liz opened her eyes to the penetrating smell of antiseptics, and she was in the bed in Rockbells'. Both Pinako and Winry were there, Winry had tear-smugged face, and Pinako was looking at her with a grim expression.

She turned her head to the side, and Oh yeah, there it was. Or actually, there it wasn't. Her right arm, that's it.

"I have to..."

And she stopped. Something was wrong.

"Liz..." Pinako started.

With her left hand she took the blanket covering her. How? She remebered her arm being lost in the transmutation, but not her leg.

Her left leg was gone too. How? She remembered her arm being lost in the transmutation, but not her leg, after those tentacles things grabbed Alphonse...

Oh shit. Alphonse. How could she had forgotten about her brother? What kind of person does that?

"Alphonse! Where is he Granny? Where is him?" she asked, attempting to stand up, and obviously, failing.

"He..."

"Here Sister" a voice, Alphonse's voice, said from a dark corner in the room.

She looked to where the voice came from. But she didn't saw her brother. She only saw a hulking 7-ft height armor. But then, a flashback.

"Take everything from me. My heart, my body, my leg, just give him back. He is my only brother. The only thing that keep me standing!"

So that's how she lost her leg. Hardly matters, not when his baby brother is like that. She may be a cripple now, but that's nothing compared to what her baby brother lost.

Oh God, What did she do?

"Liz..." Granny started, although herself did not know what she wanted to say..

But Elizabeth wasn't having none of it anyway. She shook her head, and Granny and Winry tacitly agreed in leave her alone. Yet Alphonse stayed, and she didn't mind. She absorbed in his new form, trying to conciliate her warm little brother; with this giant and unexpressive armor containing his soul.
Alphonse seemed to sense her need of silence, so he mutely raised his metal hand and brushed her sweaty bangs out her face. Even in cold metal, the gesture was so meaningful.

So she wept, admitting defeat to the tears threatening to spill since her awakening. And with Alphonse now stuck in a metal armor, unable to feel, unable to smile, unable to cry, she cried for the both of them.

Roy Mustang is a city boy through and through. Born and raised in Central. He usually is too busy to travel, but when he has time to indulge himself to a trip, he prefers the chaotic rhythm and bubbling nightlife of the other big cities in Amestris and Galilee*, instead of the gentle grasslands and quiet life of the rural towns.

"And this is another reason why I prefer the city" he vexedly thinks while unwittingly jumping on his seat in the cart pulled by oxens he is in currently. In Central there are trains, taxis and cars. In the small towns like the one he is now, almost all means of transport are donkeys and horses. Roy is a good horseman, he just likes the cosiness of modern cars more.

"So, what does an important army boy from the big city here?" the horse rider amicably asks.

"I am a State Alchemist" Roy answers, flashing his silver pocketwatch, wondering if the man is going to throw him out the cart. State Alchemists don't have the best reputation with the common folks, and given some of the things Roy himself has done, he can't exactly blame them. But the man doesn't do that, so Roy continues "so I am looking for the rumour of two talented alchemists living here. We are a little shorthanded, so we need all the manpower we can get"

The man nods "And who are those alchemists you speaking about?"

Roy tries to get more comfy on his seat " Names are Elizabeth Elric and Alphonse Elric"

For the first time in the road, the man's smile falters "But they are just kids. Way too young to enlist"

"Kids?" Roy whips out the file deposited in his briefcase " Here it says their names are Elizabeth Elric: 31 years, and Alphonse Elric: 30 years"

The man shakes his head "Nope man. Look, I am old, so my memory may be a bit fuzzy, but I'm sure those two are just kids yet. Not even eighteen"

It takes everything in Roy to not childishly tear his file in little bits, frustrated as he is. There are sweat stains under Roy's underarms thanks to this trip to this backwater town, with its ardent summer sun and humid climate. His backside hurts of sitting so many hours in this very uncomfortable cart.

This is nothing compared to Ishval though.

He breathes, trying to think rationally. The horse rider say they are not eighteen yet. Maybe they are about 16 or 17? Impressive ages to be already accomplished alchemists. With a few more years of practice, they could become State Alchemists. Not exactly what he was hoping for, but at least that way this trip wouldn't be for nothing.

"Can you tell me where these kids live? My contact only said they lived in Resembool not" "Contact my foot. That stupid secretary is getting fired"

"Are you going to recruit then?" the man cautiously asks, a note of disapproval painting his voice.
Roy shakes his head "No I am not. They are way too young and although talented, they probably still are not good enough to became State Alchemists. But maybe I can persuade them to take a career as State Alchemists in the Army when they are of age"

The man relaxes "Well, they don't live in Resembool the town. More like in the hills. Had been a while since I had been there, but I can take you there"

"Thank you"

Eventually they reach the Elrics residence: a small cottage in the hills, decorated with a small garden of immensely bright flowers in the front and what it looks like a vegetable garden in the back. The only sounds around are the sheeps' bleating and the cows' mooing.

A perfect place to raise children, Hughes would say.

Roy knocks the door, but no one answers it. He waits for over an hour and half, and when he turns to knock again, he notices a shiny key in the bushes of a potted plant next to the cedar door.

"People actually does that? It's like the oldest trick in the book, and very insecure too" Oh well, it comes in handy, besides Resembool seems like the kind of place where a petty burglary would be the big news for the next three months.

He slowly opens the door "Hello? Someone here?"

The house looks deserted. Not even like people has moved elsewhere because nothing is covered or stored and some thing seems out of place, as if the people living here left in a hurry and didn't bother to came back.

Apprehension takes over Roy. His fingers instinctively form in a snap motion, until he remembers he is not wearing his ignition gloves. He then gropes the revolver securely hosted in his holster, inmediately regretting not taking Hawkeye with him.

His steps resound loudly within the empty house, and he chides himself. He is being ridiculous. It's obvious that the Elrics are not here, so why is he still here?

Deep down however, he knows why he is still there. His gut instint tells him something in the house is wrong. Very wrong.

He finally reaches a room behind the kitchen. He opens it... and nearly gages at the putrid stench inside. Thankfully he hasn't had breakfast yet, so the only thing coming out his stomach is dry spit.

Roy's dark eyes pose in the array drawn in the floor, one of the most complicated arrays he has ever seen. What these kids did? This seems like horrible alchemy. He sees and grabs a small note peeking from an old book placed in the desk.

"Water, Salt, Nitrogen, Silicone..." and then it clicks.

Those are the ingredients for a human transmutation .

Apparrently the Elrics kids are friends with a woman named Pinako Rockbell, who owns an Automail business close to the town, and lives with her little granddaughter.

Rockbell... that surname sounds awfully familiar...
"Welcome to Rockbell Automail, what can I do for you...Hey!"

He pushes the door and steps inside, passing through the old lady, not caring about how rude he is being. He needs to crack down some heads.

But the angry impulse dies when he sees who Elizabeth Elric is.

He was wrong too. This is not the 17 to 18-year-old he thought, but a girl who can't be a day older than ten.

His angry instinct dies immediately, replaced by a deep dash of empathy, but since he stills has a duty to comply, he places himself in front of the wheelchair-bounded girl, gently cupping her chin.*

"I went to your house. I saw the floor. What exactly was that?" his voice is gentile, but firm enough to make his point.

The girl only lets out a shudder of breath, her eyes lowering again even with Roy's hand in her chin. Roy resist the urge to rub his hand on her cheek to comfort her.

A big hand poses itself in Roy's shoulder, and he turns only to see... a huge armor. A talking armor.

"We are sorry Sir. We are so, so sorry" the armor says. Its voice breaking like it was about to cry, and it's then when Roy takes heed of the preteen voice coming from the huge armor.

"You are...?"

Dear, what these kids have done?

The cup of coffee in the table is just a courtesy. No one in the room is up for any sort of socializing.

"I heard a rumor about two talented alchemist living here in Resembool. What I didn't hear was the fact the fact of said alchemist being just mere children. But, children or not, if they are capable to make a human transmutation, even if it's an imperfect one, then they're more than capable to become State Alchemists"

A dry sound of a pipe against a table cuts him him off "When they came here, covered in blood, I went to their home. It wasn't human, was it was there. It was alchemy what created that thing! And you want to subject these kids to that again?"

Roy wouldn't consider himself a good person. He is demanding, self centered, and a war criminal, a mass murderer who deserved to be executed, but instead of it was lauded as a "hero". Selfish as he is, he sees this movement as a chance to promote his own career.

But a larger part is doing for honest-to-god good will. These kids could get all the money they'd want for research. It would mean the opportunity to regain their bodies. Roy doesn't know how probably that goal is, but those children need all the help they could get. Roy rises up and walks toward the door, dangling a piece of paper over the old lady's hands

"This is my number to my office in Central. If you reconsider my offer, call me"

Roy sits back in the cart. In the road he didn't stop thinking about those kids. Specially the girl.

The old lady and her granddaughter could only see the shell of a broken girl, the deep sadness exhaling from her mangled form.
Roy saw all that too. He saw despair, loneliness and hopelessness habitating inside her.

But he explored further. He also saw potential, determination and liveliness...

And those golden eyes were pure *Fire.*

Chapter End Notes

Good, Bad, Average? Leave kudos or/and comments!

*I love Roy as much as anyone else, but hot damn, how I hated his introduction in BH. I mean, he assaulted a minor, one heavily traumatized and in a wheelchair to boot.

*Galilee is the name of a region of Israel, and the largest moons of Jupiter (Europa, Io, Callisto and Ganymede) are called the Galillean moons. In other words, Gallilee is the equivalent to Europe in this ‘verse.

I tend to write stories in past simple tense, since it is the easier way. But I had recently gotten daring, trying my hand in combining both present and past tense, specially in this story. I'm wondering if that's makes too confusing/badly written for you readers, or it's fine the way it is?
Six months have passed since the morning when Lt Colonel Roy Mustang came to the Rockbells' house and invited to take part of the State Alchemist Program.

Some things have changed in all those months. For example, Alphonse is still stuck in the old armor from Hohenheim's study, but Liz can now stand up by herself, helped by the automails she has now, stitched to her body during the most painful experience Liz has ever felt.

And today, they are standing in the train station in Resembool, waiting for the next train headed to Central. In Al's hand are three pieces of papers: two are their tickets, and the other is the crumpled bit of a sheet with Lt Colonel Mustang's number on it.

Pinako Rockbell's face seems to have aged a lot more in all those months too "Liz, Al, promise you will be taking care of yourselves. And try to not get into much trouble okay?"

The two preteens nod mutely, asking themselves that they could tell their pseudo grandmother that it might sound even remotely comforting to someone like her.

Winry just spreads her arms to them, and she manages to cram both of them in a sole hug, no small feat considering how Al now is twice as broad as both her and Winry together "Please, don't forget to come and visit!"

Neither Granny and Winry approved of their decision to go and join the military, but Winry even more so. Liz tries not to feel too guilty about it, because she knows Winry thinks they'll walking out their lives to never return, like her parents before them. But they have to do this, so Liz just quietly hopes that someday Winry can forgive them.

The train comes and she and Al hop in, waving their hands to the only friends they have now. Soon Winry and Granny's smiling faces are replaced by the vastness of the green fields of Resembool.

Al keeps his eyes in the window, thinking about everything that has happened and taken them to this point.

Liz stares at her automail, blindingly shiny when the sun illuminates it. Machines are not Liz's forte but even she can appreciate the beauty in Winry's design. However adapt her body to no one but two automail limbs wasn't easy work. Her body feels much heavier than ever, when she always had
been skinny and wispy. She had always favored speed and agility over strenght, but automails gives her an advantage in the latter. Not that it matters against an opponent such as Alphonse in an armor. Granny warned her about speeding up too much her rehabilitation, but she didn't listen and so she ended up vomiting blood a few times. But she kept standing up, just to prove she could, keeping her sparring sessions with Alphonse ‘till the point of inconsciousness.

She had to re learn how to write too, this time with her left hand. Automail permits an ample degree of mobility, reason why Liz can perfectly fight with her automail arm, but writing is a labor way too finicky to be properly done with automail. Thanks to Winry’s efforts, she can write with her automail hand, but it's so difficult than became ambidextrous seemed like the easiest option.

The sibling’s musings are interrupted by a curious girl giving them looks, and after that by two big men in guns taking the whole train hostage. So much for their promise to Granny about not getting in trouble.

Elizabeth's memories about the morning when she met Roy Mustang are a bit hazy, just like the ones from the night when she performed human transmutation. Maybe it has something to do with the fact she was near catatonic that time, and only came back to life when Mustang mentioned the possibility of recovering their bodies.

In that in mind, in some way, this is a first meeting of sorts. And man, what a first meeting it is.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!"

Watching someone getting roasted like that should be traumatizing and not near as beautiful as it is, but Mustang's flames seems to have that effect. They are consuming the other man entirely, but Mustang didn't kill him. Liz can only imagine just how precise his control over his alchemy is to do something like that. Awesome.

"You can call me Roy Mustang or just Lieutenant Colonel. Or you can call me " The Flame Alchemist". Either way, remember the pain"

Elizabeth bites her lower lip, bethinking that the time when they called to Mustang's office, two days prior to their trip; he told them exactly what train to take, at what day and at what hour. Mustang placed them there in purpose. So she confronts him about it. And he laughs.

"Oh come on Elizabeth, you think I control everything?"

His tone is condescending, nothing like the firm yet caring tone he used with her when he asked her what she had done, back in Resembool.

"Besides you should feel grateful for the good news. Major General Hakuro knows about your heroic deeds and will be extending you two a special permission to do the State Alchemist exam. How's that?

Mustang doesn't know her. He didn't know how she was going to react to a situation like the one that just happened. What if she and Al had runned for their lives instead of trying to save everyone? Mustang didn't only lie to her about they being able to take the exam but he also made a gamble. He gambled with her life, her brother's life, and the lives of all the passengers in the train.

He leaves the plataform with his escort, leaving Elizabeth alone save for her brother and the feeling of having been used.
Riza Hawkeye is the epitome of professionalism. Roy Mustang is the charmer, the manipulative gallant who can play power games with the military and dope someone with just a well placed word and a suave smirk. But in the day-to-day work, it's Riza the one who does honor to her infamous war name and overlooks the work of her unit with a Hawk's Eye.

She is also a very patient woman, which comes in handy when dealing with the stubborn, pigheaded men she works with in a daily basis.

That's why she salutes Roy with the utmost respect, stands firm to his side and thoroughly reads the reports about Hakuro's attempted kidnapping. That's why she waits until the commotion is over, to come to her colleague's house. When they are not longer Lt Colonel Mustang and First Lieutenant Hawkeye, but Roy and Riza, Berthold Hawkeye's daughter and his pupil, and slaps her friend right in the face in the moment the man opens the door.

"Lieutenant what the hell?!" Roy exclaims while holding his jaw. Riza's hand is throbbing.

"Just be thankful I didn't use my pistol" That's a bluff. Riza wouldn't never actually use a gun against Roy unless he ever steps out the line, but Roy doesn't know that.

"Can you tell why the hell did you do that?"

"You have to ask? The girl Colonel! The eleven-year-old girl that you shipped onto the train with Hakuro, the one you want to turn into a State Alchemist!"

"Oh that" Roy seems to recover his suave demeanor, the one he uses to charm women and sweet talk the brass. It annoys Riza. "Well, you yourself read the report over the incident with Bard. Her performance was astounding. I'd not offered her a spot as a State Alchemist if I thought she couldn't handle it"

"It doesn't matter how capable she is! It matters that she is a girl who still should be in elementary school! This is insanity!"

Roy looks weirded out at her unusually angry tone "I never took you for the passionate type Lieutenant. Besides they coming to make the State alchemist exam right now wasn't my idea, it was theirs. I just made it possible"

That latter part is true at least. Roy did not expect to see the Elrics in a long, long time, at least until they were eighteen, or sixteen at the very least, specially since automail surgery requires a long time of recovery (Roy already sensed that Elizabeth was going to take automail even before he saw her again, Pinako Rockbell was an automail mechanic after all) Instead of it he received a call from the Elrics six months later, asking if his offer was still open.

As a Lieutenant Colonel, he just didn't have enough power to change established laws and allow two little kids to take the State Alchemist exam, so a bit of craftiness was necessary. Resembool is in the heart of the Southeast of Amestris. And Hakuro had already programmed a family vacation to East City, despite the fact he had received threats from The Blue Squad, the main anti-military extremist group from the East. It was just a matter of placing the Elrics in the right place, in the right time.

Risky? Sure it was, but nothing ventured, nothing gained.

Riza seems unimpressed, and would’ve slapped him again, if it wasn't for the telephone's ringing by a call from Hughes' office; announcing the 5th victim of the Chopper, the serial murderer of women.

Shou Tucker. The Life-Sewing Alchemist. 47 years. Lives with his wife Cindy and their 4-year-old
daughter Nina. Created the first chimera capable of talk the human language two years ago, which earned him his State Alchemist license.

Roy would've wanted to place the children under the tutorship of a female Alchemist, but the only two female alchemists in the State Alchemist program: Clarice Stevenson "The Snow Alchemist" and Lara Stanfield "The Butterfly Alchemist", are stationed in the North and West respectively. And Tucker is a family man with a big estate, so he could perfectly host the Elrics there.

They seem marveled by Tucker's creation of a talking chimera, the same way Roy was, two years ago, when Tucker presented the creature in front of the Council. How did he managed to do that indeed? Combining different kinds of animals? Monkeys maybe?

Elizabeth seems at ease enough. She probably already got over the whole thing in the train with Hakuro, if her inquisitive questions and face free of frowns are any indicative.

At least until a huge polar dog comes out the bushes and decides to teach the small girl exactly who is the boss.

The man wanders through the city, his blood-colored eyes hidden by dark sunglasses. Not even the criminals in the alleways dare to bother him, because even with his eyes covered; his mere presence inspires fear and wariness.

If he notices that, he doesn't say anything. His only preoccupation is know the why of his arm, why his brother branded him with such sacrilegous symbols?

The house is bigger in the inside than how it looks in the outside, and is very clean and tidy too. At Tucker's right side is a tall woman with short blonde hair and blue eyes, and at his left is a small girl with auburn hair; combed in two lanky braids, and blue eyes like her mother's. She is adorable and takes an immediate liking to Alphonse.

Tucker presents his family to them and then says "Cindy dear, can you make something for our guests?"

The woman only lets out a noncommittal grunt and looks at them blankly, before huffing and leaving to the kitchen. It doesn't escape Liz that the only word the woman has uttered in their presence is a dry hello.

The air in the room is thick with awkwardness. Tucker gives a tight smile to his daughter "Nina dear, why don't you go out to the garden for a bit? Alexander must feel lonely"

The girl seems unhappy but complies anyways.

Tucker turns his attention back to them "Sorry. I'm having some troubles in my marriage. But she has never taken out with our guests before...She is usually better than this..."

Too much information. Way more than they need.

Elizabeth wonders if Mustang even bothered to tell the Tuckers about their upcoming arrival. She wouldn't put past that man to just drop them unannounced in someone's house and expect them to be hosted immediately. Tucker told them his wife didn't usually behave like that, so perhaps that's the reason why Cindy was so rude in front of them?
With a practiced smile, Mustang manages to smoothly deviate the conversation to a more general, business-related conversation. "Mr Tucker, surely you will be having the opportunity to talk to those kids about their unusual qualities. Accept them as they are"

Tuckers looks at them appraisingly "You are a little too young to be taking the exam. I'm glad to be of help"

"And we are thankful for that sir! And if it's not too much trouble, we'll like to see the talking chimera you created!" Liz jumps on, hoping she doesn't sound too eager.

Tucker pulls a strange face before answering "I'm sorry, you're a bit late. The chimera died shortly after its creation" And like that, the air in the room becomes awkward again.

"But first you need to study to approve the exam. It's monstrous! You will be needing a lot more than a night of study to pass. And after we pass for my library, we are going to see if Cindy cooked something. I heard you kids made a long travel to come here. You must be famished"

Chapter End Notes

Good, Bad, Average? Leave kudos or/and comments!

I hope Riza wasn't too OOC in this chapter.

My favorite chapter so far, probably because it finally changes something (guess what) and because is mostly based in FMA 03 cap 5, one of my fav episodes of the first anime.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

A butcher attacks

Chapter Notes

English is not my first language, so feel free to point out any mistakes.

I suck so bad writing dialogues. Please don't hit me *cowers under table* And this chapter in general sucks, being so damn canon and everything, but whatever.

Also this chapter is dedicated to...me. Because it's my birthday, and my one-year anniversary of joining AO3 too. Yey!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Living with the Tuckers is mildly uncomfortable.

Shou Tucker is nice and soft-spoken, and although he doesn't put his hands in whatever Liz and Al are doing, he makes a point of always asking how their studies are doing, giving them advice and the like.

And even so, Liz can't still shake a feeling of uneasiness around the man. Maybe it's the way the light reflects on his glasses, not allowing him give any expression on his face. Maybe it's the constant growling of the chimeras, giving the house a slightly tetrical aspect during the nights, that's the time when the growling is louder and creepier.

Or maybe it's just her instinctive distrust of paternal figures speaking.

And Cindy Tucker is not better, really. She is polite with them, never failing to offer them food and refreshments when she and Al had gotten a little too carried away with the alchemy books in the library, but she is distant, always doing small talk, but without any sort of warmness, just cold civility.

Nina was the exception. She is so precious, and Liz wasn't one to gain fondness for anybody so fast, but Nina managed to get past that with just a few days and a few bright smiles. It takes every bit of Liz's cool facade to not squeal in delight the first time Nina calls her "Little Big Sister"

It's 1:00 AM and Liz is still up. Al is outside, taking a walk around the neighborhood. They got into an epic fight over that, with Liz insisting he was way too young to be walking outside so late with no supervision. At the end Al won the fight, remarking that although he was just ten, he was also a ten years old boy trapped in seven feet of intimidating armor; so it's not like he was in danger or anything. Besides he couldn't sleep and didn't need sleep anyway.

But Liz can sleep and needs sleep. But she is too engrossed in her book to go to bed just yet. So
engrossed, that she almost misses the soft knocks to her bedroom door.

When she opens the door; she sees Nina with her hair loose and a blanket with elephants on it draped around her tiny shoulders.

"Little Big Sister"

"Nina, what are you doing so late?"

"The bedside lamp broke, and my room is all dark... I wanted to go with Mommy, but she's already asleep and I don't want to wake her up, and Daddy is studying, so..."

Ah. Nina is one of the most mature four-years-old that Liz has ever meet, but she is still, well, a four-years-old girl. It makes sense she is afraid to sleep in the dark.

"Ok, come in"

Liz wanted to get Nina to sleep in her bed while she stayed awake with her book. But Nina wasn't accepting excuses. And soon Liz finds herself huddled next to Nina, her flesh arm serving as a comfy pillow for the other girl.

"Thanks for letting me sleep with you, Little Big Sister"

"Mom gets angry, because Dad is always studying. And Dad tries to tell her that he needs to study, to give us...things" Nina struggles with the words, obviously not quite grasping the concept of material goods. "And Mom tells him he was that way before... And she tells him that she doesn't care if he doesn't spend time with her, but that he needs to spend time with me"

Previously Liz had only seen Nina as this little girl who she had secretly adopted in her heart as her pseudo-sister. But now she sees a kindred spirit too. She sees herself in Nina, small and naive. Always having her mother's unconditional love; yet always opening the study door, always trying to get a peek of her father; the golden man of intelligent eyes.

"Little Big Sister, you think they fight because of me? Maybe Dad gets bored because Mom and I are not alchemists. I could be, but..."

Liz's heart clenches at Nina's words. How many times did her younger self ask herself the exact same thing? How many times did she think that maybe Hohenheim left because she was too loose lipped, too loud, too annoying? And it hurts Liz to admit it, but those doubts came back, with greater force, short after their failed attempt in human transmutation. Did Hohenheim see something in her, something bad, something rotten, did he see his daughter for the sinner she was?

She knows better now. Even if Hohenheim had magically knew about her breaking the taboo long before she even committed it, it didn't excuse him for abandoning Mom and Al; two angels compared to an amiss being such as her.

So she hugs Nina tightly "Don't ever think that Nina. Your parents adore you. Perhaps they have problems, but it has nothing to do with you, trust me"

Nina may be caught between her father's indifference and her mother's bitterness, but she still has her Little Big Sister Elizabeth and her Big Big Brother Alphonse.

The next morning Liz wakes up with a handful of red hair inside her mouth. And it's not morning, more like almost midday. She takes a quick shower, goes downstairs, and after raiding the kitchen of
every available fruit, she comes across with Cindy Tucker, who is mindlessly wiping the room table.

"Hello"

"Hi"

This is seriously awkward, Liz thinks while shifting her weight from one foot to another. One would think she should already got used to the awkwardness after more than a month sharing the same space, but no.

"Thanks"

"Uh, Why?"

"Nina gets lonely sometimes, she only has Alexander, she doesn't have any friend her age. I'm busy sometimes and Shou, well... What I'm trying to say is that thanks to you and your brother Nina feels so happy nowadays"

"And I'm sorry for treating you and your brother so coldly before. I guess I was wary towards you, with you two being alchemists, and in top of that so young, too young to be taking the State Alchemist exam"

Oh. Cindy Tucker must have a bit of a beef towards Alchemists, with Shou Tucker being one, and to be fair, Alchemists had a bit of reputation of being eccentrics...and with the problems Cindy has in her marriage, it's understandable. And their youth is obviously a big turn off for most people.

"Uh, Apologize accepted, I guess" she lamely finishes.

Cindy smiles, amused at her awkwardness, and Liz thinks that, somehow, she got a victory of sorts.

Winter in Central probably is prettier than in Resembool. In Resembool the verdant landscape is replaced by white fields, with the leaves of the trees dying under the weight of the shiny ice crystals. In Central, the grey tones of the city are enhanced by the snow, giving the appearance of one huge fleck of platinum brightness.

When Liz wakes up, she can't see the street through the cloudy window of her room. She goes to the garden, in pajamas and Al, and sees Nina and Al playing, her brother laugh reverbating in the hollow armor.

"Big Sister, look!" Nina exclaims holding a clumsily-made snowman of the size of her hand. Al on the other hand, has made a big snowman, completed with a carrot for a nose and two chocolate eggs for eyes.

Liz smiles at the childish glee Nina expresses. And it had been such a long time since she played in the snow...

Oh what the hell. Her studies can wait an hour or two.

Major Hughes walks through the cold streets of Central city, and after a couple of laps, he finally reaches the place he wants to come. And he even gets a glimpse to the scene of two small girls and a boy (although the boy doesn't really look like a boy) playing in the snow.

Elizabeth Elric. The first time Maes saw her she was clad in an all-black set of tight leather pants and
fitting long-sleeved shirt, white gloves, and thick soled boots. But now, with a loose yellow night gown that looks a little-too-big for her, her long morning hair sticking everywhere, and a carefree laugh, she doesn't look her age. No, she looks even younger, and Maes has to fight the sudden rush of anger that surges in him.

He hasn't spoken to Roy since that day. To cheer him up about it, Gracia resorts to teases him; telling him that he is just in a minor lover spat with his boyfriend Roy, and that is going to pass soon. Hughes appreciates his lovely wife's efforts but frankly they do nothing to appease his foul mood. The only reason why he hadn't gone to Roy and give him a piece of his mind it's because Riza already did it. Maes smiles at that. If he is displeased about this, he doesn't want to imagine how she feels.

After what happened in Ishval, Maes thinks that Roy should know better. Maes saw Roy at his lowest, emotionally crippled after his experiences in Ishval; and Roy was an adult (a very young adult, but still) and now he wants to recruit this child. This inexperienced child.

Although that's not really true. Honestly Maes isn't sure that he'd had come out alive from the whole disaster with Bard, if it wasn't for her. It shames him to admit it. Not matter how skilled in alchemy and martial arts she and her brother were, he was the adult, he should've been able to protect them.

After some noosing from a close source, he found out that the kids' birthday dates were February 1, 1899 and May 28, 1900. Alphonse's birthday had already passed, but Liz hadn't.

And really; what kind of man would Maes be if he doesn't throw a birthday party to a pair of kids who saved his life?

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Liz's taste buds dance with joy at the flavor of the strawberry pie Gracia cooked. Vegan, Gracia says, no milk at all. And Liz's only regret is that Al cannot eat it. Maes and Gracia give her a flowery dress that Liz is never going to be caught wearing, but she appreciates the feeling.

Everything is perfect.

Until Gracia's baby decides that it doesn't want to miss the party, and everything goes to hell.

While Liz is busy running through the Hughes's apartment like a hen without head, Alphonse, God bless his soul, has the sense to pick the phone and dial Granny. Granny is firm and precise: Keep the lady warm with blankets. Don't let her lie down in the floor, it only makes the birth harder. Don't cut the umbilical cord immediately.

Nina's soft voice, Alphonse gentle hands and Liz's ministrations did the job.

When Hughes finally comes back with a doctor at his heels, Elizabeth already has a baby in her arms.

Lying in bed, Liz thinks about how much of a miracle babies are. Alchemists know the composition of a human body until its eyelashes, but they aren't able to recreate life. And even if they could with human transmutation" they could never create a body fully functional with all their cells in perfect equilibrium and with a soul in it.

The bay was named Elysia. Hughes wanted to name the baby Elizabeth, in her honor. But Liz refused. After all, she had been at lost if it wasn't for Granny’s intructions, and it's not like she was the only one helping. Nina and Alphonse helped too. So they settled for Elysia, a name similar to
hers.

Al moves in the adjacent bed that's too small for him "Sister?"

"Yes Al?"

"I have a present for you"

"Really?"

"Yes" Al pull out a small box from his pillow. The box is covered in shiny red gift wrap, clumsily wrapped by Al's unrefined fingers.

Liz impatiently rips out the gift wrapping, uncovering a tiny black box, and inside the box, it's a golden pendant. The pendant has the form of the simplest array Liz can remember, the one who they used the first time they practiced alchemy and at the center, the crowned flamel, the symbol Izumi bestowed upon them.

"It's very pretty Al"

"Yes, I made it myself. I bought some gold in the jewelry a couple's block from here, and the details of the array and the flamel are made with a bit of sterling silver Winry gave to me"

Liz pulls out the elastic band from her hair, freeing it from the tight braid she always wears. She transmutes it in a velvet choker, joining the pendant with it and promptly putting it on her.

"It looks good in you sister"

Liz blushes a little. She has never wear jewelry before. "Yeah, yeah, whatever. You know, you didn't have to make it sound as if it was Major Hughes the one who remembered my birthday"

If Al had a human face, he probably would be blushing. Or gapping. Or both. "How did you know?"

"Oh come on Al, even if Major Hughes uncovered my birthday date, how in the world could Gracia know that I don't like milk?"

Al moves his helmet, embarrassed at his slip "Yeah"

"Besides it would be more likely to be raining in hell, than you forgetting my birthday"

"I knew that if I didn't do something you wouldn't move a finger to celebrate your own birthday"

Liz frowns at that "We are busy with the State Exam. You know that Al"

"I know Sister. But you deserve a break every once in a while you know. You looked so happy today. You don't have to deprive yourself of anything just because you feel like you owe me"

An exam of 400 questions in 4 hours. Liz's left hand feels like a noodle. She wouldn't be surprised if after this, she'd need **two** automail arms.

The exam started at 8:00 A.M, but Liz and Al left the house two hours earlier, to take breakfast and repass the contents. When they finished at midday, they were surprised to see Cindy, Nina and Alexander waiting outside.
"Little big sister! Big Big Brother! How did it go?"

"I didn't finish it, and I think my hand is about to come off"

Al shakes his helmet at her dramatism "I think I approved it, but now it comes the interview"

Cindy shakes her head "I'm sure you approved it. How about we go to a deli a few blocks from here? It's famous around State Alchemists. And the owner already knows me"

"Really?"

"Mmm, the food is good and inexpensive, so State Alchemists, cheap bums as they are, happen to be fond of it"

A middle aged man with a thick mustache happily salutes a woman in her middle thirties, with dark brown hair, thin frame and dark almond-shaped eyes.

"Hey Mary! How's our prettiest girl around?"

"Oh stop."

"No need to be so embarrassed! It's quite an accomplishment! By the way, wanna hear some gossip?"

"Just because I'm a woman doesn't mean I like gossiping" the woman rolls her eyes but her tone implies she is just joking.

"Well, word on the street says that a 12-years-old is taking the Exam"

"No way! You kidding?"

"Nope, in fact the kid in question it's the tiny girl eating with Cindy and her daughter" The man says gesturing with his mouth. Mary glances towards said table, her eyes falling on a blonde girl with dark clothes. She appears quite young, and her mouth is covered in red by the ketchup from the spaghetti she is eating with gusto.

"Look at her, she is just a child"

Externally Mary agrees. Privately, "Mary" thinks how much she'd like to keep one of those fiery yellow eyes as a souvenir.

Liz's mind is still caught in the freaky tripod chair of the interview. It really detected people with the gift of alchemy?

Surprisingly how words seems to fall seamlessly when she thinks of her brother. It could have been seen as a cheap attempt to gain empathy, but it wasn't that. She was absolutely honest when she spoke about her promise to her only family left. She is still a bit bitter about him no being able to take the State Alchemist Exam. But Mustang had a point. In case they decide to do a physical examination, how could they explain Al's empty armor?

"Hello Elizabeth" Cindy says, standing in front of the gates of Military HQ and effectively interrupting her thoughts.

"Hi Mrs Tucker. Em, why are you here?" she says, and cringes at her own tactless speech.
Cindy doesn't appear offended "I decided to come and pick you up. Maybe we could get a early brunch, if you want of course"

"And Al?" Liz, asks, peeking behind Cindy as if one huge armor could be hiding on her back.

"He is in home with Nina, who was taking a nap. Shou is not at home" she says with a hint of bitterness, but she quickly masks it.

So Liz and Cindy decide to have a nice dinner, just the two of them, and Liz realizes that it's the first time she has never been alone with Cindy with the exception of that time when they make their pseudo-truce.

Amazingly enough, it's not as awkward as she thought it will be. Cindy is no alchemist, but she's married to one, so she is pretty versed on it. Enough to keep a decent conversation about it. And Cindy tells a lot of stories about Nina, about the time she fall to the pond trying to feed the ducks, about the time when she got up a a can and tried to fly etc. Her eyes shine with fondness and Liz listens with pleasure. Despite everything, Cindy truly loves her daughter.

And the food is incredible. That helps too.

When Liz leaves to wash her hands in the restroom, wrinkling her nose to fight the smell, she hears rough breaths coming from the alley back of the diner. She opens the door connecting the alley with the dinner and gets close to a young woman curled in a ball, her green dress dirty and her brown hair mussed.

"Miss, are you all right?"

The woman erratically shakes her head. Liz places her hand on her hair, gently petting it, and turns her head to call for some help.

Big Mistake. When she turns her head to look at the woman again, the only she sees is a quick flash, followed by a blunt pain exploding in her nape, making her see stars.

Liz falls to her hand and knees, and tries to stand up, without results.

"Elizabeth? Where are you? Your food is getting cold" a voice at the start of the alley says.

Oh shit. It's Cindy. She must looking out for her. She tries to warn her, but the pain is too great to ignore.

"How annoying. Oh well, I suppose two is better than one..."

Liz's eyes widen in horror. She makes another pathetic attempt to rise up and scream, but her mind finally gives up, and the last thing she does is helplessly see the woman trick Cindy too, smashing her bat against her head; and her ears itch from the rowdy sound of her attacker's laugh.

It's not every day people see a huge walking armor running through the corridors of HQ, even if said armor was one of the privileged few allowed to do the State Alchemist Exam and approved it.

So funny looks chase Al through the whole military compodium. It almost looks like he is running from them. He practically kicks the door of one of the upper offices, ignoring the cries of the people inside (and the cock of a gun directed towards him) and marches to the main office in the back, with the door having a sign that reads "Lt Colonel Mustang"
Roy Mustang looks at him with one raised brow, and quickly interwines his gloved fingers
"Alphonse. This is a surprise. May I help in something? Now, if it's about the Exam, I'm sorry but-"

"Sir, Sister is missing" Al says without preambles.

"Elizabeth? What do you mean she's missing?"

Al exasperately throws his arms on the air. "That, that she is missing. She left early in the morning
for the interview" Roy nods, he was there after all " And then Mrs Tucker left to invite her to lunch,
and neither of them has come back"

"And how long was this?"

"Sister left aroung 8:00 and Miss Tucker left around 10:00. It had been more than seven hours!"

Roy shakes his head; standing up and ordering his staff to gather Hughes and his Intelligence team
for a possible kidnapping case, his baritone voice getting a commanding quality on it. And Al stays
there, doing nothing, but with worry coming to him in floods.

"Sister, where are you?"

Chapter End Notes

Good, Bad, Average? Leave kudos or/and comments!

Upon rewatching both FMA 03 and Brotherhood I noticed something about both series.
Neither of them are that big in romance. With the exception of Ed/Winry, in Broho all
the romantic couples (Ling/Lan Fan, Al/Mei, Roy/Riza) are only left implied. And in 03
the romance was so scarce that it was practically nonexistent. This is why I erased the
tags "Eventual Romance" and "Eventual Relationships" because even if
Elizabeth/Fem!Ed will get explicit romantic feelings for one or two characters (Roy
or/and Ling most likely) the focus of this fic will be her and her journey with Al, the
same way it was in Broho and even moreso in '03.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

The Rescue

Chapter Notes

According to the department of Intelligence and Investigation, the MO of Cindy and Liz's possible kidnapping fitted with the Chopper's. Except by the fact that, to their knowledge, he had never kidnapped someone as young as Elizabeth Elric, since his youngest known victim had been a 18-year-old woman.

Honestly, Roy had only called Hughes at the beginning because how worried Alphonse sounded and looked (well, as worried as a armor could look) Elizabeth Elric was strong, he had been able to tell since the first time he saw her and the incident in the train with Bard just confirmed it. He had a hard time believing that some random low life could get the drop on her.

But the Chopper wasn't some common thug. When he saw the files Hughes provided for him and his staff (Gentlemen, be sure to empty your stomach before you take a look at these, Hughes had said) chills walked through his back. Those bodies were unrecognizable. The Chopper was smart and professional. All the bodies had been slashed with a near-surgical precision, and no semen, blood or other signs of sexual abuse or ADN had been found in the bodies, making him undentifiable. No one was sure about how the killer even looked like.

At least until they talked to the owner of the dinner when Liz and Cindy had been spotted for the last time, telling them about how Liz and Cindy disappeared in the moment the former when to the bathroom and the latter followed. After asking where his employess had been in the moment of the disappearance, all of them had been in the restaurant, except sweet Mary, the lady who provided his deli with meat, who had been in the back of the deli bringing his delivery from her cooling van.

The poor man seemed totally naive to how incriminating his words sounded, probably because "sweet Mary" had returned and stayed in the deli for hours after the incident. But he had mentioned a cooling van. Those weren't that common, even in a city as industrialized as Central, and the bodies of the Chopper's victims, although with a mangled, grotesque appearance, had been found in more or less acceptable conditions, without coming close to putrefaction. Even when the victims had been
found weeks after their disappearance. What better transport for a killer like the Chopper than a cooling van to carry the bodies around and keep them in optimal conditions without raising suspicions?

The Chopper was a woman then? Roy was surprised at that. All those crimes had been perpetuated by someone with an obvious misogynist outlook. But stranger things have happened, Roy supposed. Besides, he had a more pressing matter about something, or rather *someone*, to care about.

When they asked the man about their woman, Roy almost let out a cynical chuckle. Her home was in district 9, just a few blocks below district 12, where the military HQ were located. Really, he should have guessed.

And now; locked in a car with Hawkeye and Hughes parroting his ear off about their mission (Hughes had dropped the silent treatment he had adopted since he allowed Elizabeth to take the State exam, probably supposing there was no point in keeping it when the person in question was in mortal danger) Roy interlaces his fingers, deep in thought. He really hopes that he is going to find Elric alive and kicking. This will not affect him in a political way, since technically Elizabeth is not a State Alchemist yet. However, he doesn't think he can take the images of another lifeless set of childish eyes staring back at him, *because* of him...

The loud, shrieking noise of a knife being sharpened hit Liz's hearing senses before she can even open her eyes. By impulse she tries to move her arms to shut up the source of such annoying noise, but when she tries she finds out that she is tightly bound against a chair with a sturdy rope. And worse yet, she only has her flesh arm, her automail one is gone. Worst, her senses feel *wrong*, like dulled, but more alive at the same time. Liz has never been on drugs before but she imagines this is what it feels like. Someone *drugged* her, for Hell's sake.

"Finally awake. Great timing too. And sorry by taking your automail, but those things are strong, I can't trust you to keep it and not just crush the chair"

She turns to see a slim man with small eyes, a short bush of dirty blonde hair in his head and sunken cheekbones, holding her automail arm with his hand. Her mind leaps back to the image of the brown-haired woman from the alley, and immediately, she knows they are the same person.

"You! You're the one who attacked me! You're a man!"

He smiles sweetly, which is sort of disturbing "Surprise!"

"Who the hell are you? Why are you doing this?"

His eyes widen, with an expression of mock-surprise in his face "That's a good question, isn't it? But everything in its due time. Right now you should greet the rest of guests in our merry party"

He pushes himself out the way and she can see Cindy, tied to a chair just like her. Her head is lulling, implying that probably she is under the influence of drugs. But the thing that horrifies her is the fact that in the place that used to be Cindy's left leg, now there's only a stump.

"Neat work, don't you think? " Barry says, waving a hand in direction to the wound, as if it is some sort of art piece " Usually I prefer them awake, so they can see exactly what I'm doing to them. But you two weren't awakening at all, and I was getting impatient. I even had to clean the wound so she wouldn't bleed out in her sleep. I guess I'd have to settle for the expression she is gonna make when she wakes up and finds out what happened"
Liz can't even answer, her mouth is totally dry. As on cue Cindy begins to stir, and Barry's creepy smile widens.

"Another one with great timing too" he gets close to Cindy, happily ignoring Liz's cries to not do it, and stars racking the long nail of his pointer finger on the lady's eyelid in a quite delicate manner. The woman starts to wake up slowly, but just her eyes place over her captor she screams, her sleepiness instantly disappears, and she violently starts to jerk her body, in a vain attempt to escape.

"You're going anywhere darling, so you may as well just calm down"

His words have no use as Cindy continues to cry in panic. She starts to look everywhere in a frantic way, only calming down a bit at sight of Liz being relatively unharmed, but then her eyes fall over her leg, or more like the place where her leg used to be.

"Oh God, oh God, Oh God, Oh God, Oh God, Oh God..."

"Easy there."

"What happened to my leg!!!" Cindy cries.

Barry sighs with impatience "I said take it easy... And I think is pretty obvious what happened to our leg" Barry says with a face of false sympathy, wavin' his knife as if demostrating.

"Leave her alone you bastard!" Liz screams out of herself, still trying to scramble away of the infuriating rope.

Cindy mutely looks back to her missing leg. And she finally starts to cry, with big tears and ugly sobs racketing her whole body.

Barry smiles and gently pats Cindy's cheek, who just continues crying in despair "You know? She kind of reminds me of my wife" He says, eyes focused on Cindy but his words are directed to Liz "She sure was a pretty thing, just like this one too. But she was so nagging. Do this, Don't do this, Go there, Don't go there. All night, all day, always nagging. One day she was being her nagger self as usual, and without meaning to, I chopped her to pieces. It was then when I discovered my real purpose on life"

"You sick fuck... So you kill people for fun? That's it?" Liz spits, her anger barely managing to keep her fear at bay.

"Reasons don't have to be complicated, they just are. I do what I do because I like it. It's really not that different from State Alchemist, the same group you aspire to join. They do what they do because they can"

"That's not true"

"Oh trust me it is."

Liz titilates on her chair. How dares he compare himself, a total scum, to Alchemists, even the ones who are the dogs of the military?

"I'll like to keep this conversation going, but the show is about to start..."

"What?-

Barry impromptu buries a knife in Cindy's thigh, suddenly interrupting her crying, replacing it with
pain. She doesn't scream this time, yet her mouth opens in a breathless cry, with her body doing little spasms, trying to cope with the pain.

"STOP!!!!"

Barry ignores her and goes on, doing little jerky motion with the knife inside Cindy's thigh, which apparently is stuck. Even with the low lights in the room, Liz can see the white filaments of bones between all the redness of the bloody meat, with Barry's stabs against it making some sort sort of welching noise.

"There!" Barry says with joy, triumphanty holding the knife which had been stuck. He turns to Cindy "It wasn't so bad, wasn't it?"

Cindy just moans and slumps against the chair, grateful that the knife inside her is finally out.

"Oh no no don't you dare." Barry says disaprovingly at Cindy's heavy lids "You are not going back to sleep. I went easy with you earlier, cutting your leg when you were still off, but not now. Now you and your friend are going to watch" The knife drops back to her thigh, with Barry stabbing it with some sort of renoved vigor.

"You bastard! Let her go!" Liz growls, knowing fully well how useless it is and how helpless she is.

Cindy's screams never reduce its intensity, and for a moment think Liz thinks she is going to go deaf because of it.

Liz closes her eyes, in a futile effort to escape the gory show she is watching against her will, and realizes that the only way they can get away of this alive is if she manages to get rid from her ropes. The only thing she can do is use her body to create friction between the rope and the chair she is in. Given how thick the ropes is, it can very well take its time, and only if Barry doesn't notice her plan first...

Fortunately for her, Barry seems too engrossed in Cindy to pay her attention anymore, and for a second Liz feels sickening grateful because of it.

For infinite, agonizing minutes, Liz tries her hardest to rub the ropes agains the chair, the rope hurting and shearing her skin. Liz finally manages to get way from her ropes... just when Barry manages to completely cut Cindy's leg. Cindy's cry of anguish is more deafening than ever before, and Liz's feels a deep ache in her chest at the sound of it.

But that's doesn't last long. She falls and the sound of spluttering wood is loud and clear in the room, even in the eve of Cindy's screams. Barry turns to her, and his face of maniacal joy is swiftly transformed into a cold mask of fury.

"You little!"

She can only let a loud squeak before dashing off, narrowly avoiding getting her left ear slashed. The pigs and animals hanging from the ceiling may look creepy, but they sure help her to hide from the eyes of the killer.

"Aren't you a little too big for hide and seek?"

She takes cover behind a peeled deer, cursing her automail leg from being so noisy, and tries to smother the heavy sound of her breathing. But then she spots her automail arm a few meters away, resting over a nearby table, and she can't resist the tentation and carelessly runs to it.
She probably could fight off Barry with just kicks, but without her automail arm her balance is definitely off. She gropes her pockets and curses, she didn't bring any chalk with her, so alchemy is out the table. She deeply sighs as she finds her metal arm, almost tumbling on her own feet due to sheer relief and her hurry to grab it.

Liz hisses as she rudimentally connects her automail to its port, the action putting her nerves are on fire and that's enough to almost bring her to the ground. But she forces herself not to do it. She needs to fight Barry and save herself and Cindy.

But it's Barry the one who makes the decision for her.

A heavy anvil, the one that Barry was using to sharp his knife early, get throw to her leg from behind. She can feel her shin bones mercilessly breaking, and she quickly falls to her knees, the movement only hurting even more her now useless leg. But she is caught.

Barry sways towards her in no hurry, and Liz tries to remember the dodging tecinques Izumi teached her. She is gonna need them.

She blocks the first slash, and the second, the third and the subsequent ones, but she know she is not gonna keep the pace long. She is still weak, dehydrated, drugged and dragged down by a useless leg. And Barry may not be a fighter, but he is fast, unpredictable and vicious. Every time his knife gets to pierce her skin, his eyes shine with some sort of maniacal glee that makes Liz nauseous.

A second too late, and Barry gets to strike a particulary deep cut in her left arm, in comparison to the previous shallow ones. Liz drops her arm and automatically places her automail hand over the wound, in an attempt to cut off the flow of blood coming out of it. Barry evilly smiles, and theatrically bring his knife up to the air, savoring the moment, And Liz's eyes widen to almost inmeasurable proportions at her vulnerable position, looking at the knife as if it is two meters long. The only thing on her mind is "I am is going to die. I am going to die. I am going to die." and such thoughts turns her blood to ice.

Then................

Ever heard about how time seems to freeze when you're about to die, and you see either your loved ones or your whole life in front of your eyes? Liz experiments the same thing, but she doesn't see her life through her own eyes. Neither Trisha's gentle face, Alphonse, Winry or Pinako, not even Hohenheim. No she only saw that thing.

The Gate.

The Universe.

The Truth.

Since the night she tried her hand in human transmutation, she tried to remember how she managed to bind her brother' soul to the suit of armor. She remembered doing it, not how she obtained that knowledge. But now...

...Black hands picking her apart...

...The truth about human transmutation...

...The Gate...

It feels like a eternity, but it can't be more that a tenth of a second. When the flow of memories stops,
she can see Barry the Chopper again, with his knife still on air, gleefully preparing to deliver the final blow. She is scared, but she knows how to stop him now...

...At the end, to end the nightmare, just a desperate clap is enough.

"Don't come in. We wait until Hughes' special units surround the building before engaging in action. Understood?" Roy Mustang orders in all his Flame Alchemist glory, gaining a sharp salute from Hawkeye and nods from the rest of his men.

Alphonse is a patient person. He sure is. His sister is the loud one. Al is the calm one. Has always been that way since they're kids.

But twenty minutes have passed since Hughes's unit and Mustang's team in guard before they can

A sharp cry of fear comes from inside, and Al finally has had enough. The unison cries of Mustang and Hughes of "Elric!" and "Alphonse" get ignored. Liked or not, he is going to tear down that door and see if his sister is okay right now. Not a normal behavior from Alphonse, not. But his sister is in danger and he's willing to tear everything in vicinity to find her.

And after a moment of blindly running through the place, he finally finds her. Her left leg in twisted in an unnatural position, her arms are bleeding with angry cuts, yet she is alive, thanks heavens, and that's all it matters.

The only things ruining an otherwise perfect sight, are his sister's tears, and the skinny man at her side; with his neck wide open and gorging himself between mouthfuls of blood.

Roy is busy barking orders back and forth. After finding Elizabeth, they proceeded to take fingerprints, photos, evidence. Apparently the recently renamed Barry the Chopper had killed more people than the five people they thought, just that those murders hadn't came to the Police's ears. Right now the killer is being escorted to the hospital, in hopes to save his life after his neck was brutally gutted by Elizabeth Elric.

He steals a glance towards Elizabeth. She looks like hell, with black shadows under her eyes and both her metal and flesh arms marred with cuts. She is shivering too. Roy frowns.

"Lieutenant, why the paramedics haven't attended Elizabeth? Look at her, she is freezing."

Riza looks at him " The paramedics have been busy with Cindy Tucker sir"

Ah yes. Cindy Tucker. The poor woman had been found a few meters from Liz, doped and with no legs anymore. The right leg was found hanging of a meat hook in the refrigerator room, with the stump still left open for infection. Her other leg had been recently chopped, just a few minutes before the squatting, so still had some color in it and some weak jets of blood were still dripping out of it.

Some soldier joked about her being "legless". It gained him an icy death glare, courtesy of Hawkeye.

Roy looks at Elizabeth, who's talking to her brother in low tones. He wonders if she will be choosing to be a State Alchemist after this. Since, as a State Alchemist, is quite probably that she will be facing something like this again, and Roy doesn't know if she is prepared for that.

Whatever her decision is, Roy is not going to interfer. It will be her decision, and only hers.
She is such a fucking burden. No even capable of moving a bit without assistance. Why this happened to her?

A man with metal glasses sits next to her and starts questioning her. About how she was kidnapped, if she remembers any details of importance, if there was anyone else in the house aside of her and Liz.

She doesn't answers. It's *their* job to find out those things, isn't it? So why they don't leave her alone? The corner of her eye catches Liz. Instinctively she knows, she just *knows* she is going to blame herself for this. And a part of Cindy wants to open her mouth and murmur words of solace. She can't get up and console her, but she can pass a message to her right? About how none of this is her fault.

And yet, that voice within her is ignored. It's just a small voice after all. The rest of Cindy just wants to *scream*.

His sister is uncharacteristically quiet. Alphonse doesn't pressure. He know she will only talk 'til she is ready.

"I wanted to kill him"

And... he really doesn't know what to say at that.

"Al I.. I wanted to kill him. I didn't think, I just acted"

A pause. Alphonse is still in silence.

"From the moment I decided to become a military dog, I knew that the road to recover our bodies wouldn't be an easy one. But I always thought that, somehow, I would manage to cross it without killing anyone, without staining my hands with blood. But when Barry tried to kill me, none of that mattered to me. Only my survival did, nothing else."

She slowly traces a line through her battered automail, a protuding dagger coming out its knuckles. "Now I have to mentally prepare myself for the possibility of someone dying, every time I thrust this blade against an enemy. It's either them, or me"

Tears roll over her dirty cheeks "And if at some point anything or anyone threatens you brother, if the time and need arises, I *have* to do it. I *need* to be able to *do* it. Because we aren't Gods, but just insignificant humans. And we have no one but each other"

The last part isn't only to her recent showdown with her own mortality, but because of that *thing*. *The Gate. The Portal. The Truth.* It literally ripped her apart before joining the pieces back again. It gave her knowledge, in exchange of her innocence, shoving knowledge inside of her with the striking force of a hundred rays. It made her wise, but it made sure to leave its mark, like a shameful badge forced upon her until the day of her death. It also humbled her, showing the pitiful arrogance of her own ways, thinking that she could be able to play God and revive someone from the dead.

Come to think about it, was it coincidence that the memories of *it* returned to her at that precise moment? Would *that thing* have something to do with it? And if so, why did it do it? To save her life? Or just to have an amusement toy for later?

Al bitterly muses over his sister's words. He doesn't want that. He doesn't want his sister killing anyone for him.
"Sister, just...just don't think about that... It's all hypothetical... Come on, you need to rest. Maybe Mr Tucker..."

She denies her head. How can she get up and go to the Tuckers' now. How can she stand Shou Tucker's gaze? How is she going to be able to face Nina, when she inevitably asks why her mom has no legs anymore?

"Let's go home sister"

She looks up to Al with glassy eyes, because what in the world is he talking about? The Tucker house is not their home. They have no home, it was consumed by ardent flames months ago, but when she sees Al, who even in an armor is so full of expression, she understands. They are not going to the Tuckers. They are going to any place she is comfortable to be in, be that a luxurious hotel or a seedy bench in the park, with only the starry sky as their roof. And Al is going to follow her, as he always does.

Home is not about a place to stay; but about where our loved ones are.

And her home has always been at Al's side.

Chapter End Notes

Good, Bad, Average? Leave kudos or/and comments!

Just to be clear, until this chapter, Liz's only memories of the night when they tried human transmutation were the bits who happened in "the real world" so to speak, like the transmutation failing, Al disappearing in front of her, or she binding Al's soul to the armor (but not how she obtained the knowledge to do so) The explanation of what exactly Liz remembered was left a bit open, for now at least, mostly because I'm still unsure of how portray the Gate/Truth. They are portrayed a bit differently in both Manga/Brotherhood and 003.

*Sighs* This story have been so boringly canon right? Hopefully next chapter will heat up things a little ;) But just a little though :(
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Sequels

Chapter Notes

English isn't my first language, so feel free to point out any mistakes.

The longest chapter of any fic I've written. And one of the weakest too. I still hope you enjoy it.

Oh, this chapter was beta-ing by RainbowMaze from FF.net. So blame her for any mistakes not me! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Sister! Sister! You need to come out of there!" Al shouts.

"Is Winry already here?" Liz asks.

"No, but I already called her. She’s on her way!"

"Then no!"

"Come on! It’s been three days. You can't stay there sulking forever!"

Liz growls under her breath. Why can't Al just leave her alone? After her brush with Death and the Chopper, Liz has stayed holed up inside her room, depression dragging her down. To kill time, she turns the pages of her alchemy books but even those fail to hold her interest for long.

Truthfully, Liz doesn't want to get up from the bed. She feels inexplicably tired, and, yet, she doesn't want to sleep either. Every time she tries to sleep, her dreams inevitably replay what happened in the past days. She always wakes up with her heart racing and covered with sweat, her mind replaying the events during the Barry The Chopper incident; be that either Barry's crazed eyes, Cindy's legless form, or the ominous white from that . . .

So she solely dedicates to aimlessly stare at the ceiling of her room, passively waiting for someone to throw her off her apathy. Someone named Winry Rockbell.

Yet Al is having none of it. The last thing he wants to see is his sister succumbing to the same pit of depression she fell in after they tried to bring their mom back. So he forces open the door, ignoring his sister's indignant squeak. He grabs her hand and drags her to the living room, even with her sister burying her nails to the walls. "Al! I told you to stay outside! I wanted to be alone!"

"No. You are getting out of here. Besides, Winry already called. She will be here in a few hours. And I don't want her to see how I allowed you to stay locked in like a hermit inside your room.” She
resists a bit, and, although Al is the stronger of the two, he knows she's not using her full strength. She quickly drops it, opting for staying skewered on the couch, impatiently waiting for her childhood friend.

True to word, a few hours later their childhood friend graces them with her presence. The first thing she tells them at just passing through the door . . .

"How's my baby?!!" Winry crosses the room so fast that Liz almost doesn't see her, holding her right arm with reverence. "A few scratches here and there, but you are fine! Fine! Thank goodness."

Liz brusquely detangles her arm from Winry's grip, glaring at the blonde. "Hello to you, too, Winry."

The blonde blinks at her as if she hadn't seen her (knowing her, she probably actually hadn't) and then scowls. "Al told me that you needed something with automail. Now, if you—"

"Geez, Winry. I'm fine. Actually, no, my automail is fine! So calm down!"

Al chooses that moment to intervene. "It's true, Winry. My sister didn't do anything. And her automail is fine. We need you to build automail for someone else."

"Really? For whom?" Liz didn't want to tell Winry about her whole incident with Barry the Chopper, but Al insisted that Winry need to hear it so they could make some context for her. So, they didn't only tell her about Barry but about the Tuckers too. Needless to say, Winry was horrified. "So you thought that man was a woman?"

"Yeah. He was crossdressing and fooled the both of us. The man — he was a serial killer stalked by the police. He took us to his lair and then he . . . grabbed a knife and cut her legs with it."

Winry pales. "In front of you?"

"In front of me."

Winry rubs her temples. "Oh God. I had no idea . . . When Al called me, I thought you had trashed your automail or something. I'm sorry—"

"Winry, you have nothing to apologize to me. Beside, this is not about me. Nothing happened to me. It's about Cindy."

"Yeah, you're right. Sorry."

Liz rolls her eyes. "Stop saying 'Sorry'."

The automail mechanic nods and then exhales shallowly. "So I guess you want me to build automail legs for her right?"

"Yes and don't worry about the cost. I'm going to pay you for her legs."

"Doesn't she have money to pay for it?"

"Her husband is a State Alchemist; of course she does. I just want to pay for it because the whole thing is my fault, you know. That bat-crazy dude was after me, and Cindy got between the crossfire."

Al is truly a great host. He didn't waste time to attend to Winry, offering food and refreshments. But,
since their kitchen was completely devoid of anything edible, they ended up ordering Cretan takeout. Their conversation strayed to lighter topics like Granny, Resembool, and the whereabouts of the people they know back home.

Suddenly, an insistent series of knocks resound on the door. "Who is it?" Al asks.

"Military," responds a deep, booming voice behind the door.

"I'll get it," Al says, standing up to hesitantly opens the door. He immediately regrets it.

"GREETINGS! MY NAME IS ALEX LOUIS ARMSTROOOONG! MAJOR OF THE AMESTRIAN ARMY! IS THIS THE ROOM OF THE ELRIC SIBLINGS?" the huge man, who seems like a cross between man and bear, asks with a suspicious glance.

" Eh, yes. I am Alphonse Elric, sir."

The man-bear shakes Al's hand with enthusiasm, almost ripping the arm from its armor. "PLEASED TO MEET YOU! AMAZING, SO YOUNG AND SO IMPOSING," says the man, clapping Al's back with a hollow sound resounding through the armor. And, not only that, but pink sparkles seem to come out of him, to the astonishment of the rest of the people in the room.

The man looks towards Winry and Liz, who are trying to escape through the ventilation. "AND WHO OF THE TWO OF YOU IS ELIZABETH ELRIC?"

"She is!" Winry and Liz reply at the same time, pointing at each other, neither eager to be the center of attention of that crazy man.

"SINCE NEITHER OF YOU WANT TO TELL ME, I GUESS I'M GOING TO TAKE BOTH YOU." The man effortlessly lifts both girls and puts them over his shoulders. The rest of the population of the hotel lobby see a huge man kidnapping two screaming teenage girls with another huge armor dude at his heels. "SUIT YOURSELF. THIS TYPE OF CARRYING HAS BEEN PASSED FROM THE ARMSTRONG FAMILY LINE FOR GENERATIONS!"

The hybrid between man and bear known as Major Armstrong, dumps the girls in the backseat of a discreet blue car. Winry and Liz are more or less comfortable in the backseat, but, between Al's bulky armor and Armstrong's Armstrong-ness, the car is utterly cramped and seemingly ready to burst. The man is still booming and loud, but he apparently has calmed down a bit.

"Major Hughes sent me to give you kids a lift to the Tuckers. He wanted to come, but he was busy with a case."

Al shuffles. "Thank you, sir. But it really wasn't necessary. We're going to go regardless. Even if he had to carry Liz through the entire city.

"Still, the Major wanted to have this courtesy with you." A short moment passes before his eyes place themselves on the other blonde in the car. "And your name, young lady?"

"Me? I'm Winry Rockbell."

"Rockbell? By coincidence, are you related to Yuriy and Sarah Rockbell?"

"Yeah. They are — they were — my parents."

"Oh." It's impressive how the man's previously flamboyant behavior becomes so demure after a
single word. "Well, in that case you have my deepest condolences."

"Thank you. So, did-did you know them? Personally, I mean."

The man shakes his head. "I'm afraid not, but I served in Ishval, and a lot of men from my platoon were attended by them."

"I see. And did you guys ever find out who did it?"

"According to some witnesses, we only knew that it was an unknown Ishvalan man, but we never found him. I'm sorry that I have nothing else to tell you." The man's strong voice drops to a meek whisper at the last bit, blue eyes shining with sympathy.

"No, it's fine. I'm fine," Winry quickly replies in a tone that clearly indicates she's anything but fine. The Major tactfully drops the subject, putting his attention to the road in front of him. Liz wants to offer comfort, but she's not good at consoling people, at least not anymore, so she directs her eyes to the rapid rolling of the wheels in the grey pavement; while her peripheral vision catches sight of Al's gauntlet fingers gently imprisoning Winry's, in a soft squeeze of comfort.

Cindy wakes up with a soundless cry. When her mind finally settles, she's content that she's alone so that she doesn't wake up Nina with one of her nightmares. She flops back to the bed, grimacing a little at the pain in her now nonexistent leg, blissfully ignoring the sound of an engine in front of her house.

Some days the phantom pain in her leg is irresistible, sometimes she feels a horrible burning sensation, and other times she feels like her leg is getting stabbed again. She doesn't know if all that is purely psychological or not.

She hasn't been sleeping well, insomnia affecting her. Her overactive mind can only replay the trauma of the past few days like a broken record. Cindy always used to get irritable if she didn't sleep well but now it's just incredible. She broke a glass vase on Shou Tucker's head when he tried to talk with her. He didn't try to talk to her again after that incident.

The only human company she stands nowadays is Nina. Her beautiful, sweet Nina who didn’t deserve to have a useless lump of a mother. Nina is oblivious and often points at her and asks her questions in a tactless way, like most kids do, but there’s not disgust or pity in her gaze like the way other people’s gazes have been. She’s still her mother, and Nina is still her daughter, and they love each other. She takes comfort in the fact that, at least, that's not going to change.

At the end, no matter how much she thrashes, curses and screams, nothing is going to change. Once the rush of fury vanished, she was still without legs, still incomplete, still an invalid.

So what’s the point? Everyone told her that a bit of anger was normal, she just needed to get it out of her system. Now, the anger has been drained out of her, but no one told her what to do with the deep depression that plagues her.

These days her only joy is to be on her bed, thinking of all the ways her legs could have been saved. With her arm holding Nina to her side and staying still, watching the fall of the leaves off the peach trees.

That's how Liz finds her, her eyes never wavering from her frozen spot near the window with Nina draped to her side, her ginger hair spilled on the pillow instead of being held in her usual fishtail twin braids. Her big eyes get bigger when she sees Al and Liz in front of her. "Little-Big Sister! Big-Big
Brother Al!” She runs and hugs Liz, nearly tackling her. “Why haven’t you been here?”

She swallows tightly. “We’ve been busy.”

“Are we playing?”

Liz shoots a smile to her. “Yes Nina, of course we’re playing. But not now.”

Nina then curiously looks at Winry before proceeding to loudly whisper in Liz’s ear, “Who is she?”

“This is Winry. A friend of mine. She’s going to help your mommy get better.”

Nina’s expression is one of pure awe. “Really? How?”

“I’d tell you if you’re a good girl and you leave with your Daddy.”

Nina brattily stomps her foot down. “But I wanna stay here!”

“Nina, I promise it won’t take long. And we’ll be playing later.”

Nina trots after her dad, who’s discretely listening to their conversation. The door is closed, and Liz scrambles her brains in search of appropriate things to say. “This is Winry Rockbell,” Liz finally greets with shyness with Winry waving her hand and letting out a soft, “Hey.”

"Hello," Cindy responds without moving a muscle.

"Mr. Tucker says you've been taking your pills."

"They are ineffective. They only served to alleviate my mind," Cindy taps her temple, "but they are useless against the pain from here." She gestures towards her stump, making Liz gulp. She can relate to that very well. "I like to think about how everything went wrong, and what I could have done to avoid the outcome."

Liz feels her gut churning. She doesn't know what's worse: if Cindy has screamed at her or the calm, eerily way she is behaving now. In what stage of grief is she? She sounds resigned, but in a way like she still can't believe what happened to her. “She is an automail mechanic.” That seems to catch Cindy’s attention, giving a sideways glance to the mechanic who smiles encouragingly at her “She is the one who made my leg and arm. Did you see my automail? Maybe they are not the real thing but let me tell you——“

Winry shakes her head and holds up a finger, cutting Liz off with a shushing noise. As nice as the praise feels, especially coming from Liz, Winry knows that Liz’s eagerness is ruining it. If there’s something Winry has learned in the past few months since she made her first automail — Liz’s — and of all the times she has seen her grandma attending people, it’s that you have to be cool and collected when dealing with people, especially if the circumstances of how they lost their limbs are particularly traumatic and still recent. She is not a not doctor or nurse but really, being an automail mechanic isn’t that different.

Cindy nods a bit and lets out a quiet, “Okay.” Winry’s smile is radiant and immediately shoos both Al and Liz out the room, who reluctantly comply. Liz more so since Winry doesn't know Cindy, yet she seems confident that she can make the older woman listen to her. Cindy finally looks at her and gives a small nod of her head. After they close the door, they turn to be face to face with Nina and Mr. Tucker again.

“Are you going to tell me what you were talking about?” Nina pouts.
“Later, Nina, later,” Al says absently.

Nina pouts again, but she recovers quickly. “Daddy says you caught the bad man who did this to mommy? Is it true?”

Well, if ‘caught’ is a synonym to slashing someone’s throat then yes, she did. "I helped."

Nina hugs her with great fervor. That relieves her tension. Just a bit, though. Tucker wipes his glasses with the lower side of his shirt. “I just put water on the stove to made some tea. Do you kids want some?”

The tea is quite good, even if the cookies were bought in a pharmacy and the packet they were in smells like medicine. Nina is asleep in Tucker’s lap, already victim of the effect of the Theanine. “So, how has everything been going on here?” Al asks after the silence extends too much to be considered comfortable.

Tucker sighs. “I’ve been thinking about hiring a housemaid. Since the incident with Cindy, I have been running the house by myself, and I already feel the effects. Every home needs a feminine touch, and I don’t think I’ll be able to raise her,” he pulls Nina closer to him, who unconsciously lets out a pleased noise at the action, “by myself.”

“Don’t say that Mr. Tucker! Mrs. Cindy is going to be fine. Winry is going to make her legs, and she’ll be up in no time!”

“I’d like to have your optimism Alphonse, but I’m afraid that my wife has been so depressed these days. I doubt that even getting to her feet again will make her recover.”

“Has she told you that?”

“No, I haven’t spoken as much to her as I’d like to. My evaluation has been taking my whole time. Nina is the one who has been keeping her company.”

If Al had a real face, he’d be putting the most disapprobative face he could muster. He knows passing the evaluation is important, he knows that, but his wife needs him! Liz’s thoughts run in the same vein as Al’s, but, contrary to him, she can sympathize with Tucker. After all, she ignored Al many times after their try in human transmutation, preferring to bury herself in books instead of consoling Al because she needed to find a way of retrieving Al’s body, even if the latter needed her emotionally. “Then I suppose we’ll be going together to the evaluation?” Liz weakly jokes.

“Oh no. Your evaluation will be before. Mine will be after because, since I didn’t get a good evaluation the past year, the Council conceded a longer respite to present my investigation.” Tucker looks at her approvingly. “You’ll be already a State Alchemist by the time I get my evaluation.”

“If she passes.”

“What?” Liz screams, and when Nina stirs due to the noise, she grimaces and lowers her voice. “Are you doubting me Al?”

“No! I’m just saying, sister, well we don’t know if you’re going to pass the exam yet. We shouldn’t get ahead of the facts—“

“Oh, shut up Al! I’m going to pass that stupid exam.” It’s only until after their brief bickering that they notice that they’re still in Tucker’s presence. Embarrassed, they turn to see the man giving them a wistful smile.
Al, Liz, and Nina stay in the living room a long time, with Alexander lazily rolling over at the side of his infant mistress. A few hours later, Winry gets down after finishing her examination of Cindy, wiping her hands on her green bandana. "Where's Mr. Tucker?"

"In his study. He has some important things to attend."

Winry's lip curls in distaste, mirroring how Al feels at Tucker preferring to work instead of being at his wife's side when she needs him the most. The mechanic turns to Nina. "Nina darling, could you please go fetch your daddy?" Nina brightens and sprints out of the room. Moments later Nina has her arm draped around the hand of a sleep-deprived Shou Tucker. "Hello again, Mister Tucker. I want to speak with you about your wife's condition."

"Oh. Yeah, sure."

The mechanic drops onto the fluffy chair next to her. "I think I can make both her limbs in a month. But I'd suggest that she should just take one surgery first then wait a few weeks until the pain and medication has wore off, and then proceed with the next operation. So that her nervous system doesn't get overcharged with so much stress."

"No problems with the nerves?"

"No. Actually it's the opposite. The way the—" Winry trails off, thinking about how she's going to rephrase this in front of Nina, "cuts were done makes the process of port attachment easier." Winry then smiles, softly patting Nina's head. "Don't worry Nina. You are going to see your mommy walking in no time."

Nina makes a big "O" with her mouth. "Walking? How? So you're going to hurt mommy!?"

"What? No Nina. I'm going to—"

"No! I know what you said. It sounded painful. It would only hurt mum more!"

Well she's not wrong about it. "No Nina, no. You're misunderstanding. Hey look," Liz says, lifting the pant of her left leg and showing the gleaming metal covered by it.

Winry and Al look at her, surprised. They sure can tell how uncomfortable she is, showing her automail just like that. She is unaccustomed to so many people staring at her artificial limbs. After all, previously, the only people who knew about her automail were Winry, Granny and Al. Mustang sure has to know, too.

Nina's eyes are wide open. "You went through the same thing Little-Big Sister?"

"I did."

Nina places her hand over her metal knee, trying to squeeze it. "Did it hurt?"

Did it hurt? It was one of the most painful experiences in her life. "Kinda'."

"Are you used to it?"

"Yeah. It only took me a while to recover."

"Recover?"
"Well, it takes most people many, many months to master these. I recovered a bit earlier though."

Winry huffs. "Well, that's because you're stupid. Nina, don't listen to her. She is always putting herself in risk."

"Shut the fuck up, Automail Freak," Liz throws back, forgetting about her self-imposed rule about never using bad words in front of Nina.

"You shut up, Alchemy Geek."

Al sighs and pointly ignores the subsequent screaming match between the two blondes that manage to lift up their spirits. A look of hopeful enlightenment crosses Shou Tucker's face.

"Are you coming back? Are you?" Nina asks, pleads, with aqueous eyes.

"Of course we are Nina," Al responds. And they mean it, too. No way they're leaving Nina all alone again.

Shout Tucker interrupts their goodbyes, though. "May I have a private word with you Liz? Before you kids leave?" Liz feels kind of confused at the request but shrugs, signaling to Winry and Al to go ahead. The older alchemist clears his throat before speaking. "About your limbs . . ." Shou Tucker nervously adjusts his glasses. "Did you do it?"

"Do what?"

Tucker shakes with head. "Don't play dumb Liz. You know what I'm asking you." Damn. Even if she denies everything, Tucker already knows what happened. He's just asking for confirmation. But . . . she trusts Tucker. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad after all. Maybe it would be nice to confide in someone else who's not Al or Winry.

Words come out clumsy and rickety. "I loved her. She was such a good mom. Al and I just wanted to see her smile again. We thought — I thought — that we had done everything right. But it didn't work out. I just did this to myself," she says, vaguely gesturing to her body, "and Al lost everything," she continues without watching Tucker, her eyes following Al who's playing tag with Nina.

Tucker keeps petting Alexander, who preens at the gesture. "What you did is forbidden . . ."

Anxiety fills her up like a bubble. "Please Mr. Tucker; no one-no one can know about this. If the military gets wind of this . . ."

"Calm down Liz. I'm not going to tell anybody. In fact, I'm honored that you have such trust in me, to confide in me with your secret. And I get it, I truly do. When you have the power, it is difficult to not do it." He gives a smile that tries to make her feel better, but it still fails.

She hastily makes a signal to Al and Winry, indicating that's time to go. But Tucker stops her before she can go. "Oh, and Liz?"

"Yes?"

"I don't blame you for what happened to Cindy . . . and she doesn't either."

"Thank you, sir. That means a lot to me." Liz takes a step forward, then a step back again. "You know what? I know that you are stuck with your evaluation. Why don't you make another chimera?"

"Another chimera?"
“Yeah, and maybe this time we'll be around here to see it!"

The older alchemist’s face is blandly blank. "All right. I promise I'm going to have another chimera in due time." Liz smiles at that and springs back to her brother and Winry, who wave their goodbyes to him and a Nina who tightly clutches his hand.

After just closing the door, Tucker sighs with frustration, his eyes alternating between his daughter and the door of his wife's room.

"Daddy what's wrong?"

"..."

If there is an advantage to Al being an armor suit, it’s the fact that, as an armor suit with an endless supply of energy due to not having a physical body, he can carry any amount of anything without getting tired. But since Al stayed in the hotel with Winry, she's stuck carrying those asshole books.

She is also a bit annoyed at Mustang for forcing her to read this shit for her exam. She doesn't need these books. And that's not even she being arrogant. She can do alchemy without circles, after all. Not that she plans on using it, of course.

Now, come to think about it, she hasn't done that again since that fateful evening with Cindy and the Chopper. Perhaps it was a fluke? She doesn't think so, but who knows? Maybe she should ask Teacher . . .

Damn, what the hell is she thinking? Teacher is the last person she wants to know about this. Sadly, she muses how much she wanted to learn to do circleless Alchemy just like Teacher and how she really completed that goal after all. She just didn't know how high the price for it was.

Thanks to her wandering mind, she bumps against a man of dark skin, her books scattering across the sidewalk. The man grunts and hurriedly tries to help her lift her books until he sees the title of some of them. "Techniques in Circle Construction? The Domination of Elements in Alchemy Arrays? Where did you even get these books, youngster?"

She finds the use of the word ‘youngster’ a bit strange, but she responds anyway, seeing no harm to it. "In the library across the street."

"But that library only lets State Alchemists borrow their books."

"Well, I'm no State Alchemist yet, but I'm studying to be one. A known friend of mine pulled some strings, allowing me to get these."

The man looks at her for a long time, making Liz twitch. "Don't take that exam. Just don't," the man finally says and turns to a corner, leaving Liz puzzled at his words. Kind of pissed too. Who does that guy think he is? Telling her what she can or can't do? But before she can take a turn and give him a piece of her mind, he's already disappeared into one of the corners of the street.

She can't see him anymore, but he can. His red eyes follow her until she herself disappears. "Take the warning, child," he murmurs to no one. Liz can't hear him no more.

Al, Alexander, Winry, and Nina accompany her to the entrance of the military offices. "Sister, did you prepare something for the evaluation?"
"Uh," Liz scratches her ear nervously. "Ehh, no, I didn’t have time."

"You didn’t have time?" asks an incredulous Winry.

"Liz, these exams are not a joke. You should have prepared," Al says sternly.

Liz frowns, remembering that she can't put the Barry the Chopper incident as a justification, not since Cindy was the one who lost the most that day. And it's not like she can talk to him about her missing memories.

After a thumbs up from Al, a tight hug from Nina, and Winry who tried to hug her and failed (failed and tried are the key words, because Winry's hugs tend to be followed by a wrench to the head) she climbs the steps when she spots the grinning face of Major Hughes.

Hughes directs her to the place where the rest of the candidates are. "Glad you are here. I was going to take you to the Tuckers, but duty calls.

"Yeah, Major Armstrong told us. Busy in a case right?"

"Yep. The Barry the Chopper case. Just closing the last detail, and moving keys so he can be transferred to a hospital under military jurisdiction—"

"Transferred?! You mean he is alive?"

"Barely. The doctors managed to save his life, but the loss of blood in such a short time prevented oxygen from reaching the brain." Hughes shrugs, "He's in an indefinite coma. We don't know if he's ever going to wake up."

Relief bathes Liz like sunlight, a heavy weight slipping from her shoulders, making her posture straighter and her steps firmer. For days that thought stayed in the back of her head, never daring to ask about her attacker's condition. And while a coma is hardly an ideal way to live, logically she knows that's more than what someone like Barry deserves.

She hasn't forgotten her talk with Al, about how someday she may be forced to take someone life in order to save his. She knows that's a possibility, but that's a problem for another day.

The practical exam takes place in a field full of different organic materials to demonstrate their alchemy. A lot of other alchemists are there. Mustang is in a crowd of higher-ranking officers, and, although she pretends to not notice, she can feel his eyes over her. It's true she didn't prepare a thing for the practical test, but Liz is very good at improvising. She only needs a few minutes to think of an array that allows her to create a tower, a small fort, or something.

But since the universe is an almighty bastard who gets its kicks at the cost of Liz's misery, she finds herself in the very same situation she wanted to avoid. A huge hydrogen dirigible falling at full speed, about to crush one of the other fatigated candidates.

She had sworn to herself that she wasn't going to use circleless Alchemy. Liz could only imagine how the military would love to have in its ranks an Alchemist who wouldn't need circles. But when she sees that man about to be crushed by a mass of helium and paper, she promptly throws caution out the window.

She runs and claps, having absolutely no idea what was going to happen. A sharp light illuminated the environment around her, momentarily blinding the people present. When their eyes can see again,
breathless gasps fly out their mouths at the spectacle. A grand crown of transmutated flowers decorates the sky. Like the ones Liz used to do for her mom. And for Nina.

The people in the streets stop their strides to look at the flowered skies above them. Nina squeals in delight at the soft petals of the magical flowers caressing her young face. Winry and Al are awestruck, too, looking at the ethereal sight in front of them.

Liz thinks Mustang looks way too smug for her own liking. Heck, Mustang knows he is being smug. He feels smug. But then again, why wouldn't he be? He knows he is just a few weeks away from a promotion and becoming the youngest colonel in the Amestrian Army at twenty-seven. Imagine that. Watching Hakuro's face sour at the news was such a treat, too. No doubt, recruiting Elizabeth Elric has been one of his brightest ideas with the Military now so pleased to have such a skilled Alchemist under its thumb.

The Alchemist in question is in front of him with her arms crossed, a satisfied smile on her face and dressed with leather and a particularly tacky red coat. A kid playing dress up in order to appear like a grown-up. Well, it's not like Roy can say his younger self didn't do that sometimes. But dear Lord, when she created that crown of flowers in the sky, Mustang was completely floored at the sheer display of such beautiful alchemy. Not that he's going to show even an inkling of it . . .

"Here, your pocket watch!" he shouts, mildly amused at seeing her fumble to grab the watch.

"Eh, I kind of expected something with trumpets or something."

"Fine. Congratulations. You're officially a dog of the military." Disdain drips through his words, trying to smother her enthusiasm and succeeding. Her face gets a pinkish, angry glow, out of indignation at being called a ‘dog’. Roy fights the urge to sigh. ‘Dog’ is actually one of the tamest insults people will be throwing at her from now on. She needs to be prepared for that. This is actually Roy being tactful, even if she can't see that. Pushing aside his dark thoughts, he gives her her freshly-imprinted certificate. Liz quickly grabs it, her eager eyes rapidly jumping on the words written on it.

"By order of the Fuhrer, this document certificates Elizabeth Elric as a State Alchemist, subjected to the laws and regulations of the State of Amestris. Hereby, aside from her commission and pocket watch, she is granted the title of Fullmetal."

"Fullmetal?"

Roy shrugs. "The Fuhrer has an ironic sense of humor. Every State Alchemist receives a codename. So now you'll be known as the Fullmetal Alchemist." Fullmetal sounds like a name way too heavy for such a young and dainty-looking girl. But, from what little Roy has seen, the girl has a bit of a temper and a resolution that matches the steeliness of her metal limbs. Roy looks at the solid golden eyes, the metallic gold of her braid, the silver flash of her automail that shows from the uncovered section between the sleeve and the glove, of the same color as her new watch. Yes, Fullmetal definitely sounds like her.

She smiles, so apparently she agrees too. "I like it. It sounds intimidating. I think it suits me just fine."

At the outskirts of Amestris, at the feet of a hill, a chateau is hidden from curious ones. A masterpiece of XVI architecture, with walls made of terracotta stone and pointy ends in the roof tile. In the second floor of the place, there's a study that belongs to the owner of the house. Like the rest of the house, it is decorated with expensive items and exquisite taste.
Normally the owner of the house is there on its own, but today there are two people in the house instead of one. A woman with red hair and green eyes is one of them, and, despite the fact that she looks like she’s around her early fifties, she still looks graceful and appealing.

She's sitting behind a massive pine desk, separating her from the other person in the room — a tall, older-looking, well-built man with a thick moustache. He's dressed in full military regalia, the stripes and the medals on it denoting his position as the most important man in Amestris. But his most prominent feature was on the left side of his face, where, normally, a patch rested over it. Today the patch is not present, leaving his normally-covered side wide open, proudly showing his Ultimate Eye. "Envy will be going to Xing? Strange, I thought that, as the Fuhrer, that would be a chore more appropriate to me."

"Xing hasn't had communication with Amestris in centuries. And Envy is a shapeshifter, so he'd be inconspicuous there."

"And he was okay with it?"

The woman waves her hand in dismissal. "As long as there is someone to kill, he will be fine. Besides, the whole thing with Xing is something of a long-term project, and you're needed here."

"I suppose you're right." the homunculus curtly responds.

The woman can tell the Homunculus doesn't like her. Of course he doesn’t. She is a human who gives him orders. But she cares very little if him and his kind like her or not. They need her, and that's all that matters. All this talk about Xing is boring her. She can't be thankful enough when Bradley finally gets up and leaves, the door violently closing behind him.

The red-headed woman rubs her hands together, noticing the wrinkles on them with disgust. Her body has hold up remarkably well but is still way too old. Damn it, she can't hop into another body, not until after the Promised Day . . .

She relaxes a bit in her chair, opening again the folder on the desk. As the person in charge of the State Alchemist Program, the one who decides who gets in and who doesn't, every possible candidate for sacrifice is examined by her. When Bradley brought her the file of the latest would-be State Alchemist, she could only press her nails into her hand 'til it drew blood.

Name: Elric, Elizabeth

Age: 12 years old

Weight: 30 kg

Height: 132 cm

Blood: A+
According to Bradley, she performed Alchemy without a circle. So most definitely someone who tried her hand in human transmutation and survived. Impressive, especially given her age. But the interesting thing about this newcomer is not that but her appearance. The photo shows a smiling girl with a healthy dusty skin tone, eyes and hair as golden as gold itself.

There are only three people she knows of with golden eyes and hair. She also knows that it’s impossible that someone without Xerxian ancestry could have such an appearance. Maybe some runaway from Xerxes survived and this child is its descendant? It may not be impossible, but that sounds way too convenient. Both her old lover and the original Homunculus assured her that no one from Xerxes survived. And even if someone survived, it would be one-in-a-million chance that its descendant could have a Xerxian appearance, after centuries of miscegenation.

So, scraping that theory, that would only leave Van Hohenheim, the Dwarf in the Flask, and William. She is one-hundred percent sure that the Dwarf in the Flask nor William could be the sires of this creature. That means . . .

She looks at the file again.

_Mother: Elric, Trisha_

_Father: Unknown_

Trisha Elric. Elizabeth Elric. No mention of any Hohenheim in any of the papers. Maybe Hohenheim knocked up some girl and then abandoned her? As much as she'd like to think that, it really doesn't sound like him. Hohenheim isn't stupid. He knows he has enemies from the past, enemies that would love to pounce at any chance to hurt him. Like the Dwarf of the Flask. Like herself. And the best way to protect himself or any loved ones is to erase himself from the map.

She looks intently at the smiling girl in the picture, trying to figure any familiar feature aside from the eyes and the hair. She finds nothing. She never met Hohenheim as a teenager, so it's difficult to compare him to someone as young as the girl in the picture, and she is female, so there's that. But she can easily compare her with William. And yes, she can find some similarity in them. The upward tilt in the eyes, the arched eyebrows, the high cheekbones. She doesn't know if she’s imagining said similarity because she's trying to find a similarity, but it's enough to send her temper into a fury.

She looks at the now empty chair where Bradley was sitting. She's absolutely sure Bradley also noticed the girl's obviously Xerxian features but didn't say anything for some reason. Probably reasoning she wouldn't dare do anything to a potential candidate for Sacrifice.

He is right. She's not going to do anything too bad to her. But not because she is a candidate for Sacrifice, but, because if the girl is who she thinks she is, she's also beneficial to her plans and may lead her to the person she has been looking for.

Supporting her chin with her hand, Dante wonders what's going to be Envy's reaction to all this.
Good, Bad, Average? Leave kudos or/and comments!

What was your fav part of this chapter? Mine was the last scene. The least angsty one and the most connected with the overall plot.

A few days ago a friend of mine told me that "transmutated" wasn't a real word. Originally this fic was going to be renamed "Transmuted Flowers" (renamed, no named, 'cause this fic's original name was "Equivalent Exchange") but there was already another FMA fic with the same name. But according to Wiktionary, is a completely valid word. If anyone has something to say about this, tell me in the comments.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!