Xerxes is in a golden age of scientific and alchemical advancement. Unhindered by major internal conflict like their neighbors, the desert civilization has prospered. Still, many of its mysteries have gone unsolved, including the baffling disappearance of the Elric brothers from the royal palace five years ago.

Ling doesn't know or care about that. He's more concerned with more important things, like his next meal, or obtaining immortality to save his clan. He wants nothing to do with abducted princes or alchemically created monsters.

Unfortunately, he doesn't get much choice in the matter.
A Minorly Flawed Heist

Every story has a beginning. But, the thing is, there are billions of stories belonging to billions of people to choose from. They are the countless, yet completely unique, threads that intertwine to create the multicolored, infuriating rat’s nest that is life.

Where do you begin to untangle it?

Do you begin four hundred years in the past, with a forgotten city and a forgotten god long since buried under the heart of Amestris? Do you begin with the horrifying end of thousands, sacrificed for the sake of the crimson glow in the hand of the sole survivor? Or do you go further back, to the death of old Xerxes, accomplished in one night? After all, they both include the creation of a philosopher’s stone.

You could also make the case that the story, like many stories, begins with the Elric brothers. The lost princes of Xerxes, sons of the grieving monarchs. In many ways, they're the ones that get the ball rolling.

Perhaps this isn't even a story that can be told by one person. Even so, you must pick a person and place to begin with.

In this case, the person is a Xingese prince driven to desperation, and the place is the most prosperous desert city-state the world has ever seen.

—

Ling Yao was excellent at scheming. He had a talent for being shifty, if anything. His current predicament was not a result of poor planning. The plan had been foolproof: break into the Xerxes royal palace, sneak his way into the ultra-secret royal vault, snatch the secret to immortality, and run like hell back to Xing, where the emperor('s throne) awaited him.

Okay, so he might've left a few things up to chance.

But in his defense, the first half of the plan went flawlessly. The palace guards, made up of Cretans, Ishvalans, and sunburnt Amestrians in addition to those with the blood of old Xerxes, were few in number, but perceptive and well trained. But with the ability to sense their qi, Ling was able to infiltrate the sandstone palace with little difficulty. The vault was slightly more challenging, stuffed with an absurd amount of gargoyles that didn't seem to match the Xerxes aesthetic at all. Yet that unfamiliar aura, like a thousand voices whispering under their breath, led him to the stone. When he looked at the egg shaped stone, his faint unease was overwhelmed by giddiness. This could be what saved his clan from destruction. This could ensure his future as emperor of Xing. He'd found the secret to immortality.

He was about fifteen seconds into his victory dance when he heard something metal clank against the stone floor. He froze, and turned slowly. The girl in the doorway was blonde, tall, and distinctively blue eyed. She also held an artificial arm in two hands like a club, a metal leg already discarded on the floor.

“What the hell are you doing in here?”

Something about the way she looked at him made him irrationally afraid of her. Yes, she was physically smaller and probably less well trained in martial arts, but she also looked like she had already made up her mind to give him a concussion, and would not be dissuaded. Judging by the
subtle definition of her sunburnt biceps and the heft of that metal arm, Ling had about half a second to avoid getting bludgeoned half to death.

“So sorry, I don’t speak language well,” he said, over exaggerating his accent even as his voice involuntarily jumped up an octave.

The girl (an automail mechanic, judging by her choice of weapon and the grease smear on her brow) gave him an unimpressed look, as if to say, “really?”. The responding nervous laughter from his end, if anything, made her glare even more. There was half a beat of awkward silence before she launched herself forward with a roar.

Ling spun around, deciding it was past time he made himself scarce. He had noticed that there was no artificial light source in the partially underground vault, only the warm rays of the morning sun filtering through the windows high on the far wall. And as any good thief knows, windows are merely breakable doorways.

He scrambled through the vault, climbing across precariously stacked leather chests, a wooden shelf bent with the weight of dozens of clumsily made metal trinkets, and an ice sculpture of a roaring lion. Despite the fact the cool vault was well above freezing, the sculpture didn’t seem to be dripping at all. Ling didn’t have time to marvel at the oddities of Xerxes, as a quick glance behind him showed that the girl was in close pursuit. He may have shaved off a few seconds by taking the upper route, but she moved with an ease that could only be provided by familiarity with the terrain. He tipped over a heavy canvas covered by a tarp, effectively blocking her path. The tarp slid off as it tilted, but Ling was too far ahead to see the painting.

He ignored her creative and impressively multilingual cursing, opting instead to vault over a suit of armor and digging his kunai in between the gaps in the bricks. Scaling the wall took mere seconds, punching his cloth wrapped knuckles through the narrow window pane only a moment more. Going flat on his belly, he wormed his way out onto flat ground with only a scratch or two.

Ling cast a final look into the vault, wishing he had knocked the girl unconscious, or at the very least, locked her in. As it was, he had five minutes, at most, before she raised the alarm and the entirety of the royal guard was after him. Sticking to his idiom, Ling took to the rooftops.

Though he had been in Xerxes for over a month after his travels in Amestris were a complete bust, Ling was continually impressed with its city. It was completely different from any other place he had traveled, yet it reminded him of those places time after time. Xerxes was loosely controlled chaos, a collage of ethnicities, culture, and architecture under the harsh desert sun.

From above, it was a maze of wide boulevards, geometric grided city blocks, and winding alleyways no wider than a grown man’s shoulders. Wells and artificial lakes dotted public squares, and Ling knew from experience they were surrounded by city posters encouraging the public to rest for a moment by the cool water, as well as factually explaining the debilitating lifelong effects of heat stroke. To the East, there was the highest concentration of Xingese immigrants, and the sight of the traditional buildings made Ling’s chest ache with homesickness. On the Western side of the city, the Ishvalan refugees had generally clustered into one area. It stuck out, with the homes alchemically erected by the city years ago, shortly after the late King Bradley announced the war of Ishvalan extermination. According to local legend, those buildings had been raised over the course of three days by the king and crown prince of Xerxes alone. Of course, there was always construction there, creating new accommodations in the traditional manner for those devout to Ishvallah and unwilling to use alchemy, even secondhand. Other residential areas were occupied by a mixture of Cretan, Aerugan, and Amestrian immigrants, with the occasional Drachman that was very, very far out of their element. Ling noticed that Cretans preferred shorter, white-painted individual homes, while the
red brick monstrosities that lined Central’s streets appeared to be an Amestrian’s apartment building of choice even in the sweltering desert.

Central and southern Xerxes was public space. Government offices covered an entire block, because if there was one thing the people of Xerxes loved more than alchemy, it was bureaucracy. The center of that arrangement was The House, a circular marble building with no closed doors, allowing citizens to hear the raised voices of the senators debating at all hours of the day and night. How they ever managed to get things done with all that deliberation was beyond Ling, though the republican system appeared to serve the city-state well. In addition, there were baths, schools, alchemist training facilities, and libraries. So many enormous libraries. Just thinking about the first week of research on immortality he’d done made Ling’s head hurt. All he’d managed to find was warning after warning not to ever attempt to create a Philosopher’s Stone. This wasn't an issue, as Ling was a lone, broke, illegal immigrant incapable of even alkahestry. He did notice, however, that nobody ever said a word against stealing an existing stone.

Since then, Ling had been chasing what had felt like a fairytale. But he’d found it. He’d obtained immortality, no alchemy required.

The hell of it was managing to hold onto the stupid rock for more than an hour. He was on the run, essentially trapped in the city by a sea of burning sand. He needed to gather supplies for the return trip to Xing, but it wouldn't be smart to show his face to a vendor for a few days. So his real short term objective was to find a place to lie low. Unfortunately, he was short on both money and friends, as he mostly interacted with citizens to either needle them for information or cheat them out of food.

Briefly, he lamented sending Lan Fan and Fu back to the clan after their travels in Amestris proved to be a complete bust. Then he realized they would have probably broken his legs just for so much as thinking about stealing from the royal family, and was intensely glad he'd decided to search on his own.

Still, he needed to find a place he wouldn't be attacked. Somewhere the guards wouldn't look, simply because they assumed no man would choose to go there.

Then it came to him. An idea so stupid, so insane, it could only be a stroke of genius.

The ruins of Old Xerxes.
A Charismatic Dynamo at Work

Chapter Summary

In which Roy looks a bit stupid, the king and queen provide some information, and a manhunt begins.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Fürher President Roy Mustang shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He was unused to the feeling, as he was typically the one making people squirm. The reasons for his current state were twofold.

Reason one: Van Hohenheim’s personal guard had directed Roy and all five members of his staff to sit on cushioned wicker chairs arranged on a shaded balcony. The view of the city itself was breathtaking, but the issue was that Van Hohenheim had yet to make an appearance. It was imperative for the recently democratic Amestris to forge an alliance with Xerxes, the waypoint of trade between East and West. The fact the king of Xerxes had chosen to leave them waiting was a troubling sign.

Reason number two: It was hot as hell in Xerxes, and every one of them was wearing a full Amestrian dress uniform. Breda had already complained at great length about having to close his jacket, a sentiment shared by his comrades. Sweat pooled in the small of Roy’s back as he fought to remain still, while Fuery mopped his brow with a damp handkerchief. Hawkeye appeared to be utterly unaffected by the heat, which was as predictable as it was infuriating.

“Say, Chief, whose laundry do you think that is?” Havoc point at the edge of the balcony, where a white shirt, a sundress, and two pillowcases fluttered in the faint breeze, long since dried by the sun. Nobody had noticed that from the outside of the immense pale palace, which was still enormous among the other few skyscrapers of Xerxes.

“Uh,” said the charismatic Fürher President.

“That's strange,” said Falman, his good-natured curiosity coming out.

Roy looked behind them. Through the open glass balcony doors was a small sitting room with a couple of couches and a low table. There were two doors: the one their party had entered through, and the one that could have anything behind it.

Roy was spared from his curiosity by the former of the two gently swinging open. A pretty woman with chestnut hair stepped through, followed by a tall blond with his pale golden hair pulled back. The man held a large tray in front of him as well, though Roy couldn't see what was on it. He assumed they were servants, sent to occupy the guests while they waited.

“Honestly, dear, there's no reason for you to carry that, I can do that myself,” the woman chided fondly.

“There's no particular reason for you to carry this either, so it doesn't really matter either way, right?”

The woman gave a small smile at that.
“I suppose. I'm just sensitive to you thinking of me as an invalid, that's all.”

“Trust me, that is the last word I would ever associate you with,” said the man with a chuckle, and continued forward to face the Amestrians.

“I apologize for making you wait, but we've brought some nice, hot tea to make up for it.”

Unfortunately, that statement seemed to be correct. The tea in the enormous glass carafe appeared to be piping hot, ejecting steam into the already warm air. Roy briefly wondered if it was a test of their resolve by Hohenheim, and felt himself despair a little. Some of this must have shown on his team’s faces, because the woman lightly elbowed the man’s side.

“Darling, don't you think our guests would prefer iced tea instead? They must be parched after traveling all this way.”

“Oh! You're right, of course,” said the man, looking embarrassed. He set the tray down on the side table next to Roy, and clapped his hands once. The sound was oddly similar to a bell, for reasons he couldn't guess. Roy stopped thinking about that peculiarity when the man touched the carafe, too busy being bewildered by the frost spreading across the glass.

“No transmutation circle… Who are you?”

The man rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly.

“Oh, sorry. I forgot to introduce myself, didn't I?” He stuck his hand out for a handshake. “Van Hohenheim, at your service.”

Roy shot to his feet to shake the king’s hand, internally cursing himself. The rest, likely sensing his panic, stood to attention as well. So much for making a good impression. Now they just looked rude and sweaty.

Van Hohenheim’s hand was dry and calloused, though not from years of labor as a farmer or construction worker. Rather, the thick rough patches on the sides of his first and second fingers spoke to a lifetime with a pencil in his hand. He was taller than Roy, a slim figure with a neatly trimmed beard and spectacles perched atop his nose. He wore a brown vest and trousers, shirtsleeves rolled up to the elbows. It was a far cry from King Bradley’s dress uniform, covered in pins, or the opulence of the Drachman tsar.

“And this is my wife, Trisha Elric.” The woman captured Roy’s hand before softly kissing both cheeks. He noted, offhandedly, that she had the coloring of an Amestrian, and had retained her maiden name. Odd, considering she had married into royalty.

“Hello,” she said warmly, before continuing down the line to greet the others in the same manner, though she retained all of her sincerity. Roy didn't even have to look to know that Havoc was blushing to the tips of his ears.

“It's an honor to meet you, your Highnesses,” said Roy, shaking himself from his surprise.

“The honor is all ours, Fürher.”

“Fürher President,” Roy corrected, because his subconscious apparently had determined the entire diplomatic mission was a wash, and that a little more rudeness didn't matter. Roy wasn't entirely sure he managed to internalize his cringe of regret, but he was absolutely certain Hawkeye was giving him the most subtle death glare of disapproval the world had ever seen.
Amazingly, Hohenheim didn’t appear to be offended. If anything, a shrewd smile settled into place upon his features.

“There is a distinct difference between the two offices, isn’t there?”

Van Hohenheim picked up the tea, while Trisha collected the tray, which appeared to be laden with a wide variety of cups, ranging from flowery porcelain teacups to clay mugs.

“I like to think so,” said Roy, selecting a demitasse made of what appeared to be smooth sea glass.

“For example, you were elected by popular vote, and share power with the Amestrian parliament, correct?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Forgive me for my simplified understanding. It takes a long time for accurate information to reach the Far East.”

Roy sincerely doubted that, based on the sheer amount of merchants entering and leaving Amestris since parliament relaxed trade restrictions with foreign powers. Any person traversing the desert was forced to pass through Xerxes to resupply (and swap information). It was a given that traders would spread news of the aftermath of the Amestrian coup, just as news of the Xingese emperor’s declining health had reached the West. It was more likely the king was feigning a certain level of ignorance for his own reasons. He kept this observation to himself, instead letting the king pour him a cup of tea.

“For all your ambition, you don’t act very power-hungry,” commented the queen pleasantly. Roy liked to think he did a good job hiding his surprise at her bluntness, but he wasn’t quite sure.

“I simply want what is best for my country, and Amestris doesn’t need an autocrat.” It's a truth he's repeated before, which makes it a little easier to say out loud, only with a little more bravado. It's not the whole story behind his motivations, but it's close enough to ring true. That was fortunate, as something about their hosts gave Roy the impression that they would see through any lie he offered him.

“That’s very admirable. Don't you think so, dear?”

“Yes, dear,” said the king, moving to fill Hawkeye’s cup, which appeared to be carved out of a single chunk of wood.

“Thank you, your Highnesses.”

“There's no reason for such embarrassing titles. We're just Trisha and Hohenheim,” the former said with a cheery wave of dismissal, while Fuery picked up a dented metal tumbler.

“In that case, let’s do away with formalities altogether. Call me Roy.”

The royals shared a knowing look, and Roy had the feeling they had been married for far longer than their ageless countenances would imply.

“Of course,” said Hohenheim, filling the last cup and placing the half empty pitcher on the table in between Fuery and Breda. Belatedly, the Amestrians realized there were no more chairs for their hosts. There were a few panicked looks exchanged as they tried to silently determine which two would give up their seats, but it was unnecessary, as the king and queen immediately perched themselves on the balcony railing.
“Well then,” he said amiably, though his eyes had taken on a dangerous sharpness. “If we're speaking frankly here, we'd like to ask you a question.”

“Ask away,” said Roy, mouth dry as the desert they'd just traveled. He fought the urge to gulp down his tea, though he could feel how chilly the glass was on the back of his forefinger where it curled around the handle.

“Why are you here?”

“Pardon?”

“It's just that it's a bit confusing,” said Trisha sweetly, her hair fluttering in the wind. “That the leader of Amestris would come and visit us as part of a diplomatic mission. After all, the two of us hold no more political power than any other voting citizen of Xerxes.”

The Amestrians were aware of this to varying degrees, depending on how much they listened to the debrief. Xerxes could loosely be described as a constitutional monarchy. The elected senate controlled most things, including foreign policy. The notable exceptions were the public education and research departments, which the royal family technically inherited, but shared control of with an appointed cabinet. Word on the street was that this generation were dedicated researchers, rather than detached overseers, spending fair amounts of time in both labs and libraries. Havoc had called them ‘the royal librarians of Xerxes’ to lighten the mood coming in, though the joke may have fallen a bit flat on sunburnt ears, weary from travel.

“Be that as it may, the royal family is held in high esteem by the people of Xerxes. Power can lie in the hands of those that sway public opinion, as I'm sure you know.” This part was easy. The flattery, the smooth tone of voice, the confidence. It came as easy as breathing.

“You're asking us to endorse your administration?” Hohenheim was unreadable in that moment, eyes obscured by his glasses.

“Essentially, yes.”

“I see.”

The royals sat there, looking serene, eternal, and not in the slightest bit hot. Roy hadn't expected an immediate answer, but their silence was unnerving. Hohenheim shifted, looking away from Roy. He would be lying if he said it wasn't a relief.

“How much do you know about the history of Xerxes?”

Hohenheim had changed the subject rather abruptly, but Roy decided to see where he was going with it. He didn't have much choice in it anyways.

“I must admit, such volumes are scarce in Amestris, and what little exists is vague and inaccurate.”

More like outright speculation, at times. The taste of unsweetened tea soaked into his tongue like water into sand, leaving him less hot but just as uneasy as before.

“Allow me to summarize a portion. I imagine it would be interesting to an alchemist like yourself.”

“Of course.”

Hohenheim was no longer smiling, not by a long shot.
“To start with, this is not Xerxes. Or at least, not the original. The ruins of that civilization lie to the south of the city. Its heyday was several hundred years ago, but its records were lost then, along with the majority of its people.”

Roy nodded. This was fairly well known among the very small number of individuals in Amestris that actively gave a damn about Xerxes.

“It was a city state of considerable size, with a cultural emphasis on alchemy, much like our present Xerxes. On the other hand, their society had a thriving internal slave trade and a despotic ruler. His actions led to the destruction of his kingdom in a single night. You see, he sought immortality in his old age. He sought to create a Philosopher’s Stone.”

His words hung in the air, like an axe waiting to fall.

“This sounds less like history and more like a fairytale,” said Roy with an uneasy laugh.

“Don't be like that, Roy,” said Trisha sweetly. “You of all people know that it's all too possible. After all, you must have become aware of the experiments Bradley authorized to create and weaponize the stone after your coup.”

“We… We haven't fully gone over the research at Laboratory Five, and many of the trials surrounding it are ongoing.”

“But you do know the main ingredient required in their experiments, don't you?”

The title of royal librarians seemed very apt in that moment. As Roy expected, they were knowledgeable in classified foreign events as well as alchemy.

Roy hesitated. His private team was privy to all classified information, but to say they were unsettled by Laboratory Five was an understatement. It sickened them all.

“Human souls and tissue,” he said, with a casualness he didn't feel in the slightest. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his men turn grey.

“Yes,” said Trisha, her expression sad.

“The last king of the original royal line wanted to create a significantly larger stone than any you have seen before, if you can imagine. He created a massive transmutation circle around the city through a series of irrigation ditches and roads. His intention was to sacrifice four hundred slaves huddled together in an inner circle, but either through incompetence or deliberate sabotage, he managed to unintentionally kill everyone in Xerxes outside that circle, including himself.”

“Ironic,” said Roy flatly.

“Perhaps. At any rate, all that was left was four hundred freed men, women, and children, along with an immensely powerful alchemical artifact. Nameless and largely illiterate, they built our city up from the sand.”

“The first wave of immigration was a product of the Xingese civil war. Later, more came, looking to escape poverty created by the extremely competitive clan system.”

This was news to Roy. Xing was a mystery to Amestrians, as it was too far away to even dream of invading. As a result, it had been a matter of least concern during the Bradley regime.

“Fürher Bradley inadvertently contributed to our population as well, by driving Amestrian moderates
into the desert, afraid of being silenced after speaking out against the government. A significant number of Cretans and Aerugans living on the Amestrian border fled here as well when conflict broke out. Of course, their numbers are nothing compared to the eleven thousand Ishvalan refugees residing in the city.”

Roy knew damn well he'd gone as white as paper. He was coming to terms with the seemingly contradictory feelings of relief and guilt. Relief that the extermination had failed, paired with the normal sick feeling he associated with the subject of Ishval.

“The point my husband is trying to make in his roundabout, rambling way is this: Xerxes was built by and for the victims of powerful, ambitious men. How are you any different?”

It was so quiet in the room, Roy could practically hear his men sweating bullets. For Roy, a detached calm had settled over him. For all the experience he had in diplomacy, he was grateful for their blunt interrogation. It brought back bad memories, but their frankness was refreshing in comparison to the officers in Central, who would rather forget Amestris’s bloody recent history altogether. Clarity came to him then, and his determination blocked out any anxiety. He smiled, humorless and sharp.

“Words are cheap; sincerity is faked easily enough. I'll prove my intentions by making sure nothing like Ishval happens again. Not now, and not when I'm burning in hell,” he spat. Regret flooded his being, his mind and endless litany of shitshitshitshitshit. Where the hell had that kind of attitude come from? It was a banner day for Roy, who prided himself on his diplomatic charm. He'd done nothing but act the fool from the second he'd entered the palace.

Silence stretched taut between them, their expressions unreadable for a tense moment.

Quietly, the couple smiled at each other. Roy was certain he'd passed the test, whatever it was.

“That sounds like a sentiment Xerxes could gladly get behind,” said Hohenheim with a smile.

“Now that that's out of the way, how was your trip through the desert?” Trisha was no longer looking at Roy, he noted. Havoc looked around in confusion, only to see it reflected on his comrade’s faces.

“A-are you talking to us?”

“Of course. We've been terrible hosts, ignoring most of our guests while we've been giving Roy the third degree.”

“Uh,” said Havoc, scratching the back of his neck in a faintly embarrassed manner. Roy was abruptly relieved Hawkeye had confiscated his cigarettes before the meeting began. If she hadn't, Havoc probably would have been chewing one to a pulp then. “In that case, our trip was definitely… an experience.”

The understatement of the century. In addition to the scorching heat and general unpleasantness, they'd been held up by a sandstorm in the dead center of the desert between Amestris and Xerxes. The result of the delay was the party only reaching Xerxes hours before their meeting, sweaty and leaking sand from their uniforms. The hair at Roy's temples felt stiff with dried sweat, and his lips were cracked and dry. Though they had time to clean their faces and change clothes, Roy hoped their hosts didn't stand or look too closely. However, their expressions must have given them away, despite Havoc’s attempt at tact.

“That bad, huh?” Hohenheim chuckled.

“I know. You should visit the baths this afternoon,” said Trisha.
“They’re the pride of Xerxes, and very close by,” chimed in her husband. He pointed outside, to a large building with three domes decorated with blue tile sitting atop it.

“Wow, I’ve never been to a public bath,” said Fuery, turning wide eyes to Roy. He fought the urge to sigh like a beleaguered parent.

“That sounds excellent.”

“It’s almost a perfect time capsule from the Xerxes of several hundred years ago, before running water was standard throughout the city. It functions almost entirely on alchemy, even now. Arrays maintain a set indoor temperature, as well as constantly filtering and heating the water, keeping it sanitary without any other treatments.”

“Do you constantly have an alchemist on hand to activate them?” Roy leaned forward in his seat, intrigued by the prospect of state alchemists being employed for other things than violence. Even so, the arrangement seemed unlikely.

“Why would we? The arrays only need to be recharged every fortnight.”

Roy very narrowly avoided doing a spit take.

“Really? With something as finicky as an ambient heating array?” Enormous flames that required only the manipulation of oxygen and a spark were downright easy when compared to the gentler warmth humans needed.

“Maybe you should bring a copy of the circle up to Briggs, chief. Improve the general’s mood,” said Breda.

“Nah, she’d bifurcate him on the spot,” said Havoc, before chugging his tea like a pint of beer. Fuery winced.

“‘Bifurcate’, huh? That’s a pretty fancy word for you, Havoc.”

“Lay off, man. I’ve just been using this novelty vocabulary calendar, the kind that teaches you a new word every day.”

“I’m glad to hear you’ve been using my gift,” said Falman, looking to his left with a smile. He immediately blanched upon seeing Hawkeye’s expression.

All four of them promptly shut their mouths, including Fuery, who hadn’t said a word yet. The royals did a very good job of stifling their amusement in the meantime.

“Well, if you have an interest in either our linguistics or our alchemy, I’d recommend a visit to one of our libraries.” If Trisha had been smiling before, she was outright glowing now.

“Yes, they’re our pride and joy,” said Hohenheim, looking up from where he was folding laundry from the line. He placed a pillowcase in the basket at his feet, smiling amicably. “Unfortunately, there’s not much else in the way of tourism here. I hope you don’t become too bored with the city during your stay.”

“On the contrary, sir. I regret that our time here is so short already,” said Roy. He meant it. There were simply too many people to schmooze and ask for favors, not to mention that he wouldn’t be able to see the results of their solar power research he’d heard whispers about. Still, he couldn’t afford to be away from Amestris for too long, with the political climate so unstable.
“What is it that requires your attention in Central, lately?”

“Just cleaning up Bradley’s mess. It’s been a nightmare, to be honest.” He grimaced. “I envy you here. I’d much rather oversee research alchemists than sign paperwork all day.”

“With all due respect, sir, it wouldn't take you all day if you didn't take twenty minute breaks every hour,” said Hawkeye flatly, before taking a sip of her tea. Roy glared at her betrayal, which was about as useful as a glass pickaxe. The other four were too busy, embroiled in yet another intense, thoughtful debate.

“You seriously put milk in iced tea, Fuery?”

“What, it's not that weird to put milk in tea.”

“Hot tea,” said Havoc, looking to Breda for support. Unfortunately, the latter looked undecided.

“People put milk in hot and iced coffee,” pointed out Falman, ever the pragmatist.

“That's like comparing apples and oranges and you know it. Come on, Breda, back me up here.”

Breda never had to decide his answer, as they were all distracted by choked laughter. They looked up in unison, and almost fell out of their chairs.

The queen’s face was soaked with tears, but she was laughing wholeheartedly. The four soldiers exchanged panicked looks. Was it something they said?

“Ed probably would have a lot to say right now,” she managed to get out. “He really hates milk with a passion. Always has, even though he's always wanted to be tall.”

For a moment, it looked as if she was caught up in a memory, before a fresh wave of tears came. Her laughter deteriorated into broken sobs, wrecked and raw with pain. Her husband pulled her into his chest, letting her cry against his shoulder.

“I-I'm so sorry. I'm such a wreck…”

“There's no need to apologize, Trisha. Believe me, I know how hard it gets, this time of year. I miss them too,” he said around the lump in his throat, his eyes stinging with unshed tears.

The Amestrians immediately recognized that they shouldn't be witnessing something so intimate.

“Thank you for your time and your advice. We'll give you your privacy now.”

Hohenheim nodded, only for Trisha push herself upright and dry her eyes.

“I promise I’m not always like this,” she said with a self deprecating laugh. “But our son’s birthday is tomorrow.”

Roy nodded. They didn't need to explain any more.

“I'm sorry for your loss.”

He turned to go, his men on his heels. They had seen plenty of grieving parents over the years, usually the relatives of fallen soldiers, but they weren't eager to witness the royal family crying over the dead and gone.

“They're not dead.”
Her voice was small, but full of conviction directed at everyone in the room, including herself.

“They’re not dead, you hear me?” Her voice rose in volume, even as it wavered tremulously. Without looking, Roy knew she was on the verge of breaking down again. His chest constricted painfully.

Before Roy could even imagine his reply to that, the door burst open once more, hitting the wall with a cacophonous bang.

“Miss Elric! Mister Hohenheim!”

The figure in the doorway was a girl in her late teens, dressed like a shop mechanic. Her chest heaved with exertion, and her eyes were wild as she leaned against the frame.

“Winry! What happened?” The royals rushed to the girl, forgetting their own troubles immediately.

“We need to find him before he gets away into the market, it'll be crowded today, we'll lose him—”

“Winry, calm down. Take a few deep breaths and start from the beginning,” said Hohenheim, calm with an undercurrent of parental concern.

Despite how worked up she seemed to be, Winry obeyed.

“I… I was going to leave Ed’s birthday present downstairs, for when he comes back, but there was a thief there. I tried to take him on, but he ended up escaping.”

“Are you hurt anywhere?”

“No, but we need to start searching, before he gets away.”

The royals seemed relieved at that, but didn’t relax.

“You called him a thief. Did you see him take anything?”

“Well, it looked like he was dancing around with a red stone the size of my fist when I came in.”

“A ruby?”

“It couldn’t have been, it was too opaque,” she said, shaking her head.

“Damnit,” muttered the king.

“Wait,” said Roy. “You don’t mean he stole—”

“The philosopher’s stone of old Xerxes? Yes, that's exactly what I mean.”

“Let me help you hunt him down,” he said, without hesitation.

Winry looked at him, noticing the Amestrians for the first time.

“I don’t know what the hell a philanthropist’s rock is, but how do we know you greedy bastards don’t just want it for yourselves?”

Roy stared, taking a moment to suppress his rising anger, with limited success.

“Because we know exactly what kind of destruction it's capable of, and we're fully aware the last place it belongs is in the hands of a military power,” he said, barely refraining from raising his voice.
Winry looked somewhat surprised by the sentiment, before quickly regaining her determination.

“In that case, I'm coming with you.”

Fuery, for god knows what reason, decided to step in.

“Miss, I know you must be in shock, but it's important not to do anything rash—”

“I'm not hysterical, I'm fucking furious!”

“Uh—”

“That creep had no right to be pawing around their stuff like that. When I catch up to him, he's gonna wish he was never born!” At some point, she had produced an enormous spanner from the pockets of her jumpsuit and was brandishing it with an absolutely terrifying expression on her face. Of course, Hawkeye was the first person to interrupt that.

“That's understandable, but it'd be more helpful if you could give us a physical description to begin an organized search.”

Winry deflated a bit, thinking.

“Yeah, okay, you're right. He was young, late teens or early twenties. He's about as tall as Hohenheim, too. He was Xingese, with a long black ponytail. He was wearing loose pants and a yellow jacket, but no shirt.”

“Any distinct facial features?”

“Yeah. He had a long face and nose, with a strong jaw and thin eyes. The bastard was smiling a lot too.”

“Any weapons?”

“No guns, just some throwing knives and a- it looked like a machete, but way bigger, if that makes sense.”

“Ok,” said Roy, nodding. Hawkeye flipped around the notebook she'd been drawing in.

“Is this close?”

Winry leaned in, and found herself looking down at the dopey, halfway handsome face of her enemy.

“Yeah, that's pretty close,” she sighed.

“Since when is portraiture one of your talents, Hawkeye?”

“Since Major Armstrong decided I need a hobby,” she said flatly.

All those present turned to Hohenheim for his final approval.

“Even if I can convince the city to allow us to conduct searches at the border, we're going to need all the help we can get. The stone has been sitting inert in the palace for centuries. It'll be a challenge to convince people it even exists without them knowing such a thing is possible.”

“Okay, then. Let's get started.”
Chapter End Notes

I promise this shit is going to have consistent updates and a real, satisfying conclusion. This is looking to be my longest work yet (which isn't saying much), so I'd really love it if you could drop some words of encouragement/criticism/questions in the comments.
An Example of Humanity

Chapter Summary

A memory in which Hohenheim is very proud of his sons and a trio of automail freaks reunite. Additionally, an angry, grieving Ishvalan takes the first steps in healing.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hohenheim observed the camp of Ishvalans, and felt his stomach turn. The injuries sustained were terrible: missing limbs, bloody bandages that hadn't been changed in weeks, scores of haunted children, the majority of them suddenly orphans. At the forefront were the Rockbells, almost unrecognizable after months amidst the massacre.

The sun, rising in the east, slowly chased away the dark and chill of a desert night. Its golden light cast upon the city, revealing more of the refugees huddled about meager fires hastily made for them by the border officers. They've been here for thirty minutes already, while the king’s been requisitioning teachers and students from the med school, with limited success.

He strode over to his old friends, who looked as if they are the only thing keeping the other upright. Up close they appeared to have aged decades in less than a year, exhausted and beaten down. He resisted the urge to reach out and touch them, prove their existence.

“Are either of you hurt?”

They smiled weakly, shaking their heads.

“No, but at least half the adults with us need professional care,” said Yuriy.

“Alright, I've made some calls, so medical and food supplies should be on their way.”

They showed a little bit of relief at that.

“Mom? Dad?”

Hohenheim turned around to see three small figures in pajamas and sandals. His sons each held one of their best friend’s hands as they displayed the similar shared emotion of confused hope.

“Winry!”

With the girl running forward and her parents stumbling on aching feet, the three of them met in the middle with a fierce embrace. Hohenheim had no doubt all three were sobbing from happiness and relief. After all, Winry had not inherited her crybaby nature from her grandmother. The king turned away from the reunion with a smile, only to cast a stern look upon his own progeny.

“What are you two doing here?”

“We heard there was something was happening at the western border, so we decided to come see,” said Ed, unrepentant. Ever since regaining complete independence with his automail the previous
year, his always adventurous son had grown bolder in his shenanigans. Luckily, they were characterized by boundless curiosity, rather than deliberate mischief.

“It's probably too much to hope for that you told anyone where you were going,” he sighed. Al had the decency to look guilty, though Ed remained cavalier.

“It's because we decided to check it out that Winry got to see her parents again.”

“Yes, but what if it wasn't some refugees and her parents? What if it was a battalion of Amestrian soldiers? You could've walked right into an invasion.” When Hohenheim was a boy, such a scenario would have been far fetched, to say the least. With their neighbor to the west under Bradley’s rule, it seems all too real of a threat, one they are woefully unprepared for. Ed mulled that over, a thoughtful look on his face, before he regained his confidence.

“I could protect Al and Winry, then take the rest on myself!”

“That's not fair! I got the same training from Teacher as you; I could kick their butts too, Ed.”

“Yeah, Dad. We could be the battlin’ Elric brothers!”

In the face of their endearing enthusiasm, Hohenheim’s stern facade crumbled into fondness. He's never been great at laying down the law when it came to his sons. It's a miracle they haven't been spoiled rotten.

“Hey, who are all these people, anyway?”

With a lump in his throat, Hohenheim explained the circumstances around Ishval as briefly as possible. He watched as his children shifted from confusion to horror to anger, all in the space of a few seconds.

“Why aren't we getting them food and water?” Ed looked ready to personally confront whoever was responsible.

“They've only just arrived, first thing in the morning. We're gathering supplies right now. All we can do is wait for them to arrive.”

Ed frowned at that.

“No.”

“What do you mean, ‘no’? Ed?”

There was no time to question Ed, as he was already on the move. The boy ran through the camp, mismatched heels pounding against the sand. He stopped in a clearing between groups about six feet across before clapping. The sound rang out as clear as a chime, attracting attention from the surrounding refugees. He pressed his hands to the ground, and the crackle of a golden transmutation dancing along the sand as a well formed before their eyes.

It was impressive, even compared to the rest of his son's work. A well, with a central fountain spitting multiple jets of water for people to fill buckets or flasks of water. Of course, because this was Ed they were talking about, the fountain was decorated with a lion and a dragon, locked in fierce combat. The people surrounding him stared, awed but wary. Seeing this, Ed addressed their concerns in his usual brusque manner. Cupping his hands under a stream before drinking it down.

“The water’s clean, I promise!” Nine years old and small for his age, smiling mouth wet with
dripping water and cheeks red from running, Ed seemed about the least threatening thing in the world in that moment.

The children were the first to come, tentatively creeping forward with canteens in hand. They took their first sips cautiously, before chugging and refilling their bottles as fast as they could. It was as if they feared the water would turn to dust in their mouths any second now. Hohenheim imagined how long their journey must have taken, and how little supplies they had brought from their homeland. The adults soon followed, gathering water and carrying it back to the wounded and elderly that had survived the trek. The camp came alive in the sun, peeling away from their huddles and smoldering fires to gather by the well.

There is nothing that could ever taste better than cool water on a dry tongue, Hohenheim noted.

Ed watched the proceedings with a smile on his face. He'd always been like this, Hohenheim thought. Compassionate to a fault and unable to stand by while others were hurting. In that moment, the king’s eye can't help but focus on those metal limbs, so out of place on a healthy young child. That familiar shame filled the pit of his stomach as he remembered exactly how far Ed’s selflessness could go. He looked down, realizing Alphonse has already left his side to go to his brother's. So, he noted with a touch of humor, he'd just been standing in the middle of nowhere, alone and looking to be on the verge of tears.

His self-consciousness disappeared when he saw a shadow fall over Ed. He started walking forward, aware that he shouldn't leave his children unattended. The man standing over Ed had not moved for several seconds, garnering the attention of both parent and child.

He was twice Ed's size, and the upper part of his face was swathed in bandages spotted with red. Out of the mass of cloth peeked one red eye, glaring down at Ed. The man's right arm was covered in intricate lines of thick black ink, leading down to a flexing hand. Inexplicably, Hohenheim found himself full of dread. In that instant he was absolutely certain that man meant Edward nothing but harm.

The right hand was lifted, slowly and deliberately, all the tendons standing out in sharp relief as his fingers twitched and spasmed. Hohenheim broke into an ungainly sprint, blood pounding in his ears. The hand trembled above Ed's skull, obviously capable of concussing a child, but Hohenheim had the feeling the intended results would be much worse. The scene moved in horrible slow motion as Ed, a child who rarely assumed the worst of anyone, looked up at the man, perplexed. Hohenheim's stomach dropped as he realized that he was too far away, that he wasn't going to make it-

“Woah, did you design that array?” In wonder, Ed seized the arm by thumb and pinky, turning it over, looking at it from every angle. As he approached, Hohenheim saw that the tattoo was an alchemical array, though unlike any he'd seen before. The man seemed considerably less threatening with his mouth hanging open and his spine hunched over to accommodate the child’s height. Hohenheim slowed to a stop beside Ed and Al, who was in a similar state of awe at the man's tattoo.

“No. It's my brother's,” he rumbled in soft voice that sounded like it hadn't been used in years. The look in his eye was infinitely more complex than the rage from earlier.

“Yes?”

“No. It's my brother's,” he rumbled in soft voice that sounded like it hadn't been used in years. The look in his eye was infinitely more complex than the rage from earlier.

“Really? He must be really talented, to combine these different schools of alchemy so... so,” Ed struggled for words.

“Elegantly,” said Al. His love of purple prose and romance novels was well known by those close to him, so his word choice was hardly a surprise. Ed glanced between the tattoo and his brother, looking very much like he wanted to argue the point, but came up empty.

“Brother! You can’t just ask someone that,” hissed Alphonse reproachfully.

“Yeah, you’re right, Al. I should be able to figure it out on my own.”

“That’s not what I said!”

All the same, he let his curiosity take hold of him, and inspected the array closely.

“Earth and air… Brother, are you sure this is complete?”

Ed was silent for a few moments before looking up, grinning widely.

“Nope! This array is purely meant to deconstruct matter without reconfiguring it, Al.”

With a sick feeling in his gut, Hohenheim remembered that right hand, inches from his son's face. He remained close enough to intervene if the man showed such violent inclinations again.

“Woah,” said Alphonse, staring up at the stranger in awe. “You're brother's amazing, sir.”

Hohenheim smiled. His son’s habitual formality with strangers was as adorable as ever.

“Where is he? Can we meet him?”

The Ishvalan pulled his hand back with an odd gentleness before sitting down on the sand. His left hand rose up to scrub at his face before he remembered his injury and abruptly dropped it.

“No. He's dead now.”

Alphonse looked at Ed, undoubtedly imagining losing his own older brother. The fact that he had already come very close to being an only child once probably didn't help matters much. Both his sons looked down at their feet, ashamed.

“Sorry, sir.”

The man sighed heavily.

“It's alright.” Hohenheim got the feeling that it certainly wasn't, but the man didn't seem nearly so angry. More exhausted than anything, really.

“Hey,” said Ed, shy for once in his life. “I could heal your face, if you want. I know alkahestry too.”

The man seemed taken aback, going off of what features were visible. He fought with himself for a moment before making up his mind, albeit with reservations.

“It's an ugly wound,” he warned.

“That's alright,” said Ed with a grin and gestured to the seams of scar tissue where metal met flesh. “I've seen worse.”

Ed’s never bothered to cover his automail, usually to avoid fabric snags or heatstroke. Winry had always heartily approved of his decision to display the Rockbell family engineering marvel, and the rest of them had adjusted pretty quickly. The man nodded solemnly before unwrapping the bandages about his skull.
He wasn't exaggerating in the slightest. The cut was vaguely x-shaped, underneath the crusts of dried blood. It hadn't scabbed over in the center, leaving exposed flesh that oozed droplets of blood like condensation on a glass of ice water. Ed sucked in a breath between his teeth before humming thoughtfully.

“Okay. It looks like an easy fix, but it'll end up leaving a big scar.”

“That's fine. It'll be a reminder.” A reminder of what, nobody asked.

“Al, can you get me some water?” The younger brother nodded and set about drawing a transmutation circle in the sand, presumably to create some kind of container. Though unable to transmute without a circle, as was the case for almost every alchemist that had not experienced human transmutation, Al was nothing short of a prodigy in his own right. Skilled with multiple schools of alchemy, including healing, construction, and combat, Al could easily surpass alchemists three times his age. Meanwhile, Ed clapped his hands, unwilling to leave the lacerations open any longer. Calling upon the Dragon’s Pulse, Ed knit together the skin with ease. The Ishvalan had a very strange look on his face. Hohenheim understood the feeling. Alkahestry, though not typically painful, induced a unique and unnerving sensation not unlike small insects crawling across the skin. In a few quick seconds, it was done, and Al placed a stone bowl brimming with water by his brother's side. For the first time since he'd arrived, Ed turned to his father.

“Hey Dad, can I borrow your handkerchief?”

“You can keep it,” Hohenheim said, knowing exactly what the cloth would be used for. Predictably, he wet it and immediately began using it to mop the gore off the man's face.

“Your forehead’s gonna be kinda tender for a little bit, but the cut won't reopen.”

The man grunted and, feeling the cloth leave his face, opened his eyes. He was much younger and far more handsome than Hohenheim had first thought. His features, though serious, were no longer twisted in rage. His forehead was marked with an enormous white scar, just as Ed had predicted. The man grabbed the bowl and drained it before wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. He looked up to see all of Ed's considerable focus on him.

“Woah,” whispered Ed. “You look so fucking cool.”

“Brother!”

“Edward,” sighed his father.

Miraculously, the man cracked a smile, even if it was only a momentary twitch of the mouth.

“Hey,” said Ed, ignoring his family's disapproval at his word choice. “What's your name?”

“I have forsaken it,” he rumbled. Ed frowned at that.

“I have forsaken it,” he rumbled. Ed frowned at that.

“Then how do people talk to you, or get your attention? I can't just yell “hey you” or whatever and hope you turn around.”

“That hasn't been an issue,” said the nameless man, his expression half annoyed, half amused.

“Well, if you're going to live in Xerxes, you should probably get a name, or they won't let you check out library books or give you a state ID,” said Al thoughtfully.

“I can live with that.”
“Yeah, but if you don't, people are just going to call you whatever they want. Are you really okay with being “Tattoo” or “Scar” for the rest of your life?”

“…It doesn't bother me,” said the man, and Hohenheim had the feeling he got some enjoyment out of being stubborn. Ed sighed dramatically but let the matter drop as he flopped down in the sand.

“Where are all these people going to live, Dad? There's so many of them,” said Al, tugging at his pant leg to get his attention.

Hohenheim looked around at the refugees, over five hundred in number. If the Rockbell’s testimony was to be believed, scores of injured Ishvalans would likely be arriving in Xerxes very frequently for the foreseeable future. To make things more difficult, Xerxes was already crowded to begin with.

“It looks like we'll have to set up a temporary camp while the city expands to accommodate all these people with new construction. They'll need latrines and shade in the meantime, too,” he said thoughtfully. Ed had already begun scanning the barren horizon, his brow furrowed in thought.

“Hey, scar-man,” he began, putting his earlier threats in action. “Where should we build a camp?”

Nobody got the chance to answer before Ed tore off into the desert, apparently having found what he was looking for. Hohenheim, Alphonse, and “Scar” all went after him. Possessing both a long stride and a head start, Hohenheim was the first to reach the sand dune Ed was stopped in front of. Ed raised his hands to clap, but his father snagged him by his flesh forearm before they could connect. Ed whipped around, frustrated.

“Hey! What's the big idea?”

“Just reminding you to start with a strong foundation this time, that's all,” he said, smiling at Ed's embarrassed flush.

“I wasn't gonna forget,” he huffed, pulling his hand out of the loose hold.

“I know. Can I help you? It would go faster.”

Imperceptibly, Ed nodded, and Hohenheim could not conceal his grin. In sync, they clapped, pressed their hands to the ground, and built the first of many buildings together.

Chapter End Notes

About Scar. In this, the Rockbell's other patients manage to sedate him (and explain things) before he attacks the good doctors, who bring them to Xerxes with his peers to entirely avoid the extermination order. He has previously used his right arm to kill Amestrian soldiers on his way out of Ishval, but Ed building the well is the first time he's seen alchemy since being in the war zone/kimblee killing his family, hence the panicky, potentially dangerous initial reaction. Also, thanks for all the comments, they've been super helpful in motivating and guiding me through writing.
An Embarrassment For All Parties Involved

Chapter Summary

In which Ling scarpers with limited success, and we get a bit closer to the main plot.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The plan had been perfect. Or it should have been, at any rate. The ruins were, theoretically, the best hideout he could hope to find. As a general rule, the people of Xerxes prized logic and scientific reasoning above all other forms of thought, with one exception.

The ruins were the subject of countless superstitions. For example, that the disaster that befell the ancient civilization was a flesh-eating virus, and it still remained in the form of a deadly miasma over the ruins. Others told the tale of a cursed being, forced to patrol the ruins, perpetually ravenous and searching for human flesh to sate its hunger. Several unsolved disappearances had been pinned on the monster, over the course of the last decade in particular.

In short, people didn't approach the ruins, to the point an artificial lake had been created as a barrier between them and the southwestern side of the city. Their reasoning, no matter how unreasonable it was, was eagerly exploited by Ling. By all rights, it should have gone excellently.

Unfortunately, the Amestrians hadn't been in town long enough to be scared off by the rumors.

He crouched on the roof of a stone pavilion, watching the group come through. They all were dressed in tight undershirts with blue military trousers, having abandoned their jackets in a pitiful attempt to keep a low profile. There were six of them, firearms at the ready, with the exception of the man at the front. His only weapon was the alchemical array stitched onto his right glove. Ling hadn't the slightest idea what it did, but he assumed it was combat oriented. He tuned into their words, the only other noise besides the desert wind.

“Hughes is gonna be pissed that you put off visiting him for this,” said the blond that smelled like an overturned ashtray.

“Whatever. Let's just get the stone back to the king,” muttered the alchemist.

“Maybe encourage him to put some proper security on it this time, too.”

Having become familiar with their qi, Ling decided to distance himself from the search party. After a moment, he dropped off the back of the building, where the sand muffled the sound of his landing considerably.

It occurred to Ling, very belatedly, that there were several negatives to hiding in the ruins, despite all the positives. For one, the buildings were widely spaced, forcing Ling to lose his typical advantage of height and agility. He lost maneuverability on the ground as well, due to the thick covering of sand deposited on many of the streets by gusts of wind. The architecture wasn't conducive to hiding, either. Ling cursed the ancients for their love of open marble pavilions and natural light.

The prince wondered if he'd made a grave mistake in leaving the city, and the camouflage of crowds.
There had certainly been no shortage of Xingese to blend in with, though that in itself was a problem. He'd been paranoid about rival clans recognizing him and either attacking him directly or sabotaging his heist.

It looked like he would have to keep moving in order to avoid running into any of the soldiers, unfortunately. The movement would be exhausting, but at least he would have an advantage with his qi sensing. While he contemplated this, the philosopher's stone remained tucked into his sash, warmed by his body heat. He imagined it as a stone heart, thought he could feel it pulse with some unknown energy against his abdomen.

That train of thought led only to him focusing on the growling of his stomach. His breakfast had been hours ago, and not nearly as large as he would've liked. He'd been eating nothing but cold food lately, seeing as he was technically homeless. It occurred to him that he could at least fill his belly with water, even if he'd already consumed all his food. And that was why he began the tricky business of making his way around his pursuers to the only functioning well in the ruins.

It wasn't easy, but by observing his surroundings with all his senses, Ling made it to the center of the city. The well was located in front of the largest building in the area, which Ling assumed had been the palace. Or, he thought bitterly, another one of their damned libraries. Pushing that thought aside, Ling promptly dunked his face in the water. It was blessedly cool on his hot, dry face. He relaxed completely as he came up for air. Flipping his soaked fringe out of the way, Ling ducked down for more. He sighed happily. After a minute of this, Ling stood up, feeling pleasantly refreshed and ready for several hours of evading the soldiers-

Behind him, Ling heard the click of a safety being turned off. He'd heard that a lot, traveling in Amestris.

“Slowly raise your hands above your head,” said a deep, feminine voice.

Internally, Ling panicked, but did as he was told. Of all the times he could've chosen to let his guard down, he cursed himself.

“Now turn around.”

Ling did so, and got a good look at her. He'd seen her earlier with her comrades, but this time she was much closer. Her hair was shiny and freckles dappled her nose, but her features were twisted in the stern expression one would expect of a soldier. She moved closer, into point-blank range. Ling’s hand itched to draw his sword, for all the good it would do him.

“Take off the sword.” She narrowed her eyes. “Slowly.”

Ling smiled in a manner he hoped was charming and lowered his hands to comply. He watched her, until she inevitably blinked. Then he sprung into action.

He kicked high, striking her dominant hand. Her shot went to the far left. Her gun dropped to the ground, likely due to the pain in her wrist. Ling kicked it away, skittering across the stone. She reached for her second sidearm, so Ling launched into a series of hand-to-hand attacks that she was barely able to deflect or dodge. She couldn't keep up, probably because she was more used to firearms than close quarters combat. All he needed to do was find some way to safely incapacitate her and-

“Hawkeye!”

Ling looked over to his right, and cursed aloud. The alchemist had arrived, likely after he heard the
gunshot. “Hawkeye” took advantage of his distraction to kick dust in his eyes, making him curse again, only twice as loud and three times as vulgar. Fu would be ashamed if he was there. Eyes stinging, Ling didn’t see her move to sweep his legs out from under him. With that, she shifted the fight from martial arts to straight up grappling. Despite Ling’s clear size advantage, her hands were like two steel traps about his throat and pinning him to the ground. In seconds, she was above him, sweaty and grim faced.

“Take the shot, sir!”

Take the shot? But the alchemist was unarmed, he thought. Ling remembered the glove with unknown abilities he'd noticed earlier. His eyes, now more or less clear from dust, widened. With a massive surge of strength, Ling managed to roll them to his left. The line of flame flashed through the air, fast enough to be mistaken for lightning. To his horror, he realized he had been less than a foot away from being roasted to death. His second, less reasonable, thought was something along the lines of, “oh, so that's what the glove does”. The third thought was that all the arm hairs on his left side had been singed off.

He need to take out the alchemist, and quickly. He sprung to his feet and withdrew a kunai from the folds of his clothing, barely taking a moment to aim. The throw was less accurate than usual, likely due to the damage to his eyes and lack of oxygen. It was a non fatal blow to the upper arm, which was both a relief and extremely unfortunate.

“Boss!”

As if on cue, the other four soldiers filed in behind their commanding officer, holding far too many guns for Ling's liking. And that was before they started shooting. So Ling fell back on the old standby: the Xingese smoke grenade. Unfortunately, it didn't have the same effect on a sunny day in an open space. It barely provided enough cover for Ling dash away and skid into a crouch behind the the lip of the well, which happens to be what he did. He cursed (mentally this time) as violently as he knew how. Given how messy he'd made things, it looked like he'd have to go on a stealth offensive and take them out individually before they could contact others outside the ruins. Ling peeked up over the edge of the well, placing a hand on the edge to steady himself.

Well, that had been the plan. Instead, the stone tile depressed with an audible click, and before he could even question that, Ling found himself tumbling down a horribly uncomfortable set of stone stairs. By the time he recovered, he could taste iron in his mouth from a bitten tongue, and the harsh sunlight was only shining through the rectangular trap door. Or, it was, until the cover slid closed without so much as a seam to prove its existence. With that, Ling was trapped below ground.

But because Ling had always considered himself something of an optimist, he also noted that he had quite effectively escaped the soldier that outnumbered him. He didn’t quite manage to escape the feeling that he'd merely traded one problem for another, though.

Seeing as one end of the staircase was suddenly a dead end, Ling made an executive decision to continue farther down. He did so, skimming one hand along the wall to steady himself in the darkness.

After who knew how many minutes of descending, Ling reconsidered his surroundings. Was there a faint light source around the corner, or was he imagining it? He went forward, desperately wishing it to be the former. After the floor leveled out, a hallway began. Ling started to hear rushing water, then began to run in earnest. The sound of water drew closer and closer, as did the open doorway. Ling burst through into the new area, only to be greeted with something far stranger than he could have imagined.
An enormous cavern stretched before him, larger than multiple city blocks. The space was lit by something of a perpetual moonlight glow, emitted by multiple white glass orbs atop stone posts scattered about. Ling assumed they used the same incandescent technology of light bulbs, though these seemed a bit different. They lacked the warm yellow glow of a streetlight, instead possessing a soft white eminence. The unusual lights illuminated the walls of the cavern, streaked through with veins of gold and chunks of rubies that glittered at different angles. Even the waterfall seemed to glow in the back of the cave as it tumbled out of some underground river into a crystal clear pool. Or maybe it was the moss surrounding it faintly glowing.

Either way, it wasn't that that drew Ling's attention. An underground tower, covered in ivy. There was a window at the top, through which that white glow could be seen. Ling thought very hard for all of five seconds before deciding to go inside. After all, he'd already fallen into a weird subterranean landscape, so he might as well fully explore his surroundings. Besides, he might be able to find some food up there.

This new resolve hit a snag pretty quickly, mainly because the tower lacked any sort of doorway. Frankly, Ling didn't see the point of the added security, considering the cavern itself was extremely inaccessible already. It didn't matter much to Ling what their reasoning was. He supposed he could feel around for some sort of mechanism like the one he'd stumbled across by the well, but that sounded horrible tedious and unnecessary. Ling looked up once more and grinned. It appeared he wouldn't need to do that.

Like any good thief, Ling knew full well that windows were just doorways waiting to happen.

Chapter End Notes

Hi! Chapter five is already done, but I'd like to hear your opinions on the story so far before I make the final edits and post.
Chapter Summary

Ed gets 30% off in a deal with what may or may not be the devil.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The full moon shining through the balcony was an unintentional element, but Ed was grateful for its gentle light. Unfortunately, it didn't do anything to lessen the feeling that he was conducting an evil occult ritual. In a sense, he was, so he supposed it was only fitting.

Trisha Elric lay in the center of the bed, as still as a corpse between laboured breaths. It hurt Ed to look at his mother, but he reminded himself that the pain was nothing compared to what she felt. So he tried not to look away. It was the middle of the night, but his father likely wouldn't emerge from his study until morning, searching for solutions, cures, pain relievers, anything that kept him from feeling useless as his wife's health declined. Ed couldn't blame him; up until recently, he'd been doing the same thing.

Hopefully, that would end tonight. However, horrible disappointment or death were just as likely outcomes. This entire venture had been built on secondhand accounts and conjecture; the scientist in him was appalled. More importantly, time was running out. This was Ed’s last ditch effort, and he didn't give a damn about proper investigation at this point.

Al was asleep in their room, as he had been for the past few hours. Early on in his research, Ed had considered collaborating on this with his brother, before quickly disregarding the idea. Al was only six, and Ed was the older brother. It only made sense for him to make the sacrifice alone. That, and Al probably would’ve tried to talk him out of it.

A little bit away from the foot of the bed, he unfolded the thick parchment until it revealed the array, as big as their kitchen table. The result of weeks of research, it functioned more like a summoning circle than any alchemy he'd used. Though elements of human transmutation were there, its focus was not to revive the dead.

In the moonlight, seven-year-old Edward Elric kneeled by the paper. He took a moment to try and calm his expectations, before touching his fingers to the edge of the array.

The thick ink lines glowed gold, then red. This was an interesting oddity, one that he barely had time to note before the array split down the middle. When the split revealed a single, massive eye, Ed didn't even think to make a noise. He was relieved, oddly enough. The results of his work, bizarre as they were, were infinitely better than the disappointment he had so poorly prepared himself for. Again, he didn't have time to marvel, with how quickly things were moving.

Black… tentacles, or hands, or whatever they were filled the air, wrapping around Ed. Somehow, he forced himself not to recoil against the alien touch, staying still as they slowly dragged him towards the iris. Just as he was wondering whether or not he should hold his breath, the scene changed.

The tall black doors suspended in an endless white void threw him for a loop, admittedly, though
only for a moment. Then he was struck by the realization he'd reached the gate he'd heard so much about. For some reason, he hadn't expected it to be quite so literal.

Anyways, he was at the gate, but he still needed to find-

Suddenly, the void to the left of the gate moved. After it squatted down in front of the dark backdrop of the doors, it was significantly easier to make out the void’s shape. Lacking eyes or a nose, its most defining feature was its grinning mouth, full of enormous rectangular teeth. Ed frowned.

“Who are you?”

If anything, the void’s grin exposed even more of its exceptional dentition than before. A very small part of Ed wondered whether a void required any sort of oral hygiene.

“It depends on who you ask. Some call me God, others call me the devil. I am the One and the All, the past, the present, the-”

“Yeah, but are you Truth?”

“Yes,” said Truth, looking about as put-out as a being like it could. Clearly, it wasn't used to being cut off.

“I need your help.”

“I assume it has something to do with her,” it said, pointing behind Ed.

The boy looked behind him, surprised to see his parent’s enormous bed in the white expanse. Under the covers and looking terribly small was his mother, the same as she had been moments ago. Ed swallowed hard.

“Yes. Can you heal her-”

(Of course.)

Ed turned around at the voice in his ear and nearly had a heart attack at the sight of those teeth an inch from his face.

“But it's going to cost you.”

Ed swallowed hard, though his throat was as dry as paper.

“Yeah, I know. It's equivalent exchange, right? If you want something, you have to give something up.” It was the idea hammered into his brain from birth, the law by which alchemists lived.

“What have you brought to pay the toll?”

“Just myself.”

Ed forced himself not to tremble, because this was what he’d been aiming for. If it came down to Ed or his mother, he’d choose her every time. If it had to be a life for a life, that's what he'd give. Al needed her, and so did Dad.

“That'll do.”

The doors opened then, revealing Ed’s fate, inch by inch. Inside was that enormous inhuman eye, and those grasping hands from before. That, at least, was familiar. As they wrapped about him once
more, Ed tried not to fight it, but couldn't hold back a choked sob. When the doors closed, his last thought was of his mother's smile.

After that, the gate poured information into his mind, occupying him from his fear. It was horrible, disorienting, and painful, but it was also amazing. Knowledge beyond anything modern alchemy had achieved, the basic structures of human genetic material, all of human history, it was all there. He didn't dare close his eyes, even as his skull felt close to bursting. He heard himself screaming, but the sound was muted in comparison to his surroundings. When he looked to his right, he could see himself disintegrating. The numbness traveled up his left leg and right arm in a geometric pattern, not unlike those left behind by a sloppy transmutation. Just as the disintegration reached his torso and vital organs, it stopped, as did the information. Before disbelieving eyes, the gate opened once more.

Without fanfare, it spit Ed out onto the bedroom floor before disappearing. That was when the pain began in earnest.

Ed was a child; the worst pain he'd ever felt was when he broke his right arm in a failed attempt to climb up a library shelf. That arm was gone, leaving behind only an oozing stump. He cried at the pain, alternating between involuntary wails and the quiet, pathetic whimpers of a wounded animal. Suddenly, he felt a warm hand on his forehead. The touch was soft but real, breaking through the haze of agony.

“Ed! Ed, what happened?”

Through slitted eyes, Ed saw an angel. Her green nightgown was stained red where she knelt in a puddle of blood, and her features were contorted with surprise and worry, but she was the most amazing thing he'd ever seen. His mother was out of bed for the first time in months. Her face had regained its color, and her eyes were lucid again. He'd call it a miracle, but he knew better. This was equivalent exchange.

Without his consent, a laugh bubbled out of his throat. The tiny movement of his chest made his stumps throb, but he found himself not caring much. It had worked. It had been worth it.

That was when his mother kicked him in the gut.

It pretty much confirmed that the bittersweet scene was a dream, given the discrepancies. For one thing, his mother didn't have a metal foot.

Grunting in pain, Ed opened his eyes, and turned his face so it wasn't mashed into the pillow. If looks could kill, the figure holding his prosthetic leg would be dead a hundred times over. Unfortunately, Envy didn't die so easily.

“Morning, pipsqueak. Sleep well?”

Chapter End Notes

I took liberties with the mechanics of the gate and I will not apologize. Anyways, this isn't nearly as important to the plot as you would think, surprisingly.
A Morning Without Sunrise

Chapter Summary

In which Ed and Al get by together the best they can, but sooner or later, Envy gets bored and returns to his favorite pastime: being a dickhead.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Alphonse imagined that if he had blood, it would be boiling. Instead, he could only stand on his shelf and yell at the homunculus as he woke Ed up. It was bad enough that they'd taken his brother's automail all those years ago, and Alphonse hated when Envy got bored and decided to steal his nerveless prosthetic leg. But he couldn't do anything, same as always.

“Leave my brother alone, Envy!”

“Oh, shut up, tin can,” he said, before swinging the disembodied foot into Ed's side.

“Good morning, pipsqueak.”

Ed slowly looked at Envy, and Al got the impression he was counting to eleven as slowly as he could manage. Ed was very good at getting angry, but had a much more difficult time staying calm. It was hard watching Ed bite his tongue, but they both knew that him losing his temper wouldn't do anything.

Ed slept with a kitchen knife under his pillow, as he had for the past five years. The homunculi had let him keep it as part of their sick sense of humor, since they knew any knife wounds on them would heal in minutes. Ed had used it as a temporary deterrent in the past when Envy or Lust started to get too close, but it had little meaning as an effective weapon against immortal opponents.

Anyway, Al wondered if Envy was about to temporarily lose a few fingers again, and considered the consequences. On the one hand, it would make his brother feel better, but on the other, Envy would probably keep going with more violence. The homunculus had never pulled his punches, not when Ed was twelve years old, and not now.

To his brother's relief, Ed didn't rise to the bait. He merely rolled over onto his back, exposing the empty automail port where his right arm was. He gave Envy an unimpressed look.

“Good morning? You've got no idea whether the sun’s even up or not.” He narrowed his eyes. “And don't call me a pipsqueak.”

A fair point, considering there is no sun underground. Envy frowned.

“Don't be a smartass.” He smiled. “Midget.”

Ed's reaction to the jab was fairly tame, just a fierce scowl as he levered himself upright with his left hand. He seemed more subdued in general that day, probably due to the fact Dante had dropped in less than twelve hours ago. Every one of her visits left Ed drained, physically and mentally. It didn't help that they were coming up on their fifth anniversary of not seeing the sun, as Envy had so
helpfully reminded them.

“Just give me back my leg,” he said.

“Why should I? It's not like you're going anywhere.”

“Because, if I fall out a window hoppin’ around on one leg and crack my skull like an egg, you're going to have a hell of a time explaining it to Dante.”

Envy pouted at that. With a swing of the prosthetic leg, he knocked Ed's left arm out from under him before tossing the heavy limb on top of him. Then he stalked across the room to flop on top of a rickety chaise lounge upholstered in a mottled salmon that had been in the tower even longer than the Elric brothers had.

Dante’s interior decorating style consisted of aging and crowded furniture, elaborate pastel prints and ivory silks, and a large and varied assortment of suspicious stains on everything from the rug to the curtains. On the one hand, the ugliness of the room was funny, but on the other, it constantly felt like Dante was in there with them. Ed said the worst part was her horrible flowers-and-rotting-meat scent, which Al was spared from by the lack of a nose, soaked into every piece of fabric.

Ed stuck out his tongue at the homunculi’s back, before going about the business of attaching his leg single handedly. Though lacking the nerve connectors, the limb was designed to lock in place in the same way his automail had. However, the replacement was an alchemic creation of Dante’s, that had never so much as seen an automail mechanic. The outer casing on Ed's port was gone, the only thing Ed had outgrown. Luckily, Pinako Rockbell had the collar around his stump detachable, since she had known from the beginning that her automail would be attached to a growing child, and planned accordingly.

When Ed stood up, he simultaneously looked very big and very small. It made sense, considering he was over ten times his little brother's size, yet was also remarkably short for his age, according to the clinical growth charts in their motley library. In an effort to ease the sting of Envy’s mockery, Al had hypothesized that it was lack of sunlight that stunted his growth so dramatically. In hindsight, Al realized that probably made his brother feel worse.

Even if his brother wasn't particularly tall, Al was glad he was at least tall enough to move him off his high shelf, even if he did have to stand on his toes.

“Sorry I fell asleep, Al. I know it gets boring just having that asshole for company.”

Al’s inability to rest had been a constant source of guilt for Ed in their early days underground, to the point that he would force himself to stay awake. The record, then marked by their bored substitute jailer Lust, had been seventy-four hours of uninterrupted wakefulness. Luckily, Al had managed to break Ed of the majority of his self-flagellating habits.

“It's alright, Brother. You need your sleep.”

Ed placed Al on his right shoulder, above his stump. As they'd discovered, Al’s false body was light and small enough that he could hold onto any stray lock of hair to keep himself righted.

“Well, I'm up now. What should we work on today? We could do a remedial Xingese lesson before tackling Drachman irregular verbs, if that's alright with you.”

“All you brats ever do is study, study, study,” said Envy from his place sprawled on the furniture. “What's the point? It's not like you'll be going to either of those countries.”
“I don’t plan on letting my brain atrophy. Unlike you, who’s had centuries to travel the world, but is just as stupid as ever.”

Envy’s only response was to chuck an ostentatious paperweight at him, which Ed was able to catch one-handedly. With a sigh, he placed it on their overcrowded bookshelf.

“I think you should eat and get changed before you start studying, Brother.”

“Can’t it wait? I don’t need to dip into our supplies so early after we’ve stocked up again.”

“If I can’t have at least two regularly scheduled meals a day, then I’m going to make sure you do,” said Alphonse, playing his trump card without shame. He didn’t mind guilting his brother into doing things now and then, as long as they were for his own good. If he didn’t make Ed eat before getting into work, his brother would just end up falling asleep atop a pile of books without so much as a crumb in his stomach.

“Fine, fine. You nag more than mom ever did, you know.”

“Besides, you should eat the bread Dante brought before it gets too stale.” His brother groaned but did not protest otherwise. His pride chafed at relying on Dante for food, but he knew he couldn’t afford to refuse it.

Ed continued to the “kitchen” in the corner, consisting of a wood stove and an ornate chest of drawers Ed co-opted for use as a cutting board and pantry. With early morning surliness that Al had come to expect after a whole life spent with his brother, he yanked open the top drawer and pulled out the brown paper bag. He all but tore it getting the bag open, before ripping a chunk of bread off the end of the loaf with his teeth. In typical Ed fashion, he voraciously chewed and swallowed the lump of carbohydrates in a matter of seconds.

“Better?”

“Much,” said Al triumphantly.

Ed put away the bread, then opened up the bottom drawer to check on his mushroom garden. A textbook example of ingenuity under stress, the two of them were very proud of their creation, which seemed to be thriving. Then he continued into the bathroom, tiled and fully functioning, but lacking a door. Ed took Al off his shoulder and placed him on the edge of the sink, allowing him to see his reflection.

It was always startling, to look in the mirror and not see himself, but rather a metal doll. Fashioned in the style of an Amestrian suit of armor, Al’s body stood not even six inches tall. At the very least, the container that housed his soul didn’t have a detailed face like the doll with a porcelain head their mother had held onto from her childhood. He’d just look downright creepy like that. He shook his head to rid himself of that mental image, and saw his twin in the glass do the same.

It wasn’t easy to be positive about being trapped in a toy, unable to eat or sleep, but Al did his best. He didn’t want to think about what would happen if he didn’t, if he let himself give in to his hopelessness. So he didn’t. He couldn’t fight on his brother’s behalf, but the least he could do was make sure he ate and slept and didn’t shut down again.

Meanwhile, Ed went through his routine: washing his face, brushing his teeth, and least fifteen seconds of glaring at his reflection with a vengeance. Al couldn’t even guess what he was thinking, but he doubted it was simple vanity. Privately, he thought Ed was very handsome, beautiful even, with features that were simultaneously delicate and sharp, and striking golden eyes. He wondered if
his own face looked like that, wherever it was. He was fairly certain his mother and father were keeping his body safe for him, but he didn't really know for sure. After all, he hadn't exactly been able to ask them to hold onto it for safekeeping the night his soul had been so rudely divorced from his physical form. He wondered how tall his body was, whether someone had been cutting his hair for him, if he had any facial hair, like their father. His muscles would have likely atrophied from disuse, but he was curious about the width of his shoulders, whether his frame was slight or burly. At age eleven, Al had indisputably been the physically stronger and slightly taller of the siblings, while Ed was had the greater penchant for acrobatics. That didn't mean much anymore, though. It had been five years, and it was completely unknown if or when they could escape and journey back to Xerxes, where his body presumably lay.

Ed opened up the armoire, a monstrosity in faded blue paint, taking a look at his limited wardrobe. His clothes were easy to put on with one hand, shorts with elastic waistbands that didn't require belts and sleeveless shirts that wouldn't get caught on his port. The shorts he chose were a pair of old ones that had gotten stretched out and needed to be rolled over a few times at the top to stay firmly above his hips. According to Ed, it was hard to be self conscious about his appearance when he spent a fair amount of time in the undesirable company of Envy, who lazed about in half a shirt and form fitting shorts with a useless little skirt. Not to mention, that hair like a palm tree. Seriously, he reasoned, what kind of guy had complete control over his appearance and still decided to look like that?

Ed had taken more than a few hits to the face for those comments, not that it made him show any remorse. That had been a cheery yet horrifying occurrence, when they realized captivity had not broken Ed's spirit. If anything, it only made him more obstinate.

Dressed for the new cycle of wakefulness, Ed began to brush his hair. Ever since a bout of seven year old stubbornness, it had never been cut. On the cusp of his seventeen birthday, it hung to his waist, and seemed unlikely to grow any further. It shone like white gold under the soft glow of the chandelier, making his brother seem unnaturally pale. It looked very soft to Al, and he often wondered what it would be like to actually touch it, rather than just hold on with an unfeeling gauntlet.

“Did you have any dreams, Brother?” The question was part of their routine, as Ed's dreams were one of the few inconsistencies of their life in the tower.

“Yeah. I dreamed about the night I saw the gate, actually.” Al read between the lines. His brother had dreamt of the night he lost his limbs.

“That's unusual. You've never talked about that in your dreams before. I wonder if it means anything,” he said thoughtfully.

“Probably nothing,” dismissed Ed.

“At any rate, I'm sorry you had to dream about that.”

Ed laughed at that.

“Don't be. It's not exactly a bad memory, you know.”

“Brother, you lost half your limbs.”

“Yeah, but I was so happy to see Mom healthy that it balanced out.”

“Did you dream about the part afterward where Dad got so angry at you for risking your life he started sobbing and cursing at the same time?” In Al's opinion, Ed's self sacrificing streak was one of
his most harmful traits, and part of the reason it was even possible for him to be held captive in the present.

“…No,” he said, thoroughly cowed. Al decided to take pity on him and change the conversation then. It had been kind of mean to play the guilt card on his brother, after all.

“Want me to help you put your hair up?”

“Sure,” he said, handing the hair comb to his little brother.

With both of them unable to braid or tie back hair due to a size deficiency or general one-handedness, the brothers had developed their own technique to keep Ed's hair out of his face. It consisted, rather simply, of Ed twisting his hair into a loose chignon and crouching by the edge of the sink for Al to insert the comb into his hair to keep it in place.

“Thanks.” With Al situated on his shoulder, Ed stood in front of the bookcase. He began to pick out the volumes he wanted for their linguistics practice, tossing them gently on the bed in the alcove.

“Actually, Brother, could you read me a book?” Another frustrating thing he had to get used to. Small as he was, he couldn't hold a book, much less read it.

“Sure, which one?”

A bit embarrassed, Al named the story he wanted. Taking place in a foreign land where the winters were snowy and rain was common, it featured a girl trapped in a castle of crystal, saved by a prince in exile. After that, the book detailed their adventures together as they were constantly sidetracked from the journey home by the plights of others. Al's favorite part was that as they tried to help all who crossed their path, they slowly fell in love. It was so sweet, so natural, that he wished he could cry the last time Ed read it to him.

“It's been a while since you asked for this one,” he noted.

“Sorry, Brother. I know romance isn't your favorite genre, but… I just wanted to hear a happy ending today.”

“It's alright, Al. I don't mind.”

With that, they sat down on the bed, with Al spread out on the mattress next to his brother's ear. He began to read, his voice soft yet clear. He went on for maybe twenty pages, uninterrupted.

“She saw the kindness in his eyes, and wondered if he was there to help her. It was unlikely, considering she was a girl without a name who had never seen so much as a hint someone had noticed or cared about her disappearance. Still, she could not stop the spark of hope in her chest that fanned into a flame. With-”

“Is that why you wanted him to read you that story, tin can? So you could imagine a prince coming to rescue you?”

Alphonse didn't know what to say to that. It occurred to him that the homunculus was probably right, and thus had no rebuttal. Still, he tried to retort.

“I wasn't…”

Envy rolled off the chaise and slowly advanced. The smile on his face was familiar in its cruelty. It reminded Al of the children outside their school that ripped the stingers off of scorpions and made them fight.

“Why do you even bother with these fantasies anymore? You're not eleven years old, Alphonse. Honestly, I thought humans were supposed to be grown after almost sixteen years, but—”

“Shut up!” Sensing his brother's distress, Ed placed himself between Al and Envy. His left arm came up, ready to punch or slap or claw.

“Come on, pipsqueak. You're the older brother, aren't you? You should tell him the truth, maybe he'll actually stop believing in these stupid fairytales if it comes from you.”

Ed growled and aimed a punch to Envy’s gut, only for his wrist to caught and twisted over his head. Though Envy was not particularly tall, he loomed over the brothers as they sat on the bed. He pressed closer to Ed's face, smiling as he always did when hurting Ed.

“Go on. Tell him what you've known for years now. People have long since given up searching you. It makes sense, right? You're as good as dead in their eyes, so they all decided to cut their losses, but the piece of scrap metal you call a brother still won't face facts.”

“I said shut up!” Ed tried to kick the homunculus in the groin, but was pushed onto his back with little effort. Envy stood between his legs, holding the right thigh completely immobile while the left remained useless. His hands were significantly stronger than one would expect, and Al knew from secondhand experience that his grip would result in heavy bruises, if not outright fractures. Ed withheld his cries of pain, until a vicious wrench of his left wrist tore a whimpered curse from his throat.

“Brother!” Al tried to pry Envy’s fingers off his wrist, but to no avail.

“You better get used to this place, because no one is going to find you. Not the city guard, not your family, and certainly not any prince,” he leered, not even noticing the little brother's efforts.

By either luck, destiny, or a higher power’s sense of humor, they were interrupted. Upon the windowsill, framed by heavy silver curtains, was a hand. There was no time to speculate upon the owner of the hand, as he appeared all too soon. The visitor hauled himself into the tower, immediately throwing himself on the ground with an immense sigh. The only other sound was the clank of two knives hitting the floor.

“So… hungry…”

Chapter End Notes

Please leave feedback in the comments. It's really helpful in getting chapters written and edited to your liking, not to mention the motivation it provides me to write in the first place. Also, ao3 says I haven't updated in ten days even though I posted four chapters since the thirteenth, so I'm a little miffed.
Ling observed his surroundings from his place on the floor. The room looked like one of the tacky Amestrian mansions he'd seen, though every item did actually appear to be antique. It was completely out of place in the desert, with its heavy fabrics and glittering chandelier.

Ling wasn't particularly concerned with the aesthetic of the room, but rather its occupants. There appeared be two of them, entangled in the alcove. One was an adult man holding a smaller, violently struggling figure against a bed. Ling decided very quickly that he should get off his ass and put a stop to that, so he flipped to his feet with an artful shift of his weight. After all, he may be a thief dedicated to his own goal of becoming emperor, but he wasn't completely morally bankrupt. The man was now focused on him, though still effortlessly restraining the person beneath him.

“Who the hell are you?” His voice was raspy and impatient, matching his irked expression.

“Just a visitor. Won't you come shake your guest’s hand?” Ling kept his tone light, but his expression told a different story entirely. His dark eyes were fully open, his smile showing too many teeth to be friendly.

The man didn't have time to respond, as the other occupant of the room slammed his skull into his temple. The attack was just enough of a surprise for him for him to loosen his grip, allowing the blond to kick up into his chin. The man reeled backwards, only to spit out a lump of bloody flesh. He'd bitten his tongue in half. Recovering almost instantly from what was probably a horribly painful accident, he seized the blond by the wrist and threw him into the wall as if he were no heavier than a toy.

He turned to Ling, spitting out a glob of bloody spittle landing just shy of his feet.

“He doesn't work with Xingese,” he stated, matter of fact. Ling could only stare in surprise at him. A man who had just lost such a significant portion of his tongue had no business talking so clearly.

“So how did you get here?”

Ling didn't answer, instead taking a moment to size up his opponent. Shorter and more leanly built, it looked as if his strength would lie in his speed and agility rather than the force behind his blows. Still, he couldn't discount how easily he tossed the kid into the wall. The man snarled, annoyed at being ignored.

“Fine. Guess I'll just have to beat the answers out of you.”

He lunged forwards, and landed a punch directly to the face with far too much strength for someone of his height and build. Ling reeled backwards, barely managing to block or evade the rain of blows that followed. The stranger was well trained, that became obvious soon enough. His attacks were
swift and focused, and Ling was all too aware of how he was being pushed back to the open window. Using his superior reach, Ling gave him a solid kick to the solar plexus, launching his opponent backwards with a wheeze of forcibly expelled air.

The man got to his feet, visibly furious.

“If you're going to be difficult, I'm not going to hold back.”

Ling braced himself, only for the man to dart forward and snag his left arm in an iron grip. His other arm came up, only it didn't make sense. It was too long, and oddly boneless. He didn't have time to process its odd shape before it looped about his neck like an ill-intentioned scarf. As a bewildered afterthought, he realized it was also green and hissing. The fangs of a python hovered scant inches from his face, which was only the third worst thing that was currently happening to him. The other two were that he was simultaneously asphyxiating and the snake-arm (snarm?) was wrapped about his right arm, preventing access to his sword, which would have been very useful right about then. The man smirked, and it was only at that moment Ling realized his pupils were slitted, like a cat’s.

“Y’know, my boss would be pretty pissed if I didn't question you before killing you.” The snarm tightened around his throat further. Ling felt lightheaded, and not a little perturbed that his opponent was somehow capable of turning his arm into a snake. “But who says we can't keep this between us two-”

He cut off with a choked groan, and slumped forward a little, providing Ling with a good angle of the scene behind. A knife was buried in his back, all the way to the wooden hilt. Holding onto the handle was the blond kid from before, with murderous yet clearly rational intent in his gaze. His eyes met Ling’s, forcing him into action with the same strength as a shouted command. Ling made use of the shock that typically comes with being stabbed to unsheathe his sword and chop off the snarm in a single fluid motion. Ducking under the impressive arterial spray, he stood beside his newfound ally. Thankfully(?), his other half of the snarm disintegrated around his neck. The man screamed in pain, and Ling briefly felt guilty for inflicting such a severe wound.

The chief word was “briefly”, as scarcely a second passed before the stump under his bloodsoaked fingers began to grow. In seconds, it was completely reformed above the elbow.

“What the hell…”

“He's a homunculus,” said the blond. “And no, you won't be able to kill him.” He didn't look surprised in the slightest.

Ling took the moment to look over the fatalistic kid next to him. Though he'd originally taken him for someone in his early teens due to his size, there was an undeniable sharpness to his features that made Ling think he was closer to him in age. He was down an arm and was unarmed as well. Ling wasn't sure if phrasing it that way was rude, but it was certainly amusing. Clearly, he didn't have a second knife hiding in his clothes. He'd dropped into a defensive stance, but Ling was skeptical how effective he could be while physically unable to guard his right side.

“You little cunt! I'll cut your fucking ears off!”

It was unclear which of them he was speaking to, which wasn't exactly helpful in foreseeing his next move. His undamaged right hand came up between them, when the bizarre shift from before reoccurred. His entire arm took on a dull silver color, like unrefined steel. His fingers changed shape, becoming longer and sharper to the point that he essentially had five knives literally at his fingertips. Ling was proud of himself for keeping up the endless stream of insightful and witty commentary despite the threat to his life. ‘At his fingertips’? He was a comedic genius.
“Well, now you're just copying Lust,” said the blond. Why he was choosing to mock the monster in front of them was beyond Ling, seeing as he was mostly defenseless. Still, it didn't stop him from placing himself between the blond and the attacking homunculus. His sword met his opponent's hand with a screech of metal on metal, and their lightning fast struggle began anew. The creature’s persistent grin had a strange, almost unhinged quality to it that disturbed Ling almost as much as his strange abilities. Out of the corner of his eye, Ling saw the blond retrieve the kunai he'd dropped upon his arrival. Did he intend to keep fighting despite his pessimistic outlook?

His distraction cost him when his opponent's left arm finished cooking and joined the fight as a two foot metal spike. With the new weapon, the homunculus pressed forward, and Ling avoided being stabbed in the brain only by the slimmest of margins. In that moment, it seemed as if time had become immeasurably slow, though Ling knew that wasn't the case.

He registered multiple events in a single moment. A deadly weapon whistling through the space his head had been just a moment ago. His blood roaring in his ears. A bare heel striking the floor. A flash of light contained to the periphery of his vision. His opponent tumbling to the floor, suddenly unbalanced. Noticing a wedge of stone sticking out of the ground that certainly wasn't there before. Barely managing to pivot out of the way as he landed face down.

The other occupant of the mysterious tower kicked his heel against the floor again, and stone hands materialized from the ground before wrapping around the prone man. The blond rushed forward and all but dropped to his side. Borrowed kunai in hand, he swung it down with all of his force. With a meaty thunk, it stuck into his left shoulder blade, beside the earlier kitchen knife. He noticed that both stab wounds were in the center of two red circles on his clothing, the third on his right shoulder. Whether it was coincidence or purposeful targeting, it seemed excessive to stab him twice. After all, he was already restrained.

Ling went on thinking that for all of one second before the stone restraints began to crack. The blond’s left hand reached out to find the second kunai, only to miss and knock it further away. The cracks spread, letting them both know their captive would not be theirs for long. Acting on instinct, Ling produced another knife from the sash wound about his waist, brought it down with an urgency that surprised even him.

Of course, instinct didn't account for why he aimed for the right shoulder. It certainly wasn't an active decision. It had just felt right. He chalked it up to the subconscious human desire for symmetry, or panicked irrationality. Either way, it miraculously worked. The man went limp, his previously curled fingers spasming loosely. If it weren't for his constant cursing, Ling would've taken him for dead.

The blond stood and stomped once more, reaffirming the restraints.

“What the fuck did you do to me, you little bastard?” Though he sounded plenty angry, Ling doubted that he could roar like he wanted to with his cheek smashed to the floor.

“Hey Envy,” he began conversationally. “Did you know that Dante doesn't trust you?”

There was that name again. Dante. It sounded like he was the man's employer, but his relationship to the blond was unclear.

“She built a failsafe into each of her creations, in case they got a little too uppity. She probably didn't even tell you. Why should she? Anyway, there's certain weak spots on your body, artificial pressure points. If I get all of them, well…” he dug his foot into the handle of the center knife, pushing it deeper. The man behaved as if he'd taken a massive electric shock, convulsing within his bonds. “You already know what happens, don't you?”

“Why would Dante tell you that?” He sounded almost panicked.
“She didn’t. But she did forget to clear out her old notes before she dumped us down here.”

“No-”

“She most certainly did, Envy. It took us a while to crack her code, what with her archaic dialect and all, but we did it. And do you know what we found?”

Ling wasn't getting any of this, so he had elected to look around for some food while he listened. He was rewarded with a loaf of non-stale bread, mostly intact.

“Everything there is to know about homunculi. How she made you guys from her original philosopher’s stone, how to contain you, how to destroy you, even if it is incredibly impractical,” said the blond, a touch of annoyance invading his proud tone.

Ling jolted upright. A philosopher's stone? Of course, it didn't matter so much, now that he already had one to take home, but he would like to know exactly how common they were. It would be pretty bad if multiple heirs showed up in the royal court with the same stone.

“How… How can you transmute without a circle? We took your arm…” It sounded as if Envy was grasping at straws, desperate for any sort of upper hand. The blond rolled his eyes.

“Yeah, no shit. Turns out I can use a circle without it, though.” He lifted his flesh foot, revealing a design tattooed onto the underside of his heel, no bigger than an ignari, a lower valued Xerxes coin. Envy cursed.

“You can do foot alchemy? I didn't know that was a thing,” said Ling around a mouthful of bread. He was actually impressed. He'd seen plenty of alkahestry and alchemy in his travels, yet none had been so simplistically effective. The blond looked at him with at least half as much murder in his gaze as from before, which was still a considerable amount of violent intent. Trust issues, maybe?

“Who are you?” Definitely trust issues.

“Just a traveler that got very, very lost,” said Ling cheerfully, partly because it was true and partly because he was in the habit of keeping quiet about his identity. It made avoiding international incidents much easier, after all. That seemed to piss his host off quite a bit more, so Ling pressed onward.

“By the way, as a favor for what just happened, could you explain what's going on?”

His expression darkened even further, and, doing exactly what Ling had hoped he wouldn't do, he stomped his foot. The stone moved like water, surging up to encase his feet up to the shin. The wall he’d been leaning against became similarly untrustworthy as it caught his wrists. Luckily, his arms were bent enough that he could still reunite his food and mouth. Nervously, Ling took another bite of bread. He sincerely doubted he’d be able to break the restraints as easily as Envy had earlier.

“Sure. After you explain to me exactly who the hell you are and why you're here,” he growled.

Ling thought back upon the rest of his morning. Running away from a psychotic mechanic, nearly getting shot by a foreign soldier, nearly being reduced to charcoal by a foreign alchemist, going toe to toe with a seemingly unkillable “homunculus”, whatever that was. In short, it had been an endless parade of increasingly powerful enemies. What did that say about the newest character?

Ling took a bite of bread.
Chapter End Notes

These next few chapters should be short and dialogue-heavy, but updated frequently. As always, if I post something that doesn't make any sense whatsoever due to bad proofreading or writing, drop me a line in the comments. Of course, positive feedback would be greatly appreciated as well if you do enjoy this.
A Step Closer to Starting Over

Chapter Summary

Al is the good cop to Ed's bad. Unfortunately, he's not the one controlling this interrogation. Ling only kinda deserves this.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ed looked at the man in front of him, who had apparently stolen his food and couldn't be bothered to put it down. That, combined with his dopey nonchalance, pissed Ed off like nothing else. Where was the focused and serious fighter from just a moment ago? Perhaps this was merely a charade to gain Ed's trust. If it was, it was failing miserably.

Truthfully, Ed was nervous. Excited, but nervous. Did this man know where they were, how to get home? If so, how could he get reliable information out of him? First things first, he decided. He needed to requisition any remaining weapons. Yet, he knew what that would mean.

Ed advanced, and lay his hand on the man's shoulder. Then he started groping around surprisingly large biceps.

"Uh, not that this isn't flattering or anything, but I think we should get to know each other first," he joked, though not without a nervous edge.

Ed flushed red but continued in silence. Luckily, it didn't take long to find what he wanted. The man's wide sleeves seemed like an endless treasure trove of weaponry, yielding several throwing knives as well as a few cylindrical capsules with braided fuses Ed assumed to be grenades of some sort. Ed decided to continue with the extremities, allowing himself a moment to get used to the idea of feeling up a potentially dangerous stranger. In the cuffs of his pants, he found six more grenades and a long, thin dagger strapped to his calf.

"Brother! What are you doing, he just saved you!" Al had made his way off the bed and over to him, running across the floor. Ed winced, feeling a pang of guilt for momentarily forgetting him. The stranger observed Al with confusion. Understandable, but it just pissed him off more that he was rubbernecking at his brother.

"I don't trust him," he declared, before promptly sticking his hand in the stranger’s belt. Well, it was more a wound strip of cloth than a belt, but that was splitting hairs in Ed's opinion. Ed was too busy thinking about how horribly, desperately uncomfortable this was. Against his wishes, Ed’s mind began to make erroneous observations. For example, how his skin was hot to the touch, held taut over lean muscle. Ed was absurdly jealous of the man, tanned and lithe from running as much as he wanted to above ground while Ed was stunted and Al trapped. He felt around, quickly producing three more knives, six low value coins, and a piece of lint.

"There's too many unanswered questions, like who he is, who he works for, and-" Ed stopped as his hand curled around a smooth object, a little bigger than the size of his palm. He looked at it, recognized its dull red luster from Dante’s notes. It's energy, the faint dull roar of voices inside, its pulse. It was all in perfect sync with the stone woven into Ed's being.
“How the hell did he get his hands on a philosopher's stone?”

Despite the lack of traditional features, Al’s look of shocked horror translated all too easily as he looked up at Ed.

“What's a philosopher's stone? It doesn't sound familiar,” said the man. Ed wondered if he was always such a bad liar.

“Where did you get this? Did you make it?” Ed held it at arm’s length, as far away as possible from his body. The man vigorously shook his head, nervously smiling in a way he obviously thought was charming. Maybe it would be, if Ed had met him somewhere different, but that was a stupid line of thought.

But in a certain light, he reminded Ed of the boys that he'd gone to school with once, carefree and wild. A grown-up relic of a different, happier time.

“It's a family heirloom! A gift from my dearly departed… grandmother! Yes, it's been passed down for centuries.” Just like that, it was gone. All he saw was the man who'd been walking around with a hundred thousand captured souls in his pocket.

Ed growled. With one harsh gesture, the wall moved forward to encase him. He finally dropped the stupid bread and the stupid smile.

“I'm giving you one last chance. Where. Did. You. Get. This.”

Ed tracked the dramatic movement of his adam’s apple as the man swallowed.

“Brother, don't you think you're being a bit excessive-”

“The palace,” he said, his gaze steely. “I stole it from the royal family of Xerxes.”

Ed felt his chest constrict painfully. Was this stone the same one his father had used to experiment on his unborn son? It couldn't have been recently created, that was for sure. A stone of that size couldn't be made in secret. It must have required a whole city, no, an entire population to create. There were only so many events of mass casualties in history that could account for its creation. Perhaps-

“Brother, do you think this is-”

“The legendary philosopher's stone of old Xerxes? Maybe.”

“You mean there was another stone in the palace the entire time? And we ended up taking the one with half its limbs and an attitude problem? You've gotta be kidding me.”

“Shut up, Envy.” Ed leaned down, let his brother climb onto his arm and shoulder like a bipedal desert lizard. Ed could hear his joints squeak as he bounced up and down.

“Ed, do you know what this means? Dad never created a stone of his own, and just used this preexisting one in his experiments! He never killed-”

“Don't jump to conclusions, Al.” It hurt to stop Al’s hopeful rant, though he knew that making hasty conjecture could just as easily lead to heartbreak.

“It's just not fair,” moaned Envy into the floor. “Watching over a prepubescent pipsqueak while I could've been out starting wars and killing idiots? That's five years of my life I'll never get back!”

“I said shut up!”
“Any chance I could have that back?” The man interjected smoothly into their discussion(s).

“Why did you steal it in the first place?” Ed lifted his left foot as if moving to kick the ground. “And I think you should tell the truth to begin with, this time around.”

“It's, ah, a gift, of sorts,” he said, somewhat calmly, before Ed narrowed his eyes. Then he was a bit more motivated to reply in haste. “For the Emperor of Xing, I mean.” Ed let him go, except for one arm buried in the wall, as a reward for being marginally more helpful than before.

“Why? Is he looking to raise an army with its gold? Bring the dead to life?”

“I didn't even know it could do that.” Clearly, the man was not an alchemist. “I thought you just used it for immortality,” he said, a little awed.

“Anyways, I need it to secure my rise to the throne, so if you ever wanted to get a favor with the next Emperor of Xing, now would be your chance to hand it-”

“Wait,” said Al in a wondrous tone that immediately made Ed nervous. “If you're in line for the throne, does that make you a prince?”

“Yep! Ling Yao, twelfth son of the Emperor, in your presence,” he said, standing as straight as he could with his arm stuck in a wall.

“Are. You. Fucking. Kidding. Me.” Every word was accompanied by the sound of Envy banging his head against the ground. It almost made looking at “Ling's” stupidly carefree expression worth it.

Well, it's been a minute since I last posted. Weird how I've actually been doing less writing now that I'm on break from school. Sorry that this latest chunk of chapters has been largely dialogue, but by next week I'll have posted all of it and we can get back to the action. (sparky sparky boom boom action)
As always, comments are a life saver, so please leave as many as you can.
A Monster Emerges From Its Cage

Chapter Summary

In which Ed begrudgingly relies on the help of a seemingly idiotic stranger, Envy knows he's in for it when this gets around to his creator, and Al sees nothing but blazing gold.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“You don't look like much of a prince,” said Ed, as he was nothing if not a skeptic. He could recall with perfect clarity meeting a deity face to face and having it rip his limbs off, yet he'd always told Al he was a staunch agnostic. Nevertheless, his pragmatism was horribly rude, even if Ling had eaten all their bread.

“Brother,” he hissed, giving him a sharp pinch to the ear. Luckily, the guest that had helped Ed trap Envy didn't seem to mind.

“That's probably because I've been traveling the world for months now, searching for immortality, starving, sleeping in the streets. It would be a shame for all my hard work to go to waste…” He revealed a handkerchief from yet another hiding spot, dabbing at some unseen tear. Ed scoffed in response.

“Why should I care about some megalomaniac asshole trying to fulfill some selfish greed?” Al winced at his brother's bluntness. Ling’s carefree expression went steely.

“I may be greedy, but I'm certainly not selfish. I need to ascend to the throne to protect the three thousand Yao clansmen that have followed my bloodline for generations. They have protected me from assassins and rival clans my whole life, and I intend to repay them in full.”

“Oh,” said Ed in that quiet voice Al knew meant he was flushed crimson all the way up to his ears. “Can you tell us how far we are from Xerxes, at least?”

“Don't you know? You're only twenty miles from the palace.”

There was a beat of shocked silence, ended by Envy screeching a few favorite expletives.

“Seriously? We've been that close the entire time?” Ed was dumbfounded.

“Dante's gonna kill me,” the homunculus groaned. “At least five times, if not more.” Apparently, they weren't supposed to find out about their location.

“You know what this means, Al? We could get you back in your body before tomorrow!”

It sounded amazing, the prospect of celebrating Ed's seventeenth birthday while wearing his own skin for the first time in five years. But…

“What about Dante? She's probably still in the city, if she doesn't live there permanently.”
“It's not like she'll immediately know we've escaped. She's got alchemy, sure, but she's still human,” he said defensively.

“The homunculi aren't. And Gluttony can probably pick your scent out of a crowd, knowing him.”

“But Al, this is our chance-”

“Brother, if Dante catches you, it'll be your last. I know you're excited, but you've got to think this through.”

“Are you even sure you want to leave, pipsqueak? If Dante catches on to this, and she most certainly will, she'll cut off the rest of your limbs and transmute your precious baby brother into a cigarette lighter. Blind and deaf, you'll be nothing more than a living battery, constantly begging for death.” Envy sounded slightly more harried than usual, but the brothers didn't notice, preoccupied more by the homunculus giving voice to their deepest fears. For a tense moment, they considered his words.

“But hey- I like you, pipsqueak, so it doesn't have to be like that. All you have to do is let me up, I'll get rid of this guy, and we can forget all about this. Nobody has to know.” Perhaps the most horrifying part of the scenario was Envy attempting to sound reassuring and helpful.

“Shut up, shut up shut up shut up,” mumbled Ed.

“Brother, he's lying-”

“I know, Al. I'm not going to make you stay down here any longer. I'm just…”

Ed frowned, thinking hard.

“I've got it. How about we just bring this asshole?” He gestured loosely at their captive. Al was taken aback, but only for a moment.

“You do have a point. He looked to be a pretty good fighter earlier.”

“Yeah, he could back me up until I get my automail back.”

“Don't I get a say in this?”

Ed rounded on Ling, hand on his hip and fire in his eyes.

“Here's the deal, asshole. You already broke into the palace once. Do it again with us behind you, and I'll give you back the stone.” The brick wall relinquished its hold on Ling, letting him stagger forward and rub his wrist. He looked down at Ed, expression dumbfounded.

“So? Are you going to work with us or what?”

Ling smiled disarmingly, but Al knew it did nothing to make Ed trust him.

“Of course. You've got absolutely no manners, but you and your brother are incredibly interesting.”

“Good choice.”

“Besides, it's not like I can stay in the ruins anymore,” he muttered.

“What was that?”

“Nothing, nothing at all!”
Ed narrowed his eyes, and picked up the long dagger he'd pulled out of Ling's pant leg before tucking it into his waistband.

“I'm keeping this, by the way.”

Ling shrugged, before retrieving the rest of his weaponry. Ed stomped his foot, creating a spiraling staircase out of the tower in less than a minute. Apparently, five years of doing purely theoretical alchemy hadn't dulled his touch. Halfway down, Ling caught up by sliding down the railing to Ed's side.

“So, what do I call you two anyway?”

“He's Al, I'm Ed,” the older sibling growled out, annoyed by the difference in speed between himself and their newfound bodyguard.

“So… how long have you been down here?”

“Five years,” said Al, before Ed violently hushed him.

“Really? That monster's been keeping you up there for that long?”

“Well, there are two other homunculi that came sometimes, but they're probably in the city right now.”

“Homunculi? Does that mean they're just like him?” It was hard to tell in the low light, but Al thought that Ling had gone very pale.

“No, they're way different.” Ling relaxed a little.

“Really?”

“Yeah. First of all, Envy doesn't eat peop-”

“Al,” hissed Ed. He jumped, realizing he probably shouldn't tell their guard of tenuous loyalty exactly how dangerous the opposition was, lest he turn tail and run.

“Well, we probably won't run into them anyway,” Al said, throwing in a bit of unintentionally nervous laughter. He winced. He really was a terrible liar. Ed stepped off the staircase then, surveying the cavern.

“First things first, I need an arm.”

Al nodded, and got to the business of opening up his miniature breastplate, revealing the hollow space just big enough to house the Elric brothers’ greatest treasure: a stick of chalk.

Meanwhile, Ed located a vein of gold in the stone floor, a space that was entirely flat. Taking the chalk from his brother and exchanging it with the red stone, he began to draw a circle, as steady as one could be. The array necessary for this kind of work would need to be considerably more complex than the terraforming one on Ed's foot. A lesser alchemist would have to spend at least forty five minutes sketching and revising it on paper, but Ed was able to visualize and create it in under a minute. With a flash of golden light, the arm was completed. Jet black and most likely hollow to keep its weight down, the arm was sleek and jointed at the elbow, wrist, and knuckles. Al would have described it as utilitarian in design, if it weren't for the gleaming streaks of gold that marbled its surface. The metal transformed what was a temporary replacement into a work of art. Ed fixed it to his automail port with a heavy click, then shrugged, testing its weight.
“Well, it’s garbage compared to Winry’s automail, but at least I can clap.”

“That seems like an arbitrary factor to me,” said Ling, leaning against one of Dante’s lampposts.

Ed didn’t bother with a verbal response, merely a demonstration. He clapped his flesh hand to the stationary prosthetic, then touched it to the edge of his shorts. The waist shrunk, fitting him properly without rolling over the top. The excess fabric was easily shifted into a hip pocket, where Ed deposited the stone. Ling looked mildly surprised, whereas any basically trained alchemist would be instantly amazed by his ability to transmute without a circle. Ed didn’t seem to care either way, focused as he was on his own preparations, which Al supposed was to be expected of his brother.

“So, how did you even manage to get down here in the first place? I thought Dante would have had the place entirely sealed off.”

“Oh… Well, I wasn’t paying attention, and I fell through a trapdoor.” Ed gave him a withering look.

“You managed to stumble on a hidden trapdoor? In the middle of the fucking desert?”

Ling opened his mouth, closed it, and shrugged, unconcerned. Ed stared in disbelief before shaking his head, as if to dispel the improbable explanation from his mind.

“Whatever. Where is it, then?”

Ling led them into a fold in the cave wall, revealing a narrow hallway and the ensuing set of stairs, all the while keeping up his friendly interview.

“So, what do you two want from the palace, anyways? If it's gold or jewels, I wouldn't bother going if I were you. They've got almost nothing other than books and metal trinkets. In fact, I think you've got more wealth in the raw materials down here than in there.”

Ed scoffed at that.

“We're not stealing anything. We're just getting back what belongs to my brother,” he said, voice full of the raw determination Al had always admired. Ling hummed, slightly higher in pitch than his speaking voice.

“Okay, but, whatever it is, are you really, really sure it's worth breaking into the royal palace to stea-”

Al was sure Ed’s death glare somehow reached Ling in the pitch black of the stairwell, because he coughed and corrected himself. “To reclaim it? Are you sure you don't want me to take you to some relatives instead?”

“No.” Ed shoved past Ling on the narrow stairs, climbing as fast as his leg would allow him. Al didn't approve of his brother's brusqueness, but understood his reasoning behind the refusal. As much as it hurt, Al had to admit that they couldn't trust their own father, not when they suspected him of experimenting on his firstborn son from before he was even born in the first place. Everyone else, Mom, Teacher, the Rockbells… they couldn't place them in harm’s way. Not with two homunculi on the loose and a third waiting to be freed. This train of thought obviously bothered Ed just as much as it did Al, because he continued stomping up the stairs so distractedly that he ended up banging his head against the trapdoor.

“You might wanna watch your step,” said Ling, far too late to be helpful and not without a trace of amusement.

“Fuck you.”
“Brother!”

“Whatever. You know how to open this?” Al could practically hear him rolling his eyes.

“Not a clue.” Ling’s grin was heard rather than seen, but its existence was obvious all the same. Ed sighed and clapped his hands. Al had no doubt whose array he was activating, considering his impatient mood. The crackle of golden energy illuminated the trio for a fraction of a second, a startling moment of clarity before the trapdoor crumbled away.

No artificial source of light could compare to the sun. Not in brightness, or strength, or sheer energy. Even as the details of its origin and composition were hazy or outright mysteries, there was no denying its significance. It heated the sands to dangerous temperatures, yet provided reptiles with the ability to thermoregulate. It evaporated any moisture it could from desert travelers, yet powered the weather systems that cycled rare rain storms over Xerxes. In that moment it was the second most amazing thing in the world. The first was Ed, looking out at the world, squinting against the brilliant glare with a grin on his face. When he tilted his face up, smiled as the sunlight heated his skin, Al could almost imagine that he felt warm too.

Chapter End Notes

Aw, Al… It's a great feeling, to see the people you love get the nice things they deserve. All he wants is a happy ending for Ed, after all he's sacrificed. Safety, freedom, and maybe a romantic ride off into the sunset with a deserving hero, *hint hint*. Anyways, I should be posting a Dragon Ball Z oneshot soon before or shortly after the next chapter, so check it out if that's your cup of tea. If not, please keep in mind that comments on literally any part of this story are what really fuel me and absolutely make my day. I'm a bit of a narcissist, so attention on my works is basically crack to me.
An Unexpected Snag

Chapter Summary

Ed gets them into a mess by being an ass, then gets them out of it by being an ass. In between, Ling gets a workout.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You made the hole too small,” said Ling, out of breath.

Ed was unsympathetic, watching Ling worm his way above ground.

“You're just too big,” he said defensively, as if that was Ling’s fault. Ling got the impression Ed didn't like him very much. It occurred to him that Ed was an incredibly mysterious person, despite how he wore his emotions so openly. His story was strange, his brother even stranger, yet Ling could find no good reason not to believe him. In spite of his personality, he was obviously a victim in this scenario. Just seeing his interaction with the creature he called Envy was enough to convince him of that. Still, that didn't change the fact that Ling really, really, really shouldn't be doing this.

Beyond the homunculi that the brothers had been alarmingly evasive about, Ling just didn't have the time to break through the palace’s doubled security again with an ill tempered alchemist of limited mobility in tow. He needed to get across that desert as quickly as possible before his old man kicked the bucket. Of course, he needed the stone in hand as well, but even getting that away from Ed could be nigh impossible. Though obviously physically weaker than him, he had a command of alchemy greater than that of any Amestrian state alchemist or Xingese alkahestrist Ling had ever seen. Leaving out the question of whether he could do it, Ling was torn up over whether he should take back the stone from someone who was clearly in a dangerous situation and in need of help. Ling’s rudimentary and somewhat self centered moral compass was spinning in circles. As he got to his feet, he subtly took another look at his companion, and almost had his breath stolen by the sight.

Underground, in the artificial moonlight, he'd looked pale and threatening as a ghost. Under the burning sun, he came to life. His hair shone brighter than any gold Ling had ever seen in his mother's jewelry or his father's court, pulled back with loose tendrils escaping to run down the sides of his face and the back of his neck. His eyes, exotic in their shape and color, were wide with wonder. His smile as he looked about was wide, illuminating his sharp, fine features.

“We're in the ruins, aren't we?” For a moment, Ling thought he was talking to him.

“We're so close, Brother!” The talking doll took a bit of getting used to. It emitted no sort of qi that Ling could sense, but he could find no explanation for it. There wasn't an automaton in existence that could move so fluidly, and certainly not one so small. That didn't even account for its voice. So, Ling concluded that Ed's little brother had... somehow possessed an inanimate object? It was ridiculous, but after the kind of day he'd been having, Ling had just decided to go with it. The brothers got busy orienting themselves in the meantime.

“It's not too hot out, which means it's still morning, and the sun is in the east.”
“So the agriculture labs are to the right, desert and ruins to the left, and Xerxes is… straight ahead.”

“Yes, but there’s a long artificial lake you’ll have to go around to get there, as there aren’t any bridges to shorten the trip.” At this Ed turned around, glaring daggers. Somehow, he looked just as good with murder in his eyes as when he smiled with content. Distantly, Ling was aware how uncharacteristic of him it was to remark on a person’s appearance, but he couldn’t help it. Ed didn’t look like anyone he’d ever seen, sharp, golden, and temperamental as a roaring fire.

“Did I ask for your opinion?”

“Just offering advice, Brother.” Al seemed a bit more grateful to Ling than his brother, at least. Gratitude that may have been misplaced, as Ling was currently racking his brain for a somewhat morally acceptable way to get loose of the brothers and their insane story that he was certain wouldn’t lead to anything good. For example, Ed couldn’t even plan a proper route into the city, which certainly couldn’t bode well.

“What does it matter? His “advice” is useless. The shortest distance between two points is a straight line. That’s all we need.”

Fortunately, Ling was saved from explaining the concept of lakes just then. Unfortunately, it was by a few Amestrian voices rounding the corner. He darted away for cover, before realizing too late Ed was not following his lead. He stood in front of the well, glaring at the approaching pair with all the authority of an emperor in his throne room. It was captivating, and dumb.

The two soldiers were the short one, and the tallest one with graying hair. Their guns were at the ready, but carefully pointed at the ground. They didn’t immediately view Ed as a threat, at least. Al had chosen to play dead, sitting quietly upon his shoulder. They approached, confusion and concern on their faces.

“What are you doing here?”

“Can’t a citizen take an interest in their cultural history?” He glared, taking in their blue trousers and black boots, identical in design. “You’re Amestrian soldiers,” he stated, spitting out the syllables like a curse. His grasp of the language was quite good, less accented than Ling’s.

“We-“ They looked surprised to be recognized so easily, and were floundering for a response.

“So, Fürher Bradley’s finally made his move to conquer Xerxes. Sorry to break it to you, but there’s nobody to murder here.” Ling suddenly realized how isolated Ed was, completely unaware of the outside world in his prison.

“King Bradley has been dead for years,” said the short one, confused.

“And Amestris has been a democracy for nearly as long. We are not here on military duty, we promise.” They seemed honest, but Ling had already guessed that they were telling the truth. Amestrian foreign policy had changed drastically in recent years, and he had no reason to believe the soldiers had any other business than apprehending a thief. Ed, who had no knowledge of this until very recently, was shocked. His plush lips were parted in disbelieving awe, before his expression closed down once more in suspicion.

“Are you alright?” The short one had good reason to be concerned. Ed’s flesh arm and thigh, along with one cheek, were bruised with suspiciously hand-shaped marks, and he was notably skinny, not to mention two of his limbs having quite obviously been amputating, all likely a product of his ordeal. The soldiers seemed like good men, despite being Ling’s adversaries.
Inspiration struck him. These soldiers, along with the powerful alchemist, could easily take Ed into their custody, taking away Ling’s responsibility and protecting him from the monsters. It was a win-win, except for the fact he had the stone on him still. Details, details. Behind his column, Ling frowned, but decided to watch for the moment. The short one extended a hand, as if to examine his forearm.

“I'm fine,” said Ed snappishly, taking a step backwards and drawing his flesh arm behind him protectively. The man seemed no less concerned but let the matter, as well as his hand, drop.

The tall one produced some sort of signal gun from his belt. He shot it directly overhead, where the round exploded in a harmless cloud of blue chalk. Within seconds, their comrades were in the square once more. Ling wanted to groan aloud in frustration.

“Who are you?” The alchemist’s arm was held in a sling, but it looked as if his fingers could still snap. Not to mention, his left side was uninjured. Great.

“Just someone going for a morning walk,” he said, not without a fair amount of snark. “I don't see why it matters to a bunch of bastards like you.”

The blond one, with the spiky bangs, looked more confused than offended.

“Hey, Fuery, what the hell did you do this kid?”

Ling could practically see the vein pop out on Ed’s forehead while he grit his teeth.

“Nothing! I think it has something to do with that he thinks we're Bradley's men, though.” The alchemist smirked at that.

“He does? Jeez, I know that there's not exactly a telegraph line across the desert, but I didn't think it would take this long for news to travel.” Ed scowled even deeper.

“I already know all my information is five years out of date, so don't fucking rub it in, okay?”

“Five years?”

“Look, I told you why I'm here, so tell me your story already,” he said impatiently. “It's only the law of equivalent exchange.”

The soldiers turned to their injured commander, uncertain of how much information to offer. He said nothing, instead gaping at their demanding adversary. Ed, for his part, didn't back down in the slightest, glaring imperiously back at them despite his bruised appearance and height deficiency. The short one, Fuery, likely trying to gain Ed's trust, was the first to break.

“We're trying to catch a dangerous criminal and deliver him to the local police force. Now, will you please let Falman take a look at your arm and wrist?”

“It looks like there could be fractures, just going off the swelling I can see,” said the man presumably known as Falman.

“I told you, it's fine. You said there was a criminal in these ruins? What does he look like?” Like he didn't already know. The tall blond patted down his pants pockets, looking for something before giving up.

“Yo, Breda. Where's the sketch?”
“I think Hawkeye’s still got it,” Breda called back.

“Yes, but where is she?”

Ling stiffened in his hiding spot. His opponent from before was the only member not present. He found himself gripped by a fierce sense of dread. And that was before he felt the barrel of a gun being pressed against the base of his ponytail.

“Put your hands behind your back,” she ordered.

“Of course. It’d be a shame to get brain matter over all this ancient architecture,” said Ling, light and breezy even as she cuffedit him. Internally, his thoughts were a pitch black storm. He’d barely managed to pull off his escape earlier, and it was largely due to dumb luck. Even if he managed to get away by some miracle, without the stone, he’d be back to square one. Hawkeye steered him into the the plaza, her gun a steady reminder she wouldn't let him get the upper hand again.

“Hey, what do you know, he looks something like that,” said the blond comedian.

Ed gave him a look that, rather than panic or concern, conveyed something along the lines of you fucking idiot. Ling winced. The alchemist observed the bizarre exchange with suspicion at once.

“Do you recognize this man?”

“Is he the person that broke your arm?” The soldiers treated him like a victim of abuse, which he was, but it was obviously grating on Ed's limited patience. Ed stalked towards Ling, looking him over with exaggerated scrutiny. The Xingese prince gave a winning smile that concealed his nerves. It was possible that Ed was completely ready to throw his recently acquired companion under the wheels, if convenient.

“I,” he began, staring Ling dead in the eye, “have never seen this man in my life.”

“Really,” said the commander in a flat voice.

“He's got the face of a bastard, though. Just like you.”

“Ed!” As soon as he realized what he'd done, Al went stiffer than the armor he was modeled after.

“Hey, did that doll just—? The red headed one shut up once he realized what he was saying. The alchemist narrowed his eyes, even more suspicious than before. He smirked.

“Fascinating observation. You can tell us all about that when we take you in for questioning.”

“C’mon, boss, you can't seriously believe he's an accomplice, can you?” The blond and Breda seemed to be the most laid back of the group, Ling noted.

“That's exactly what I think, Havoc, and it's why we need to question him.”

“Need I remind you, Mr. President, that we barely have the authority to search for this man, let alone detain a citizen without solid evidence?” Interestingly, Hawkeye was the rational one that stuck to the rules, unlike her hotheaded superior. Hotheaded. Ling was a genius.

“If anything, we should be taking him to a hospital, not the authorities! …Sir,” tacked on Fuery, who was less soft spoken than he seemed, apparently.

“Stop talking about me like I'm not here, dickheads,” growled Ed. He was ignored.
“He’s just a kid, boss.”

Ling felt a horrible premonition just then, in the form of all the hair on the back of his neck standing straight up. A single cloud in the sky floated over the sun, casting the group into a slight shade. A noise fell out of Ed’s mouth, not unlike a cat about to hiss. His shoulders began to tremble, almost imperceptibly. Al tried to subtly tug on his hair to get his attention, but to no avail.

“God damn it…”

“I don’t care if he’s a little kid, he’s acting suspicious as-” Ling wasn’t sure what part of that sentence was most offensive to Ed, but he was fairly certain it was either “little” or “kid”. Either way, it drove the already precarious blond over the edge.

“WHO ARE YOU CALLING A BABYFACED TEENAGER THAT NEVER GREW UP ‘CAUSE HE’S GOT VITAMIN DEFICIENCIES FROM A TO Z?”

The golden light of the transformation arced across the ground, causing it to buck as wildly as a living thing. The distortions were enough to launch the president vertically several feet, causing him to land painfully on his back a few yards away. The others weren’t incapacitated so fantastically, but were effectively unable to stand on the roiling surface. The pillars constantly shooting up and retreating into the ground also made it impossible to attack, keeping the soldiers on their toes for fear of being suddenly airborne. Ling, for his part, managed to stay on his knees. This was fortunate, since his cuffed hands were unable to break any fall.

“Brother! Why do you always have to be so excessive?” Al’s voice had taken on a screechy pubescent quality, cracking on every other syllable. Ed strode purposefully towards Ling, rearranging his transmutation with every footstep. For the first time since their meeting, Ed was able to look down on Ling, and it made him nervous. The blond’s features were contorted in rage, a grimace frightening in its intensity. After a moment, the cloud slid away from the sun, letting it turn Ed’s hair into a shining golden halo from behind. With it, Ed’s expression transformed into one of self satisfaction. He clapped once before transmuting his handcuffs into something with all the strength of stale bread. Easily, Ling cracked them open, before looking up at Ed.

“Why did you-?”

“We made a deal, remember?”

Ling sighed before smiling broadly and getting to his feet. It looked as if the three of them were stuck together until their transaction was completed. It was no less ill-advised than before, but Ling found himself strangely excited.

“C’mon,” said the blond, wasting no time in snatching his arm and leading him north. “And don’t worry, Al. They’ll just have some killer bruises tomorrow.”

“Alright,” muttered the younger, watching as they stepped over the groaning and incapacitated soldiers lying on the still ground.

“It’s been a while since I heard your voice crack like that, though,” he said with a grin.

“Ed!”

Ling wanted to laugh. Despite the circumstances, it seemed that teasing was a universal constant among brothers. Well, he supposed, it didn't apply to Ling’s half brothers from other clans. The vast majority of those had attempted to kill him, either indirectly or by their own hand when he was a child. He contemplated what he would have to find the best way to neutralize them after his
coronation without excessive violence. After all, it wouldn't do to kill off the entire clan leadership. That would push Xingese devotion to the emperor a little too far. Once again, he reminded himself, he was getting ahead of himself. His ascension to the throne was far from assured, especially with this bizarre new development—

Ling heard a groan from behind him, along with the shift of sand on stone. He turned, already feeling his world slow down, full awareness condensing into a few seconds. The alchemist was on one knee, looking absolutely furious. His left hand was extended, clad in another white glove. Ling felt his blood run cold, seeing the fingers prepare to snap. His body moved on its own, catching Ed around the waist and tackling him to the side.

“Ling what the—”

The bolt of fire impacted the place he'd just been, creating a crater with a noise that Ling could swear was making his brain vibrate. Acrid smoke rose in the air, and Ling could've sworn he saw the sand melt. Given the lightness of his body, Al was thrown clear, but recovered quickly and ran back to his brother’s side. Ling suspected that, in a lot of ways, his body was far more durable than the average person’s.

“Ed, are you alright?” For his part, Ed just groaned and shoved at Ling, who was still hovering above him on hands and knees. Ling, for once in his life, was frozen, staring behind them. Following his gaze, Ed turned to the alchemist, who had stood up.

“God-fucking-damnit,” he growled, proving his increasing vulgarity. With a savage twist of his torso, he freed his right arm and clapped, pressing his hand to the ground. In seconds, a wall two dozen feet tall shot up between them and the soldiers. Ling came to his senses, getting to his feet and pulling Ed behind him. Al attached himself to Ed's shoulder, holding onto the tank top strap for dear life.

They had scarcely run to the end of the city block when they heard it again, that earthshaking explosion. Behind them, a cloud of black smoke and burning flame rose up from behind their barrier.

“So, uh,” Ed said, before taking a heaving breath from exertion. “How long would you say we have until he cracks that open?”

“Optimistically? A minute, at the most.”

“Why the hell didn't you tell me you had the Flame Alchemist on your tail?”

“It's not like I asked his name, okay?” The stress of the situation was getting to him, causing him to wildly oscillate between frustration with the cosmic unfairness he had been through that day and a detached sense of amusement towards the compounding circumstances.

Ling tried to speed up, only to quickly realize that Ed was at his limit. His prosthetic limbs weren't intended for running, and even if they were, Ed wouldn't have been used to running for any significant amount of time. He was breathing heavily, his gait unsteady and inefficient. He looked as if he would give out any minute. Desperation washed over Ling. He fought the urge to turn around, give up, but some unknown sentiment, possibly pride or determination, drove him forward. Suddenly, inspiration struck.

Making use of Ed's stumble, Ling swept him into a cradle carry without losing so much as a step. His weight, while not completely insignificant, was much less than he expected, which was saying quite a bit, considering his height and build. Perhaps his prosthetics were hollow? The specifics were unimportant in the moment. What mattered was that the pack Ling had carried across the desert had
started out heavier than this, meaning he could easily run while carrying him, while still being significantly faster than with Ed on foot. Unfortunately, Ed didn't immediately understand his reasoning.

“What the hell are you trying to pull? Put me down!”

“I'm getting us away from the man trying to roast us like fattened ducks,” he said, remarkably calm. He ducked into a side street, none too soon. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw rubble flying into the main avenue, followed by a cloud of dust and the voices of soldiers. Ed’s barrier hadn’t even made it a full minute. Ling ducked through crumbling walls, homes long abandoned, in an effort to throw them off their trail. After a moment, he heard the president order them his way. His footprints in the sand would be blown away within the hour, but were as bad as a paved stone trail right to him while they were fresh. At least they still maintained their widening head start over them.

“You can't destroy the ruins, sir!”

The explosions had stopped for the moment, so Ling assumed the president had decided to listen to Hawkeye. That was good, at least. However, the second they left to ruins or came across a large enough clearing, they would be fair game.

“Who the hell brings a sword to a gunfight?” Ed had recovered from his shock, apparently. Ling wasn’t sure if that was a good thing.

“A ranged weapon would be helpful right now,” said Al, sounding more worried than angry.

“Do you know how unreliable those things are? They misfire, they break, they get wet, and suddenly they’re useless,” he listed off, only to realize Ed was no longer listening. He suspected Al wasn’t either, but it was hard to tell, given his condition.

“Useless when wet,” mumbled the younger brother.

“Hey Al,” said the elder, concentrating hard. “Remember when you were nine, and we came up with counter attacks for every state alchemist?”

“Yeah! The Flame Alchemist uses an array that controls oxygen content in the air, not fire itself, so he needs something to produce a spark.”

“All those years, we thought he used a lighter, but really, it was just as easy as snapping his fingers.” Ed’s face broke into an evil grin.

“Are you thinking what I am, Brother?” Al sounded significantly more confident than before.

“We need to get to the lake.”

“What? I told you, it’s a reservoir. There’s no boats, no bridges, no way across. We’d be trapped,” insisted Ling.

“Just trust me! I know what I’m talking about, alright?”

Ling made a snap judgement. The situation was officially out of his hands. Ed was right, Ling was outgunned and outmanned against their pursuers. At least, Ling reasoned, Ed couldn’t make things any worse. With a destination in mind, he picked up the pace.

After mere minutes, what had once been the residential district began to thin out, revealing pieces of a placid mirror, sitting on the sand. The sun reflected off the water with blinding intensity, suddenly
high in the sky.

“Put me down put me down put me down,” whispered Ed under his breath, all but falling to the ground the second Ling loosened his hold. Frantically, he limped to the shore. Ling would have thought him to be panicked, if it weren’t for the excited grin on his face. With a firm kick, Ed constructed a wall in the shape of a nearly complete circle, with an opening directly ahead out to the lake.

“He’s just going to blow it up again,” he pointed out, reconsidering the wisdom of letting Ed handle their scheming.

“That’s the plan,” he said, expression bordering on sinister. He clapped, and thrust his hands into the shallows. Ling thought he had an unusually high tolerance for the extraordinary, but even he had his limits. When someone made a mile long bridge in a matter of seconds, even he was bound to be astonished. Well, calling it a bridge was a bit misleading. It was more of a pathway, its surface barely six inches above the water. It looked as if it had always been there, a straight line perfectly bisecting the lake. Without hesitation, Ed pulled Ling onto it and started running. They’d been doing an awful lot of pulling each other around lately, considering they first met barely an hour ago.

“Al, this is gonna be so cool,” he said, enthusiastic in a way that was nothing short of alarming to Ling.

“This way!” The voices of their pursuers, however, were even more alarming. A quick glance behind them showed the party already running to the edge of the water, the alchemist at the forefront. Ling felt his stomach churn, thinking of the searing heat and bone rattling noise of his explosions. He’d always liked roasted meat, but he never imagined himself becoming it. He heard that thunder behind them, before they were even a third of the way across the lake. He resolved not to look anymore. Instead, he focused on the feeling of his scarcely covered feet slapping against the stone, the sun beating down upon him, the roar of blood in his ears.

Suddenly, Ed came to a stop and turned on his heel. Ling, having accepted that leaving him behind was no longer an option, did the same. The soldiers were on the bridge, charging two abreast. Calmly, Ed got to his knees.

“If there’s a second part to this plan, I think that now’s the time.” The soldiers were a couple hundred feet from shore, but too far away for handguns to be incredibly accurate. That, or they were merely unwilling to shoot a child.

“Don’t worry about it,” said Ed, clapping his hands. “They're falling for this-” he pressed his hands to the ground, causing the pathway to fissure and shake.

“Hook,”

Ling could practically hear the soldiers cursing in confusion and distress.

“Line,”

The transmutation spread, causing everything behind the escapees to crumble like dry clay.

“And sinker.”

The ground gave way beneath the soldiers, neatly depositing them into the water with a few startled screams. Ed turned around, a self-satisfied smirk on his face.

“Your jokes are terrible,” said Ling, though he was smiling all the same.
“Normally, I would disapprove, but you were right, Brother. That was pretty cool.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter took eight times longer than usual, but it's only twice as long as the others. Oops. Well, at least we'll be getting to see a bit more of the city shortly. Please please please talk to me. I get lonely.
An Aftermath of an Escape

Chapter Summary

Ling and the brothers plan their next steps. Roy can still salvage this mess.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Edward Elric has been having a hell of a day. He'd defeated Envy, joined forces with a Xingese prince who's got the stupidest face he's ever seen, and humiliated the infamous Flame Alchemist of the Ishvalan extermination. The last one had been particularly satisfying, for various reasons. Currently, he was walking around southwestern Xerxes, unofficially known as the shady part of town. Well, that's what their teacher had always called it. Luckily, she lived just far away enough that to run into her would be extremely unlikely. Due to her condition, she mostly stayed at the shop, sharpening knives and carving up raw meat with ruthless efficiency.

“Brother, what do you think Teacher would do if she saw us again?” Al had obviously been following the same line of thinking as Ed, which was not nearly as surprising as one would think.

“I don't want to think about it,” he said, swallowing heavily. It was already bad enough that they had been defeated and held captive for five years. If Teacher found out about her students’ humiliation, she’d murder them. Not to mention, she’d never approve of their current plans.

“Me neither.”

With that in mind, the brothers marveled at their surroundings, trailing a few steps behind Ling. They took it all in: laundry hanging on lines across alleys, street performers competing for audiences, overly aggressive vendors pushing their products on passers by. The things that had once seemed mundane and expected were suddenly vibrant and entrancing, if only for the fact that every scene held new faces, stories completely unrelated to the Elric brothers or Dante and her creations. The sun beat down on them all, its harsh warmth filling Ed's muscles with an energy he hadn't felt in years.

And yet, none of these factors were what pushed Ed to take another step, despite his aching stump. No, it was the pale stone palace in the distance, practically glowing with reflected sunlight. A relic of the early days of autocratic cruel of the city, an annual gathering place of the people for certain occasions, and the first home of Edward and Alphonse Elric, crown princes of Xerxes. But more than that, Ed was certain it was where Al’s body rested, waiting to be reunited with its soul. It had waited for five long years, and Ed didn’t want to waste a second longer waiting to put his brother back together again. With that in mind, Ed sped up to reach Ling’s side.

“So, how are we getting into the palace?”

“I was kind of hoping you would have a plan,” he said, way too flippant for Ed's liking.

“What do you think I'm blackmailing you for?”

“Ed, there's no need to be so rude. It's not like we're asking for something simple here.” Ed was beginning to seriously hate how often his brother took Ling’s side. So much for fraternal unity.
“You're brother's right. Growling like that all the time is bad for your voice, you know.”

“Making me wanna punch you all the time is bad for your teeth, you know,” he shot back. Ling cheerfully ignored him.

“If you must know, the most important thing in a job like this is meticulously taking things step by step.”

“Well, what's step one?”

“Getting something to eat, of course.”

“You… You're kidding, right?” A look from Ling’s direction made Al deflate.

“I never joke about food.”

“Look, if you're just going to waste our time, we'll just go by ourselves.” Ed was ready to throw his hand up and cut his losses. He'd make this work without him. He had to.

“Wait, let's not be too hasty,” said Ling, eyes straying to the pocket that held the stone. “I was just saying, you can't commit grand larceny on an empty stomach.”

Ed glared, only to be contradicted by his gurgling stomach.

“How ever. Just find someplace cheap.”

Ling grinned and pulled Ed along by his flesh hand.

“Stay close.”

“Stop doing that,” he hissed, but didn't bother to jerk away. It looked like he'd just have to get used to Ling's propensity for manhandling, based off of his earlier actions. Red-faced and angry, Ed seethed at the memory, even if it had saved their lives. It was like he hadn't even weighed anything to him.

They soon abandoned the wider avenues for cramped, spiraling alleyways. Ed was unfamiliar with them, having known such side streets as shortcuts between larger areas, rather than places one would search for a destination.

“Besides, we can't make a move until the changing of the guard, which happens at dusk and dawn every day. I got in this morning, so we've got another nine hours to go, assuming they don't change the schedule too much because of the break-in, which is a very big assumption to make.”

“In that case, maybe we could go to Winry and get your automail back first,” said Al. Ed's phantom limbs twitched and shook. He hadn't felt completely whole since the day his automail disappeared down Gluttony’s gullet, partly because it was what gave him independence, but mostly because it was a gift from his best friend. Drafted lovingly, constantly redesigned and improved, even Ed could appreciate it as a work of art, despite his disinterest in automail mechanical engineering. He missed it, pridefully carrying the genius Winry Rockbell’s latest creations around, finer than any flesh arm or leg.

“You know we can't do that, Al.”

“Why not?” His tone was despairing, already knowing his brother's reasoning and finding himself unable to refute it. Ed winced. He knew how badly Al wanted to see their friends and family, felt
that ache just as fiercely.

“...You know why,” he said, trying to sound firm and ending up sounding tired and miserable. They were magnets for trouble now, pursued by both Dante and the Amestrians. In the former’s case, the first place she would look would be the Rockbell Automail shop. Though intelligent and deadly with wrenches in hand, the Rockbells stood no chance against the nigh-immortal alchemist.

“Hey! I think this place looks pretty good,” said Ling with all his characteristic cheer, though how much of it was manufactured was up for debate. Ed wondered if his exclamation was because he wasn’t paying attention to the topic of discussion between the brothers, or because he read the dark mood that hung around Ed’s shoulders like a localized storm cloud. Ed wasn’t sure whether he was grateful for the distraction or annoyed at his perceptiveness. Both, maybe.

Either way, Ed had to take a look at what caught Ling’s eye. Down an alley scarcely wide enough for two grown men to walk side by side, at the bottom of a set of uneven stone steps, was a door. Though the swinging wooden flaps did nothing to hide the interior, Ed found he could see nothing of the indoors, thrown too far into shadow and surprisingly dark. Though Ed couldn’t see any artificial light sources, he heard other signs of life, such as smooth, unobtrusive brass music and the occasional laughter floating back out to them. Nothing about its outward appearance suggested a place for a traveler’s lunch, but Ed wasn’t about to start looking for an alternative. They had nine hours until Al got his body back, and Ed didn’t intend to waste them on looking for higher dining accommodations.

Still, it was an odd place. The only thing that proclaimed it as any sort of public area was the split wood sign that hung crookedly above the door. Upon it were three words in crude red paint, looking as if some incompetent drunk had written them with his non-dominant hand half a century before.

_The Devil’s Nest._

###

Roy was officially done with Xerxes. Cultural hub of scientific and alchemical advancement or no, the charm had worn off somewhere around the thirty second mark of swimming back to shore in heavy, dark clothes. Though his team were all competent swimmers, it had been horrible just based on the surprise of being dunked, let alone losing their target while they were at it.

The worst part was the walk of shame back into the city. Though his clothes were no longer soaked, they had transitioned into being boiling hot and damp, which was almost worse. He felt like he was trapped in his own personal sauna, and none of his men were any better off. With every step, his socks squished and oozed water that immediately soaked into the burning sand.

Scratch that, the worst part was that Roy had thought he would be safe from large quantities of water in the desert. But no, Roy would never be free of his glaring vulnerability.

Currently, they were camped out by a pay phone, digging through pockets for change.

“At least,” said Breda, with the smile of a man that knew damn well he was going to piss everyone off, “We don’t need to check out the baths anymore.”

“Oh, fuck you.” Havoc had elected to take off his shirt to dry and was leaning against a brick wall. He was crossing his arms across his chest somewhat self consciously, which was a bit of a first for him. Roy suspected it had something to do with the group of four teenagers across the street giggling at his tan lines. They looked to be students on lunch break, judging by their canvas bags of textbooks, food, and water canteens. Their skin was, by comparison, bronzed in shades of gold, copper, and polished teak. The palest of them all was a tall individual of indeterminate gender,
swathed in layers of protective pink muslin, crowned with an oversized sun hat and a gap-toothed grin. Overall, there wasn't a harsh white line or angry red burn to be found. Roy resented them for a moment, until he realized in horror exactly how curmudgeonly he'd gotten in his old age.

Finally, Fuery and Falman produced another two coins, and the funds to make their call were complete. The piece of paper with the number on it had turned into a pasty wad of of disintegrated cellulose long ago, but Falman had already memorized it by then. He quietly recited it over Roy's shoulder as he dialed, before respectfully shutting the door. The phone rang just once before picking up, giving Roy no time to rehearse his speech to the operator. He'd never attempted to phone a king before, after all.

“Hello? I'd like to speak with his Highness, as quickly as possible. It's very urgent—"

“It's just Hohenheim,” said the man on the other end, though only a shadow of his amusement from that morning remained. Roy took a deep breath, stills a bit unsure of what his time limit was.

“I'll get to the point. How common is the ability to transmute without a circle? Do you have some sort of registry?”

The king was silent for a long moment before speaking haltingly.

“The ability is exceedingly rare, because one can only receive the knowledge in trade for some sacrifice. I've only known two other alchemists capable of it. Did the thief use it?”

“No, but he has an accomplice that is a an extremely skilled alchemist. That would explain why the original thief would steal the stone, though some of us (Fuery and Falman) believe the alchemist is being coerced.”

“What do they look like?”

“Male, long blond hair, prosthetic right arm and left leg, plain clothes,” he listed, only to be surprised by the sound of Hohenheim sucking in a quick breath. “You know him?” Hohenheim gave no indication he heard the last part.

“How tall was he?” His voice was soft, hard to hear even in the solitude of the booth.

“Small enough that me and my team mistook him for a child.” He grimaced. “The second we broadcast that mistake out loud, he flew into a rage and attacked us.”

The noise that came over the line was half startled laughter and half sob.

“That's Ed, alright,” he sighed, tired and amused all at once.

“You can personally identify him?”

“Of course I can. He's my son.”

“I thought your son was…”

“Violently abducted from his bedroom five years ago?” The word Roy had been tactfully avoiding was “dead”, but whatever. “This would be the first lead we've had in nearly that long. Did he look healthy?”

Briefly, Roy considered lying.

“Aside from being abnormally short and skinny, he had some bruises, and a possible fracture on his
left arm, but he wouldn't let Falman examine it, since he said it was perfectly fine.”

“I don't have any better idea of what happened to Ed than I did five years ago, but that sounds about right for him. Ed has a massive tolerance for pain, and would never accept help from an Amestrian soldier, considering how many of his close friends came to Xerxes fleeing Bradley and the extermination.”

Any doubts Roy had about the King misidentifying their suspect went up in smoke. It figured that the son of their prospective ally would be running around with a philosopher’s stone, unprecedented skill, and a major grudge against the Amestrian military, because nothing could ever be simple. Of course, he'd already known that there couldn't be very many double amputee midget alchemists running around Xerxes, but it was always paid to be certain.

“Whether he's being forced or not, we will bring your son and the stone back to you as quickly as possible.” It would certainly help mending relations with Xerxes to return the lost crown prince, he thought.

“I am doubtful you could track and subdue my son, though you are welcome to try. If you do see him, I'd like you to give him a message. Tell him his mother and father miss him, and that no matter what's happened, we will protect him and restore his brother as a family.”

“Of course,” said Roy, as professionally as possible. However, he was internally on the edge of crying out in confusion. Additionally, he was a little indignant. Roy and his men could track his son down and detain him any day of the week. The midget had just gotten the drop on them the first time.

“What's your location? We'll be sending city guard members your way to investigate the trail.”

Roy passed on all the necessary information, but his thoughts were all of how to track down the prince, the stone, and the jackass that threw a goddamn knife at him. He politely hung up, before turning around and throwing open the booth. His men startled and looked at him, expectant.

“So, there's good news and bad news. The bad news is that we just got our asses handed to us by long-lost royalty.”

Half his men looked ready to interrupt him with some sort of question, the other half processed their awed disbelief in silence, and his right hand woman gave a long suffering sigh, like she hadn't expected anything less ridiculous. Eventually, Fuery spoke up.

“And the good news, sir?”

“The good news is that we once again have need of Hawkeye’s unexpected portraiture skills,” he said with a grin.

Chapter End Notes

Not much of a revelation for you guys, but Roy's pretty surprised by this turn of events. I officially have no more chapters finished ahead of time, so we're looking at once a week updates for the foreseeable future. Expect word counts to be very inconsistent.
Life's been difficult lately, but reading your comments and hanging out with my dog has been the highlight of my days. Thank you for reading and make sure to be kind to anyone who's being paid to tolerate you.
A Zoo In A Basement

Chapter Summary

Greed, predictably, gets on Ed's nerves. However, they've got some shared experiences that make him an ideal ally.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ling, in all honesty, hadn't even been looking where he was going when he picked out a restaurant. He'd just been following his nose, because no matter what kind of place it was, he wanted to be at the source of that spicy, salty, fried meat smell.

Currently, he was having second thoughts. For one thing, his sense of smell led him to a literal hole in the wall and down a set of stairs that gave him an awful case of déja vu. The difference was that these stairs were lit by crimson lanterns, casting everything in its blood-red glow. Ling wasn't exactly scared, but he did have a healthy sense of self preservation that told him to never, under any circumstances, fight in a basement. But, he said to himself, it did smell awfully good in that basement.

Ed made the decision for him, brazenly pushing forward. He pushed open the flimsy swinging gate, triggering a twinkling chime in direct contrast to their surroundings. The room was dark and mostly empty save for a group in the corner and a couple of women that seemed to be nursing the hangover of their lives. The other group of four were camped out by a record player, the source of the smooth music they'd heard outside. Their numbers included an enormous man with scarred biceps thicker than tree trunks, a very small woman sharpening a very large knife, a man with one hand resting on his sword, and a fourth figure hooded in ratty brown cloth, who quite obviously had a scaly tail curled around the legs of his chair. They picked at a platter covered in pickled vegetables, sauces, and fried croquettes of indeterminate content. Upon the disturbance, they looked up from their card game, suspicion written all over their faces. Ling didn't know what he expected Ed to do, but it wasn't to calmly limp in like he owned the place, fully aware of but seemingly unconcerned by his surroundings. He took a seat at the bar, growling a little at the difficulty he had getting up on the tall stool.

The man behind the bar was one of the tallest ones Ling had ever seen, broad and muscular while having significantly less bulk than the giant that was currently getting slaughtered in a game of go fish. He wore tiny round sunglasses that seemed redundant in a dimly lit basement, along with a fur lined vest that had definitely seen better days. He grinned broadly, revealing unnaturally sharp teeth that led Ling to believe he'd gotten them filed.

“What can I get for you, kiddo? Glass of warm milk?”

Ling winced, waiting for the inevitable explosion. Ed, having already expelled five years of poorly repressed rage, only scowled.

“Shove it up your ass, fuck-face. And get me some ice water while you're at it.”

Still, he wasn't that calm. Luckily, the enormous man with shark teeth didn't seem to mind too much.
An amused grin stretched across his face, still looking somewhat predatory.

“Whoops. Looks like I hit a sore spot. What about you, big guy? Care for something stronger?”

“No thanks,” said Ling with a polite wave of his hand. “I'm only sixteen, so I can't drink yet.” Not that he would if he could. He likes all his senses in perfect working order, thank you very much.

“You're only sixteen?” Al sounded very surprised from where Ed put him on the bar, but he seemed to be taking it better than his brother. Ed, for his part, was glaring at him with the force of a thousand suns.

“Stand up.”

“Hm?”

“Stand. Up.”

When faced with an expression like that, Ling did the only thing he could think of, and stood up. Ed did the same, and stepped into his personal space, where Ling could feel the puff of his breath against the exposed areas of his chest. Baffled, he offhandedly noted that Ed didn't even come up to his shoulder, before taking notice of the oscillating expressions of horror and rage on his face. For some reason, Ling felt small in the face of that glare.

“I might not be the best judge, but you seem really tall for your age. Ed turns seventeen tomorrow, and he's not nearly as big,” said Al, innocent curiosity in his voice. “But we think there were some severe nutrient deficiencies, plus he was born prematurely, so I guess it only makes sense he wouldn't grow up the same.”

Ed intensified his glaring, before raising a single, accusing finger.

“You've just got a freakish adult face.”

Ling was surprised for all of one second before having to clamp his mouth shut not to laugh. In his periphery he saw the hungover women groan and get out the door with minimal stumbling.

“Speaking of graceless subject changing, I can't help but notice that you're in possession of a talking doll,” said the man, eyeing Al with an unchecked curiosity. “Does something that interesting happen to be up for sale?”

“He's not a doll. He's my brother, ya reprobate.”

“And you can't buy me either!”

The bartender looked between them thoughtfully.

“Not much of a family resemblance, is there?”

“Funny,” said Ed in a tone that implied the exact opposite. Ling felt a strange sense of victory in seeing a person Ed disliked even more than himself. Said person deposited a glass of ice water in front of Ed, which raised his opinion of him only slightly higher, even as he drank greedily.

“But seriously; can I get the story behind this? My curiosity’s killin’ me here.”

“No. Just feed the bastard so we can get on our way.” Ling assumed “the bastard” was him, but couldn't argue with the prospect of some hot food in his belly.
“It’s a long story,” said Al, politely refusing even as he stuck close to the protective crook of his brother's elbow resting on the bar. The bartender sat back, a borderline devilish smile on his face.

“That only makes me want to know more, you know. But whatever, I can let it drop for now. How do you even know we sell food here, anyway?”

“Smells pretty good from outside,” Ling said, by way of explanation.

“Well, as a matter of fact, all of our lunches typically come in liquid and alcoholic form. However, I think we can make an exception for you, if only because your friend looks adorable when he's mad,” he said, tossing a wink in Ed's direction before sauntering over to the end of the bar. The blond sputtered and turned red with indignation, physically biting back a screeching response.

“Hey, Roa. Duty calls!”

The giant in the corner set down his cards and got to his feet. He glared at the bartender for a moment, before sighing heavily.

“I'm not a damn fry cook,” he grumbled, in a voice that matched his appearance. “I'll put something together, but only because that kid seriously needs a sandwich.”

“The hell’s that supposed to mean?”

“Means I can practically count your ribs through your shirt,” he said, before disappearing into the kitchen. Ling doubted that, considering how large and baggy the undershirt Ed wore was. Still, the sentiment held true. Ed silently fumed in place.

“You might be surprised that, in spite of Dolcetto’s weapon of choice, we don't get a lot of customers carrying swords. Care to give a little background about the kind of day you've been having?”

“Who says we've been having any kind of day?”

“First of all, short stack, that didn't make any sense. Second, he's got a fine spray of blood all over his forehead that I'm pretty sure you can only get by decapitating someone. Third, you're walking around barefoot in your pajamas, looking like you went a couple rounds with a guy that's actually got a functional metal arm.”

“You're just guessing,” said the elder brother.

“Am I wrong?”

“Well, I actually cut off his arm, not his head,” said Ling brightly.

“Goddammit, Ling.”

“That admission aside, you really shouldn't be running around barefoot in here. There's broken glass all over the damn place,” said the man presumably known as Dolcetto. He had a much less threatening manic air than the bartender, which was a relief, even if it didn't actually indicate trustworthiness.

“You think this outfit’s a fashion statement? My choices were pretty limited.”

“Yeah, about that… How exactly do you plan on paying for this meal? Because something tells me you two aren't exactly rolling in it right now,” said the bartender, looking at them over the tops of his redundant sunglasses. All three fugitives froze in place. Ling cursed, missing the early days when his
search had been much more well funded. Their thoughts must've shown on their faces, because the man sighed in mock exasperation, shaking his head.

“Well, that's no good. But don't worry. I'm sure you have something I want that we can trade,” he said, leering. Ed blanched before snatching something out of his hair. Ling was momentarily transfixed watching the waves of spun gold unfold, before noticing what Ed held up in front of him. An elaborate hair comb, made of a smooth red metal and decorated on top with a glittering sun.

“An antique, with real rubies and real gold. The body is alchemized tungsten, and that alone is worth the price of a month's worth of meals.” He set it on the bar, with a heavy sound that contradicted its size.

“This isn't an antique, it's an artifact,” said the man, awe in his voice. He dropped the dishrag in his left hand, raising it to cover the comb. Ling barely noticed the strange tattoo on the back of his hand before Ed recoiled, though not without snatching up his brother.

“Homunculus,” he breathed, showing more fear than he had the entire time Ling had known him. He made for the door, a frantic urgency to his movements. Ling knew even before the bartender spoke that he wouldn't make it. Ed seemed to realize this too, because he promptly chucked his brother into the stairway, with the intent of providing an escape.

“Dolcetto! Martel!”

The former seized Ed's arm with graceful efficiency, almost gentle in his attention to detail. He twisted his arm behind him in a smooth movement, effectively immobilizing him in seconds. As an unintended side effect, Ed was unable to clap, which was less than ideal. Ling had barely unsheathed his sword when he realized far too late that he had lost sight of the girl. The tip of the oversized knife pressed to the soft skin over his pulse, and her arms wrapped around him in an effective hold that was all too reminiscent of a certain snake arm.

“Take your hands off my brother!” Al had rejected the easy way out, instead returning to enter an impossible fight. He'd picked up a shard of broken glass and started going for the ankles, with limited success. The man with the tail, who was apparently no more attractive under his cloak, picked him up, looking terribly apologetic about it. His skin was too thick to puncture, leaving Al in a significantly worse position than before.

Ed twisted and jerked like a man possessed, angry shouting edged with fear.

“I'm not going back! I'll fucking slit my own throat before I let you take me back, you artificial bastard!” He threw his head back with the intent to break his opponent's nose, only for Dolcetto to swiftly dodge with a jerk to the left.

“Wait a second, kid. We don't want to take you anywhere,” said the homunculus, having vaulted over the bar. He held his hands up, palms facing outward in a placating manner. Still, he looked incredibly out of his element, cocky grin becoming unsure. “I just wanna know how you know what I am, okay?”

“It's not like you did a good job covering up your ink, genius. For some reason, not a lot of people go for the ouroboros tattoo,” he snarked.

“Okay, but, I can count all the people who know what this tattoo means, and none of them look like you.”

“What, Dante didn't tell you about her spare battery pack?”
“What the— the hell do you mean by “battery pack”?” Martel hissed at the blond.

“You know Dante?” The bartender began backing up, uncharacteristically nervous.

“Don't lump us together, you son of a bitch! What I know is that the next time I see her pale ugly-ass mug, one of us is gonna die!”

“Well, at least we've got similar feelings about her,” muttered the homunculus. Startled, Ed stopped struggling.

“Wait, what?”

The man sighed heavily, before pulling up a bar stool to sit on.

“Look, kid. I think we got off on the wrong foot here, so let's start over. The name's Greed, and I was created by Dante some hundred odd years ago, to be her servant, bodyguard, and on occasion,” Greed paused for a moment to grimace in disgust, “lover.”

All those present cringed, Ed in particular.

“Anyway, as my name would imply, I am a particularly avaricious individual. After a couple years of going along with my creator, I started wanting more. When I tried to get away, she did what any sane person would do, and set me free to live my life.”

“Really?”

“Of course not, that bitch is as crazy as they come,” said Greed with a laugh. “She threw me in a specialized cell thirteen stories underneath what eventually became an alchemy lab that specialized in human experimentation. I was there for about a century, when people started getting suspicious about whatever puppets Dante was using to control the government. They started poking into the shadier aspects of the government, including the laboratory I was buried under. But before they could legally order a raid, the intrepid scientists of Lab Five decided to blow the whole building—”

“And all their “volunteer” test subjects,” interjected Dolcetto, with skillful usage of singlehanded air quotes.

“—sky high,” finished Greed.

“Those were good times,” said Martel, unnecessarily sarcastic.

“Luckily, they did a shit job on the demolition. The explosion cracked the arrays around me just enough to let me bust the cell open, but didn't manage to bring the place down entirely. I ended up cutting through the chimera lab on my way out, and picked up this zoo.” He jerked a thumb at his employees/friends/goons.

“You mean… Amestris has been combining humans with animal DNA? What kind of alchemist would subject people to that? What the hell is wrong with them?” Ed went from disbelieving to horrified to pissed, all in under three seconds. It was, in all honesty, a bit impressive.

Dolcetto, somehow sensing that he wouldn't want to bolt, let go of Ed's arm. It probably had something to do with the sympathy he showed towards them. Ling, who had done nothing of the sort, didn't receive the same treatment. Ed stepped away, staring at them all in a new light. Ling supposed it was because of the fact that they too had all been victims of Dante's desires, directly or indirectly. Or they were, according to the story they told.
“Don't get so up in arms, kid. For all the painful and messy restructuring forced on my body, I do have to admit that having the flexibility of a snake is interesting, at least.”

“Yeah. Of course you would say that. You're not the one that got saddled with the loyalty of a dog along with the heightened senses, which is probably the only reason I stick with this asshole.” Despite the feigned annoyance, it was clear the complaint was little more than fond grumbling. Ling wondered if that too was by design, to calm Ed down from his indignant rage.

“Trust me, I wasn't winning any beauty contests before I became a gecko man, either. At least now I can climb easily, and lick my eyeballs if I feel like it.” The unnamed chimera set Al down on a table, chuckling at his self-deprecating words.

“The point is, I'm not working with Dante, and if I never see her again it'll be too soon.”

“Lunch'll be done in a few minutes, so sit back down,” called Roa from the kitchen. Ed moved forward to grab Al and sat down by his glass. Greed moved his stool back and hopped onto the countertop.

“The meal doesn't come free, though.”

“What, do you not want the comb anymore because it came from Dante?”

“We're not giving that back,” said Martel imperiously, releasing Ling to fold her arms across her chest defensively. “We need to move houses, because these cramped living conditions are not working out. When Dolcetto sheds, it gets everywhere.”

“At least I shed fur, and not sheets of skin like you and Bido! It's disgusting!”

"It's natural," said Bido defensively.

“Come on, let's not be petty in front of the children,” said Greed.

“That's rich, coming from the guy that adjusts the chore wheel so he never has to do the dishes.” said Martel.

“I have never been so offended in my life, and by such baseless accusations—”

“Give it up, Greed. You're not half as subtle as you think.”

The homunculus leaned back, looking thoroughly cowed even as he tried to ignore his roommates’ glares.

“Whatever, that's not the point. The point is, we told you our story, so tell us yours.”

Ed grimaced.

“Look, aren't you alchemy types always raving about equivalent exchange or whatever? Just think of it that way if it makes it easier.”

Roa appeared from the kitchen, balancing an obscene amount of food in his arms. The meal included more croquettes, fresh vegetables, dried fruit, bread, and a mixture of meat and vegetables in a violently orange sauce. Ling felt his mouth water uncontrollably. Ed seemed to be in a similar state, though he did shoot a nervous look in his brother's direction.

“You should eat as much as you want, Brother.”
Ed reached for the food, but pulled back at the last moment, remembering his deal.

“Fine,” he said, surly. “How much do you wanna know?”

“The name's Greed, kid. I want everything.”

“Guess I'll start at the beginning,” muttered Ed, before raising his voice to a clear, detached tone.

“My full name is Edward Elric-Hohenheim.”

“You gotta be shitting me. You're claiming to be the dead prince?”

“There's a dead prince?” Ling hadn't known anything about that from his limited time in the city, but now that Ed said it aloud, he almost believed him. There was a certain sharpness to his features, or perhaps it was his molten gold eyes, that leant him a regal look on par with that of Ling's father at times.

“If you don't believe me, that's your business. Anyway, I was born seventeen years in the palace, delivered by close family friends. Around that time, our father began his experiment to combine the power of sacrificed human souls with a “traditionally created” person. Essentially, a walking philosopher's stone.” Ed paused, deliberately breathing slow and patterned. Al stood on the edge of the bar, looking desperately like he wanted to say something. He didn't, and let Ed continue.

“And what better test subject to imbue with the energy of mass murder than your firstborn son?”

In the horrified silence, he continued.

Chapter End Notes

I really do enjoy original Greed and his buds. Dante POV, more characters, and the trials of Envy will be coming up in the next chapters. Also, in this, I picture Ling looking as he did at the end of the series, rather than the noodle he was at first. Same goes for Ed, face and height wise, but he doesn't have anywhere near the same muscle mass as he would get with proper meals and exercise. Luckily, things are looking up for the brothers.
An Imperfect Eternity

Chapter Summary

Dante refuses to die, and she'll do just about anything to avoid meeting her maker.

Chapter Notes

You would think that once you sacrifice an entire civilization to create a philosopher’s stone, you would be set on immense power for the rest of your infinitely long life. That was what Dante was promised when she set along this path. An escape from the stupid, limiting idea of equivalent exchange.

Imagine her disappointment when realizing that human souls, like anything else, were a finite resource. The stone, once too large to fit inside her fist, slowly shrank over centuries of age reversing alchemy, the creation of the homunculi, and personal underground building projects. By the 1890s, it was no bigger than her pinky nail. She needed a replacement. She insinuated herself at the highest level of the weak but expanding Amestrian government, a shadow pushing and pulling them around towards notoriety.

You would think that once you've sacrificed an entire civilization for personal gain, it would be simple to give a repeat performance.

No, the issue was not that Dante had developed an aversion to taking human life. If anything, she maintained that the Amestrians deserved to die like their geographic forebears, the ones that criticized and shunned her genius, because they weren't bold enough, clever enough to do what she would, and seize the power of gods in her teeth. No, the problem lay with the logistics. By issuing instruction through the homunculus Wrath while he sat as Fuhrer, she was able to exert a fair amount of control over the absurdly long chain of Amestrian command. A violent, squabbling people, it was relatively easy to push them towards destructive combat alchemy, and dedicating almost all research activity to it. However, only so many people could go missing to create a philosopher's stone. With citizens protesting the death penalty already, taking any more would only arouse more suspicion. Therefore, her pool of materials for the stone was significantly smaller than it was in her youth.

Cramped laboratories made for smaller circles. And fewer souls made for smaller stones. Too small, in fact, to do anything impressive, like maintain immortality or create life. When taxed, they crumbled into red dust, disappointing and useless. She could make all the gold she could ever want, or raze Central in a day, but neither of those things would keep her young.

But Dante would not let herself expire in a slow, unattractive death. This was partly due to the fact she didn't entirely believe she was capable of dying, but that was beside the point. The point was, she needed a replacement, and a replacement required roughly the entire population of a large city. Or, she thought to herself, of a mid-sized country. That was when her plans became all consuming. After meticulously drafting and expanding her array from three hundred years ago, she discovered that the setup would require the work of the very people she intended to sacrifice.

It required so little effort to manipulate them, though. Just a little prodding, and they would invade any of their neighbors, gaining territory and unwittingly providing a basis for the circle that would be
their deaths. Unquestioningly, they filed into places like Ishval, where the flash of foreign red eyes was all it took to incite a massacre, a sacrifice to the circle. Dante did an excellent job, yes, and when the plan went to shit, it wasn't her fault. The blame lay squarely on the shoulders of the homunculi.

Dante's relationship with the bastardized creations was complicated, going all the way back to her first attempt. Within the first few decades of eternal youth, Dante was ready to encroach on God’s territory once more. Her results had been unexpected, to say the least. The creature that called itself Pride had been hideous, a swirling ball of slitted eyes, grinning teeth, and pure shadow, no bigger than two palms. Though weak in bright light and complete darkness, it had a capacity for growth and destruction under certain conditions that made even Dante nervous. The worst part had been the creation’s sheer arrogance. It thought itself to be superior to all humans, including its creator. It was so impudent it made Dante's blood boil, and utterly baffling. What sentient creature could possibly be proud of such an incomplete form? It was a failed experiment, and couldn't even recognize what a disappointment it was.

At any rate, it had to be snuffed out. It sought power and superiority, and would constantly try to outwit her into letting it escape. It was a liability, and she dealt with it appropriately.

A few decades later, she thought she'd perfected the formula with Greed. He was obsessed with jewels and metals, preoccupied by the finery Dante could produce, rather than self-aggrandizement. Not to mention, his form was leaps and bounds ahead of Pride’s. The nose might've been a little too big, but the muscles more than made up for that. As long as he got to share in his creator’s wealth, he would gladly obey her every command.

Or so she thought.

Greed applied to more than money, food, and sex. He became fixated on the concepts of free will and socialization. He tried to betray her, leave her behind, and for that, she devised a punishment worse than destruction. Containment. For a being that thrived off of conquest and fleeting desires, to be imprisoned in a bare, static cell would be hell. So there went attempt number two.

Envy was irritating in his pettiness, but he was, at the very least, predictable. Motivated largely by sadistic tendencies towards humans, his goals typically aligned with Dante's plan for survival. Lust and Gluttony followed after. The latter was an idiot, but Lust kept him in check with surprising efficiency. Lust had the annoying habit of smirking with amusement at just about everything, but unlike the others, didn't seem to be controlled by the cardinal sin she represented, so she was fairly tolerable. Wrath was her magnum opus. A human being, inwardly transformed into a homunculus, and the perfect puppet Fuhrer. Sloth was the most recent, a necessary use of power to create the array. Coincidentally, he was the first to fall in the coup.

He had somehow gotten far enough of his route to have tunneled into the northern fortress of Briggs, where he was swiftly and ruthlessly defeated (Dante still couldn't imagine how). That, combined with all other recent events, brought their plan crumbling down. Maes Hughes realized the government’s intention to create an array, distributed his research, then was squirreled away to Xerxes before he could be silenced. Roy Mustang, Grumman, and half the Armstrong clan joined forces in suspicion, bringing along the considerable numbers of troops that held them in high regard. The trigger-happy researchers of Lab Five grew nervous, rigged an explosion to destroy the evidence, only to botch it, releasing Greed and leaving behind a lab full of human based chimaeras, two disembodied suits of armor, and a dozen cowardly scientists to testify about their experiences. Gluttony and Lust had been able to permanently silence a few, but Mustang and his ilk saved a significant portion of them. Then, when the dissenters finally attacked Central command, Wrath had the idiocy to show off his regenerative abilities in front of a live audience. Any respect for a government of monsters disintegrated.
By that time, Dante had already jumped ship, so to speak. She was halfway across the desert, three remaining homunculi in tow. With any luck, she'd be able to process her creations to retrieve some part of the philosopher's stone. Of course, they weren't aware of that.

But all of that, all of that was in the past now, because she had a new plan. A plan that hinged on kidnapping the crown prince of Xerxes. That, at the least, explained why she was skulking outside the royal palace in the middle of the night. The palace was no fortress. A wall surrounded it, but only for the purpose of herding people through the proper gates to the library, the ballroom, or whatever place the royal family decided to show off to the unwashed masses of the city. The gate was closed at night, but the city was far from dead. The market was nowhere near as full as it was during the day, but couples strolled along in the lamplight, tossing coins to musicians and singers squatting on dusty street corners. The air was cold and dry, and Dante couldn't help but sneer. What a disgusting city.

Gluttony drooled over the food stalls, Lust kept him in check, and Envy, the vain creature, occupied himself by surreptitiously shifting between forms. He experimented with Xerxes golden coloring, only to spy his reflection in a pane of glass and snort in disgust. He cycled through Xingese, Amestrian, and, very briefly, Ishvalan. He looked up, finally noticing Dante's glare.

"Are you quite finished?"

Envy scowled at being caught, before continuing along the circumference of the wall, to the western side of the palace, where the royal family kept their apartments.

The entourage came to a place Dante deemed suitably shadowed. A flex of alchemy, and the brick wall opened and closed behind them without leaving so much as a seam. They arrived in the garden, populated by succulents, cacti, and various fruit trees. What a stupid climate, that couldn't support green grass or fields of flowers. What was the point of decorating with misshapen, spiny, and ugly plants? Whatever. She cast her annoyance aside, if only partially, and turned to Envy. The homunculus shifted, putting on his disguise.

"I thought we agreed you would look like the king," she hissed. The being suddenly nigh-indistinguishable from Trisha Elric tossed its chestnut hair haughtily.

"Gold isn't my color," Envy sniffed. "Besides, this way, no one's likely to ask us something important."

Dante rolled her eyes and moved onto the sandstone path. They entered the palace through ground level glass doors, leading into some kind of sitting room. Dante was glad she'd had the foresight to torture a proper floor plan out of a palace aide. Otherwise, this venture would involve far more trial and error than she would like. They wandered through silent, dark corridors, surprised there were no servants. The only room with the lights on was the largest, the private library, where the king and queen could be plainly heard moving about. For all the public access to other areas of the palace, it was clear they enjoyed their privacy in the evenings. The prince’s bedroom sat atop one of the spires, leaving Dante to climb up a staircase that had her slightly aged form heaving for breath.

Dante questioned whether one brat was worth all this. She disregarded that thought quickly. Ever since their chance encounter that he'd surely forgotten, she'd been certain that Edward Elric wasn't entirely human. Anyone that wasn't intimately familiar with the formation and feel of a philosopher's stone probably couldn't sense the brimming power beneath his skin. It was like a homunculus, only… the boy didn’t derive strength from the stone. It was threaded through his life force, but it was clear he didn’t wield the stone. He was merely a vessel, which meant he'd be infinitely easier to restrain and extract the stone from than a homunculus. She swung the door open, its hinges barely whispering in the still night.
Inside, it looked as if a library exploded. Well, maybe exploded wasn’t the right word, because the stacks of books, though messy and precarious, were all upright. A clear space sat below the window, vaguely circular and dusted with chalk. The prince liked to pretend to be an alchemist, apparently. A sound not unlike a malfunctioning wood chipper emanated from a bed in the corner. Dante strode forward as quietly as possible, resisting the urge to kick over the stacks of books. She slid back the covers, from which protruded a tuft of golden hair. Unfortunately, that hair was connected to a prepubescent boy with two flesh arms and an entirely normal human composition. She cursed softly.

It was either this noise or the movement of the blankets that awoke the small black cat at the foot of the bed, mistaken for a shadow. It hissed and spat at her, its hair bristled atop its arched back. Then, several things happened very quickly. First the boy woke up. Gently, at first, before startling at Dante’s presence. On instinct, her hand lashed out and seized his forearm in an iron grip.

“Wh-what’s going on? Who are you?”

Gluttony licked his lips and snatched up the yowling cat, anticipating a light snack. He lowered it to his dripping maw, when Dante saw a flicker of silver out of the corner of her eye. Edward Elric, previously sprawled across a bed in the opposite corner, was on his feet and poised to attack. For some reason, the two princes in an enormous palace decided to share a shitty tower bedroom. Just her luck.

“What the hell are you doing to my brother?”

Gluttony looked up at the noise, relaxing his hold just enough for the cat to twist around and scratch his eye in a move that would’ve left a human half-blind. The homunculus startled, heavy jaws falling shut. Dante thought the cat had managed to escape without a scratch as it landed on the ground, before she noticed a furry black tail hanging out of Glutton’s lips. The cat scrambled on top of a stack of books, hissing in rage and pain. Dante sighed.

“Jesus fucking Christ, can’t I have just one thing in my life go smoothly?”

“Christ?”

Dante ignored Edward, turning to her underlings.

“Envy,” she called out. The homunculus let his disguise melt away, which in hindsight may have been a mistake, because when the complete stranger previously wearing the skin of his mother attacked him, Ed had no qualms about fighting back. He used Envy’s momentum to grab his arm and throw him across the room. It probably worked even better than the child had expected, considering Envy’s unusual mass and how lackadaisically he’d come at the child. Edward clapped his hands in a familiar manner, making Dante’s eyes open wide in shock. She produced a knife from her clothes, and swung the child now identified as Alphonse Elric in front of her as a hostage and shield. It wasn’t a moment too soon, as the razor spikes protruding from the floor barely stopped before skewering her and her captive.

“So you’ve seen the gate as well, prince?” That was a surprise.

“You bastard,” he said, before clapping again, likely to produce a weapon.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” she said, pressing her blade into the little brother's neck, raising a few beads of blood that were a glittering black in the moonlight. The younger prince whimpered in fear, while Edward froze, horrified.

“What do you want with Al?”
“Funny you should ask that, considering that we're only here for you, Edward. In fact,” she said, 
tilting the boy's head back to expose a larger target for her blade. “You could say he's rather 
expendable at the moment.”

“If I'm the one you've got business with, let Al go. Otherwise, you're not getting anything from me.”

“Brother, don't!”

“My, what a brave face you've put on. You're such a silly child, thinking you have any sort of 
bargaining power here.” What Dante really hated, more than anything, was weaklings with 
overinflated egos.

“Lust,” she called.

Edward barely had a second to be confused before two dagger-like fingers shot out of the dark. With 
a neat flick of her wrist and a screech of shearing metal, Lust severed the child’s automail. Shocked 
and off-balance, he crumpled to the floor. Alphonse writhed in Dante's hold, and she let go. She 
wasn't here for him, after all. He shot to his brother's side without hesitation.

“Ed! What happened? Are you hurt?”

“I'm fine,” he growled, pushing himself upright, and shifting himself in front of Alphonse. The very 
model of a perfect older brother, protective and dependable in a crisis. Or so she assumed. Dante had 
ever been close with her family before she killed them, so she wouldn't really know.

Edward frantically searched for a weapon, since he couldn't make one. Eventually he ended up 
chucking an enormous tome at her, which she deftly dodged. Dante rolled her eyes and strode 
forward. She seized the boy by the jaw, tilting his face up to hers. His brother lurched forward to 
attack, only to be restrained by one of the homunculi. Dante didn't notice which one and didn't care, 
too focused on the energy of the souls inside the child.

“Edward Elric. Were you aware that you are not human?”

“...the hell,” he managed to groan out.

“I guess not. Then, here's another question. Are you aware what the main ingredient of a 
philosopher's stone is?”

Edward’s horrified eyes spoke volumes.

“The stone is only theoretical,” insisted Alphonse, a worried desperation in his voice. His brother 
was more stoic.

“You can't make a stone with just my soul, so hurry up and tell me what you're getting at.”

“Why would I make a stone when I already have one right here?” Her grip on his face tightened 
meaningfully, and his eyes widened.

“What-”

“Your father must be a very skilled alchemist to be able to create a human philosopher's stone. 
Though, you are less of a stone and more of a flesh and blood container for sacrificed souls, to be 
more exact.”

Prodigies that they were, the brothers grasped the concept quickly. However, that didn't mean they
“You're delusional.”

“You're delusional.” The children stared, confused but overcome by an instinctive feeling of dread all the same.

Dante rolled her eyes, too excited and impatient to explain any further. She tightened her hold, and dug into the enormous well of power within him. His eyes went wide, not understanding, merely driven to fear by his own instincts. His remaining limbs kicked desperately, but his fear made him uncoordinated and weak. His tan skin grew hot to the touch, practically vibrating as the transmutation took hold. He had an odd expression of absolute horror on his face even as his eyes glazed over. Very briefly, she wondered what kind of pain he was experiencing from such a unique situation. The moment was over shortly, as empathy was never her strong suit. All that mattered was how good she felt, anyways.

Wrinkles filled out to a smooth canvas, age spots faded back to an ivory background, her raven hair once again shiny and smooth. Distantly, she realized the child's movements had slowed, and the younger one was extremely annoying when he cried. However, not even that detail could ruin her high. The effects of age set in slowly for her, but the reversal of aching joints and deteriorating eyesight was immediate and incredible. Internally, she applauded her genius and tenacity in regards to her goals. After all, it was her innovative thinking and opportunistic attitude that allowed her to find the resource that was Edward Elric. Speaking of which, she tossed the boy back onto his bed, observing how well he fared from the first use.

“Ed!” The younger brother jerked and babbled endlessly, but the only response he got from his brother was a palm raising up to press against faded red sheets, but lacking the strength to push himself up more than an inch. But he was most definitely alive.

“So, you're good for more than one use. That makes things easier,” she remarked, pleased. “You'll be coming with me, then.”

“No! You can't take Ed!”

“I can't? Big words from the least useful person in the room, Alphonse,” she said, annoyed but not entirely lacking in amusement. Still, his protests had to come to a stop eventually.

“Gluttony, dispose of him.”

The homunculus looked up from his spot on the floor, snacking on the artificial limbs.

“Really? I can have meat?” He turned away from Dante to the doorway. “Can I, Lust?”

“Go ahead,” she said, smiling the way one would at a particularly stupid puppy. It annoyed Dante that Gluttony seemed to care more about getting permission from his fellow homunculi than his master, but she would iron that out later. In the moment Gluttony gleefully advanced on the frozen child, his smiling mouth wide and hungry. His intentions must have come across through his expression, because Ed suddenly won the fight to push himself upright, panic all over his face.

“Don't! If you let him live, I'll go with you!”

“Ed, don't say stuff like that! It's not worth it,” cried Alphonse. Dante swept her eyes over Edward’s disfigured, incomplete form, shaking with fatigue.

“I doubt you could stop me, cripple.”
“Maybe not. But I promise you, if you kill my brother, I will make every second spent around me a living hell. If you get close, I'll spit in your face. If you reach out to grab me, I'll bite your fingers off. And when I get the upper hand, I'll rip you apart.”

Dante reached out and snagged Gluttony by the back of his collar, giving herself a moment to think. She studied the boy before her with interest. His fear was gone, replaced by a white-hot, focused rage. After a long moment, she shrugged.

“Well, I can already tell that you'll be extremely irritating in your attempts to cause trouble, so perhaps I can grant your request. However, I do prefer to keep my leverage close at hand.”

The prince’s eyes opened wide in horror.

“No! You can't take Al too, Mom and Dad need him!”

“You do have a point. I obviously can't take him as is. Your brother is far too unwieldy, and his crying is even more annoying than your lousy attitude,” she said, casting her eyes about for a suitable vessel. She landed on Edward’s nightstand, where there lay a toy. A miniature suit of armor, holding a toothpick of a spear.

“Yes, this'll do nicely,” she commented, picking it up as she walked over to the younger brother. She placed her palm flat on his chest, recalling exactly how the process was supposed to go. If those idiots at Lab Five could manage to do it twice, she shouldn't have any problems.

“Get your hands off him,” called Edward. He attempted to drag himself forward, but his burst of strength gave out, sending him to collapse on the bedspread.

Dante reached inside of some intangible container every human body held, curling metaphorical fingers about the child's soul. It attempted to hold onto his rib cage with tendrils of light, displaying an immature obstinance. However, one confused soul was no match for her as she pried it away from its body.

“What are you doing to me? Please, stop! Please…please…” His voice became faint and tinny, echoing around a small metal space. His words continued long after his mouth stopped moving and his body went limp, an empty shell. Sensing this, Envy let him drop to the floor.

“Al?”

“Brother? What's happening? I can't feel anything,” he said, voice rising in panic. “What did she do, I can't feel anything. I should be cold, but there's nothing. Ed?”

Ed stared, horrified, as the doll began to twitch, the soul getting used to its new accommodations.

“I'm here,” he called, his fight draining out of him.

“Ed… I'm scared.”

“Don't worry, Al. I can fix this-”

A swift punch clipped his temple, knocking him out instantly.

“Envy,” she chastised.

“What? All that talk was getting on my last nerve. Besides, it should be easier to move him like this,” he said, slinging the child over one shoulder. Dante sighed but made her way out of the room.
without complaint. She couldn't fault his reasoning, and her triumphant mood wouldn't be spoiled by his impulsiveness. In fact, nothing could ruin her high. Immortality was once again clenched tightly in her fist, and she would be keeping it under lock and key for the rest of his life.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry it's been a while, but at least there's an extra thousand words this time around. I'm still mad AO3 doesn't show when this updates, but I don't know what to do about it. I'll be doing my best to put out another chapter by Friday, so I'll see you then.
Two Trophy Husbands, A Housewife, and Roy

Chapter Summary

A few more pieces return to the playing field. Roy Mustang's no good very bad day continues.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Envy was still in the sulking phase of his temporary defeat, alternately growling and screaming into the floor. He wasn't sure who he was angriest at: the brat, for trapping him, that Xingese bastard for enabling him, or the tin can, for making him look stupid. He twitched, which was the closest he could get to destroying his surroundings with those knives in his back. Dante had hidden the weakness from him, but now that he knew, the brat wouldn't be able to get the drop on him when he caught up to him. Edward Elric was going to regret ever being born by the time Envy was done with him. Unfortunately, that required escaping his prison. Easier said than done. He could barely wiggle his toes. Maybe he could…

Nope. The ability to shift was gone too.

He couldn't wait on his comrades to help him. Lust wouldn't be by to bring more food for a month, and even though she had been coming by for alchemical face lifts more frequently lately, Dante wouldn't appear for at least three months. Frustrated, he yelled as loud as he could, which was pretty damn loud.

“Did you hear that?”

The voice was faint and unfamiliar, but it was official. Envy was not alone. And no matter how it pained him to admit it, he needed some assistance. He couldn't shift currently, but his base form was cute enough to seduce anyone, he figured.

“It came from up there, hurry!”

“Is someone there? Please, help me!”

Envy heard the sound of footsteps on the staircase and smirked. Damn, he was a talented actor. Within a few moments, two pairs of dirty boots appeared in front of him. The city guard, he guessed, based on their dusty white uniforms and bright red markings, designed to make them immediately identifiable in a crowd of civilians. However, the contrast only made Envy think of bloody doves, mauled by cats.

“Oh God, is he… alive?”

“Please, help me. Pull out the knives,” he moaned pathetically, getting into character.

“We can't, that would only make the bleeding worse,” said one, sinking onto one knee at his side.

“I don't think we can make this worse, Michaelis,” said the other man, kneeling at the opposite shoulder. He tugged at the sturdy stone bindings surrounding the homunculus. “An alchemist did
this, we can't break these,” he said, despairing.

“Who the hell would do this?”

“Oh, please, take out the knives, kind sirs. I'm dying anyway,” said Envy, with as much melodrama as he could muster, which was quite a bit.

“We're not giving up on you,” said the one that wasn't Michaelis fiercely. Envy wanted to gag.

“Damn. We'll have to administer first aid here until we can get an alchemist down here. Wilson, stop the bleeding, talk to him while I remove the weapons.”

“Alright. Hey, you with us?” His voice was gentle, sickeningly so.

“Yeah.”

“Can you tell me your name?”

“E-envy. Envy Alighieri.”

“Alright, Envy. We'll get you through this.”

Without warning, the first blade was yanked out with a noisome sucking sound effect, sliding through shoulder muscle with a burn that surprised even Envy. He grunted, but otherwise swallowed the pain. But with the discomfort came a greater range of motion that Envy secretly delighted in. Wilson leaned what felt like all his weight on the open wound, trying to stop the bleeding that he assumed would come.

“You're doing great,” encouraged the annoyingly personable guard. Envy didn't need his platitudes, he thought miserably. Besides, if he were a human, he'd obviously already be dead, so it just proved Wilson was an idiot. He was distracted by another knife removed, dispelling most of that horrible dead feeling in his limbs. Wilson lifted up the cloth in his hand, taking a look at where the other knife had been.

“What the hell,” he breathed.

“There's nothing there,” said Michaelis. “Not even a scratch.”

“That's some amazing alchemy, Envy,” said Wilson, awed and curious. Deciding he'd had quite enough of the guards’ naivety, Envy pushed into action. Even while shaking off the effects of his paralysis, he had little issue crumbling his bonds into a pile of pebbles. The guards fell on their asses in surprise, watching the homunculus remove the last knife. The angle was a bit awkward, but he managed to wiggle it free after a moment.

“Wow,” said Wilson breathlessly. He sounded awed more than anything, and that drove Envy’s rage to previously unheard of summits. This man was obviously too stupid to recognize when faced with a monster, too much of an idiot to give him the respect he deserved. With two swift slashes of the blade, those problems were dealt with. Once the gurgle of blood stopped, Envy became hyper aware of how silent the cavern was, without wind or wildlife or the sound of humans breathing. For some reason, he found it disquieting. He felt the urge to sprint for the surface. As he was not one to ignore impulse, he did so immediately. However, he couldn't quite explain why he took the bodies with him.

He threw the men down at the base of the fountain, carelessly as one could. Despite his best efforts, they landed in natural positions. Michaelis, with spread limbs and tilted head, Wilson with his arms
laying delicately over his torso. The cuts to their necks were neat and unobtrusive, lending to the illusion of careless sleep. Envy worked himself up even further at the sight. How dare these humans be relaxing when Envy was in such deep shit. He swung back his leg to aim a kick, only to stop short at the sight of Wilson’s face. The luster of his brown skin was fading already, making his slumber look sick even with his relaxed features. Envy spun on his axis and stalked away.

“I'm not going to give them the satisfaction of getting a rise out of me,” he said, feeling the need to justify himself. He ignored the facts that there was no one to explain himself to, and the guards wouldn't be getting any satisfaction from anything ever again. With equal feelings of dissatisfaction and irritation, he began towards the city, a new topic for his annoyance found.

He was going to track down the Elric Brothers, then rip the Xingese bastard’s teeth and tongue out of his grinning mouth, right in front of them. He felt himself perking up at the thought already.

••••

“Have you seen either of these men?”

“That's a man?”

Roy Mustang sighed at one of his prospective witnesses. He was currently looking at three children, basking in the sunlight of a busy public square. At their feet sat a unique instrument of some kind, keeping up a chiming, intricate tune. Interestingly enough, it looked as though it required no less than five hands to operate. However, Roy was more interested in the fact that the musicians had been camped out at the intersection all morning. Statistically, they were more likely to have spotted the prince.

“Woah, he had a sword too?”

“That's so cool!”

“No as cool as having a metal arm,” retorted the third, marking the beat with a finger steadily tapping the frame.

“I'm gonna take all that as a ‘no’,,” said Roy Mustang, first president of Amestris and leader of the western world. Exasperated, he dropped a coin in the wooden bowl at his feet. He let Hawkeye’s sketch retreat, taking another look at the two figures. Scaled relative to each other, his right-hand man had done an excellent job drawing the mismatched pair.

For a moment, he studied their enemies, captured in paper and memory. The Xingese one had been smiling at every turn, yet was skilled enough to get the drop on Hawkeye and nail Roy with a throwing knife from fifteen yards away. Efficient, unpredictable violence. The man's weapons capability and overall physical fitness outranked every one of Roy's men, judging by how fast he was while carrying the prince like a basket of laundry, clearly marking him as a close-quarters enemy to reckon with. However, the less obvious and altogether greater danger was the prince himself. He possessed a control of matter so smooth it seemed nigh-instantaneous, impossible to counteract. The kind of alchemical capabilities he displayed were above and beyond anything Roy had ever seen, but he had no clue when or how he'd gained these abilities. In fact, there were a staggering amount of unknowns when it came to the teenager Hohenheim swore was Edward Elric. Part of Roy still doubted the claim. The only thing 'royal' the kid seemed to be was a royal pain in the ass. Supposing the missing prince and the blond were one and the same, it still raised a lot of questions about what he was doing out in the desert ruins. According to the very abridged version of the story Falman relayed to him after his phone call, Edward Elric had been violently kidnapped from his bedroom five years ago, on his twelfth birthday. While they were at it, his abductors sent his eleven year old brother into a coma he had yet to recover from several years later. No ransom note had been
delivered, no threats were made, and no clues were found. For months afterward, the city had been unable to move on, plagued by a rash of disappearances, half-eaten corpses, and reports of an Ishvalan vigilante, all theorized to connect with the royal tragedy.

Wherever the prince had been, it was clear he'd been having a bad time, judging by his physical condition. All in all, it was quite the mystery. It sparked the president’s curiosity, the same trait that eventually led to him discovering the dark secrets of the Amestrian government.

Unfortunately, he'd hit a bit of a dead end. Aside from Falman and the story he heard about the prince, his men had gained little useful information from their interviews with civilians. Xerxes was a large, dense city, with a million places to hide. It wasn't made any easier by the fact that they had no idea what their targets’ goals were, and no hint to where they would be going next. Roy had been certain his men could locate the prince without outside help and prove Hohenheim wrong, but with every passing minute he felt that certainty diminish. He scanned the plaza for his next victim, settling on a butcher shop with wide front windows that had been open all morning. He began to move, only for a hand to clap heavily against his shoulder.

“Roy! Well, isn't this a surprise?”

“I highly doubt that, Maes,” he said turning to face his friend. He seemed well enough, the pallor of a lifetime working indoors banished from his face. He already had a paper sack of groceries in his hand, and his clothes were casually wrinkled.

“Well, I may have heard from a little birdie that my best friend was in town, but I didn't expect him to be running around without even stopping by to say hello.” His old friend seemed caught between his usual cheerfulness and mock disappointment, covering a small amount of genuine hurt.

“I was going to visit you and the family today, but something came up.”

Maes looked him up and down, assessing his excuse.

“Must've been a hell of a something. You're damp all over, and bleeding,” he noted, looking at Roy's right bicep. The alchemist grimaced.

“Things got… messy,” he settled on eventually.

“Huh,” said his friend, that horrible gleam of curiosity in his eye. “Where's Hawkeye and the rest of the entourage?”

“Nearby, working,” he said, in an attempt to be as vague as possible.

“In that case, you should be free to help me get groceries for dinner tonight.” Immediately, he began steering his friend towards the butcher shop. The interior was blessedly cool, a fantastic contrast to the pounding sunshine outdoors.

“We eat a lot more goat and lamb than we used to, but Elicia doesn't complain, she eats all her meat and vegetables, no complaints. No picky eaters in our house,” Maes proclaimed.

“Except for the guy that's been claiming to be allergic to kale for the past decade,” muttered Roy.

“Rude.” He drew a number and got in line. “Anyway, Elicia’s been telling me she wants to grow up to work with agricultural alchemists, so she can make sure everyone has enough food to eat. Ain't that just the cutest reason for becoming a farmer you've ever heard, Roy?”

“Look, Maes, I'm sorry, but I'm too busy to catch up right now,” he said, angling his body to the
I'd be a lot more understanding if I knew what you're so busy with,” he shot back.

“You're just as nosy as ever,” he sighed in exasperation, before lighting up with an idea. “You still keep up that bad habit of getting into everyone's business?”

“When I've got the time,” he said mildly. “What do you want to know?”

“I need to find these two,” he said, holding up the sketch for inspection. “The big one got me with a throwing knife, and the kid nearly drowned me and my entire team.”

“Sounds like a job for the city guard. You know, since they actually have authority here.”

“Maes, this is about more than catching a couple of criminals. It's a matter of establishing diplomatic relations with Xerxes.” He paused, lowering his voice to a stage whisper. “That kid is the missing prince, and finding and bringing him back could improve public opinion of Amestris.”

“Wait, are you telling me you got in a fight with the Fullmetal Alch-”

A knife appeared from thin air, pinning the entire notebook to the doorframe. Standing on the counter was a tall woman looking through the crowd of customers with murder in her eyes. With not a small amount of nervousness, Roy noticed that it was almost entirely directed at him.

“Everybody out,” she commanded, the dirty meat cleaver in her hand pointed at the door.

“Not you two,” she added when Maes made to slink towards the exit. The last customer left the building with the chime of the bell on the door. She gazed imperiously at her captives for a moment longer before bending double, hand pressed to her mouth. Her cough was wet and hacking, and something viscous dripped through her fingers to the floor. An enormous man in a bloody apron rushed forward, gently lowering her to the ground.

“Izumi-”

She recovered quickly and pushed him away, straightening and swiping ineffectively at the mess of gore on her chin. With a brisk motion, she lodged the cleaver in the counter.

“Are you-”

“Shut up, dog.” Her words were just as effective as a physical blow. She moved forward, eyes locked on the drawing. She yanked her knife from the door and stared at the picture, her expression completely inscrutable.

“Is it him?” The giant’s voice was a soft rumble, barely heard over the sound of the air conditioning.

“Yeah, Sig. It's him.” She was quiet, lacking that impenetrable authority from before. Her hand went her mouth, and Roy feared she would have another coughing fit. However, all he heard was a choked sob. Within seconds, she turned back to him, all signs of weakness swallowed down. All that showed on her face was a fierce determination. And rage. Lots and lots of rage.

“Where's Ed?”

“I don't think that's any-”

“Let me rephrase that. Where were you when Ed kicked your sorry, two-bit state alchemist ass and disappeared?”
“Frankly, ma'am, I don't see how that's any of your business,” he said, mustering as much nonchalant authority as he could while being so accurately insulted.

“None of my business? None of my business? I'm the one that taught him just about everything I could about alchemy and violence. I was there at his first birthday, and his twelfth. I grieved for that boy for three years. Now, when the first trace of him shows up, an Amestrian mutt lets him slip through his fat, clumsy fingers. You are going to tell me everything, just so I can fix this.” At some point, the knife in her hand became part of a series of harsh gestures that Roy wasn't even sure she was conscious of, ending with it pointed directly at his throat.

“Uh, Roy?”

“Yeah?”

“I think you should let her help.”

Roy sighed.

“Thanks, Hughes.”

Izumi gave him a grim smirk, prompting him for information. Sig stood behind her, a formidable shadow, even if his eyes looked a bit wet. Roy pinched the bridge of his nose.

“We were tracking down a thief suspected of stealing an ancient philosopher's stone from the palace.”

“He's the other guy drawn up, I assume,” she said, mouth drawn in a severe line. She studied his image more intensely, dedicating it to memory. Roy suspected the thief was in for far more than a knife being brandished at him when he met her.

“Yes. Anyways, we tracked him to the ruins, where he disappeared. He's not an alchemist, but he's got an abundance of sharp objects and smoke grenades to make up for it.”

“And Ed?”

“He appeared just as suddenly. He accused us of being Bradley's men, said something weird about his information being five years out of date, then attacked us.”

“He just attacked you, out of the blue?”

“I may have… antagonized him.”

“Let me guess. You called him little.”

“How was I supposed to know he had a height complex?”

“Then, while you were busy underestimating him and got your asses handed to you, he ran off.”

“More like the thief grabbed him and ran off carrying him,” said Roy. “Though Ed used alchemy to drop us in the lake.”

“That's my boy,” she said proudly.

“Whose side are you on?”

She ignored him.
“And you've just been running around ever since?”

“Not running around, Maes. It's called investigating,” he corrected peevishly.

“This isn't automail,” she stated, gesturing at the drawing.

“No. He appeared to be injured as well.”

Izumi sighed.

“Well, if I know Ed, he's probably got a convoluted, self sacrificing reason for not coming home immediately after getting the shit beat out of him. The real question is why he's staying away from Al. He'd never willingly give up on his brother, I know that couldn't have changed.” Her features were drawn in concentration, staring off at something Roy couldn't see. “Any leads?”

“No, none.”

“I don't know what I expected from a dog. I'll get in contact with the Rockbells, see if they've gotten any surprise visitors.”

“You could tell Scar,” said Sig.

“That man's impossible to get ahold of on a good day, you know that. Besides, I'm not so sure it's a good idea to get him involved. He nearly killed himself looking into it before.”

“So did you.”

Izumi stared at Sig for a long moment, before leaning up to plant a kiss on his cheek.

“You're right. But you know I can't let it go now.”

“We'll bring him home, Izumi. I know it.”

Maes coughed, echoing Roy's awkwardness. The looked between themselves, silently arguing which would attempt to break the delicate moment. Eventually, Maes lost, and opened his mouth, only to be interrupted by the jingling of the door opening. Breda and Havoc all but slid inside, briefly snapping a salute.

“Boss! We found witnesses!”

“Really?”

“Yeah, two ladies at a tea shop.”

“Hungover, but quite lucid,” called Falman, bringing the rest of the men inside.

“Colonel Hughes,” said Hawkeye with a nod of her head.

“It's just Maes now,” he said cheerfully.

“Well?” Roy was getting impatient.

“Oh! They said they saw them at this bar less than an hour ago.”

“Which bar?” Izumi growled. Nervously, Havoc glances at Roy, who nodded his approval.

“The Devil’s Nest.”
I've been enjoying the abrupt summer rain, and all the weeds, spiders, and buds that come with it. This story has lots of characters, and I hope I do them justice. Care to tell me about the seasonal flora and fauna you're used to?
Chapter Summary

In which food is had, Al questions his brother's priorities, and Greed wishes he could get drunk for more than a minute at a time.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“So yeah, that's my story. Satisfied?”

Ed briefly wondered if he had given them too much information. Really, that was only the highlights. Three homunculi, his being an abomination of a human experiment, and his complete failure to prevent the forcible relocation of his brother's soul. Yep, that about covered it.

Wow, he felt even shittier when he said the whole story out loud. Whatever. Al probably felt a whole lot worse than he did, so he could relegate his shitty fucking emotions to the back of his mind until Al was returned to his body.

Ed shoved food in his mouth, at first to ignore the silence that surrounded him, but eventually realized how ravenously hungry he was. The food was better than anything he'd eaten in literal years, but his enthusiasm was tempered after a few minutes, when he realized he was the only one eating. Even Ling, who'd been drooling almost nonstop at the prospect of food, seemed to be at a loss.

“You're telling me that you've spent almost a third of your life underground in the care of a batshit crazy alchemist that's been draining your life force for eternal youth?”

“You asked for the story. It's not my fault if you don't believe me.”

“I think we do. It's just…” Dolcetto trailed off.

“That's fucked up,” said Martel authoritatively.

“I guess.” He went back to eating, feeling a frisson of anxiety run through him afresh. After just these few hours in the city, he didn't think he'd be able to go back there, if Dante caught him. The immortal ripped pieces away from the very fabric of his being with impunity and left him to rot in a cell in between periods of usefulness. Envy deprived him of food and rest on a whim, and vented his energy in fits of violence and verbal abuse. And the worst part was that those snarky, painful interactions, exhausting as they were, were half of what kept him sane. That and Al. If he didn't have to get Al back to his body, Ed didn't know what he would've done to get away from Dante, reaching to tear off yet another piece of him. “Fucked up” didn't even begin to cover his thoughts on the situation.

“Slow down, Ed. You're going to make yourself sick,” said Al.

Ed paused in stuffing his face to turn around and glare at Ling. “Would you stop staring and eat? You just look stupid when you try to have a serious expression. It's like I can see your last two brain cells fighting for dominance.”
“Has anybody ever told you that you have a terrible attitude?” With a blink, the Xingese prince was back to normal, with his lilting, teasing tone, even if it wasn't quite as easy as before.

“At least twice a day,” said Al. Ed glared at the traitor, but was gratified when Ling decided to sit down and eat. The less time Ling had to mull over the implications of Ed’s story, the less likely he would be to renege on their deal. Besides, it did look like he was going to seriously injure himself from thinking too hard.

Greed abruptly slammed a bottle of something green and clear on the counter.

“So,” he said, right before taking a quick pull from the bottle. “I'm guessing you're here 'cause you don't want to run back to daddy after he decided to turn you into a meat sack full of mass murder.”

“Don't call my brother a meat sack!”

“Well, if the shoe fits,” said Ed. He wasn't angry, but the accuracy of the homunculi’s comment didn't help his mood.

“Don't look so blue, kid. I'm a meat bag of genocide too, but I turned out alright.”

“You're chugging rubbing alcohol straight from the bottle on a weekday morning, Greed. Does that scream ‘well adjusted’ to you?”

“Don't give me that, squirt. A little absinthe never hurt anyone,” he said, flippantly enough. “Besides, it's after noon now.”

“Barely. So, you guys are looking to lay low in the city right now,” said Martel.

“No, that wouldn't work,” said Al. “Dante's got a homunculus that can track scents.”

“He'd find us within a week of realizing we were missing, unless we were constantly on the move.”

“And Ed actually has to eat and sleep, unlike me.”

Ed winced at that, though he knew Al hadn't meant anything by it. Al couldn't feel the sensations of fatigue or hunger, nor did he get the satisfaction of a good meal and a night of sleep. As such, Ed's inevitable physical needs compounded the guilt, as well as often making things worse for Al. When Ed finally gave into sleep in their cell, it left his brother alone with Envy. If he slept now he'd be holding Al back, wasting time. Greed frowned, pulling out an actual glass to drink out of.

“I've been hoardin' a lot of money for the past six years,” he said thoughtfully. “More than enough to send a kid across the desert to Xing or to the western half of the continent without anyone knowing. I've heard Drachma is beautiful in the fall, in between the summer monsoons and winter blizzards.”

“Mr. Greed, that is…uncharacteristically kind of you,” said Bido, with tentative approval in his voice.

“Don't get me wrong, I'm not offering out of the goodness of my heart. If Dante loses the stone for good, the old hag might finally shrivel up and die. I can't begin to tell you how much of a relief that would be.”

“I'm gonna have to call bullshit on that, boss.”

“What exactly is that supposed to mean now?”

“Oh, I think I know what Dolcetto’s getting at,” said Martel with a smirk.
“Well I don’t,” said Greed, irritated.

“Don't play dumb, Greed,” called Roa from the corner, breaking his silence. At some point during Ed's story, he had procured a war hammer and leant it against the wall within arm's reach.

“It's obvious. You've come down with another case of bleeding heart syndrome.”

“The hell-”

“You see a cute face with nowhere to go, and you can't help it. You just have to lend a hand, take them under your wing,” she teased.

“You're on thin fuckin’ ice, you scaly bint.”

Ed supposed that it would make sense a homunculus could flush, considering that their structure was identical to humans. It still didn't fail to surprise him, though.

“It's how we ended up with you, ain't it? We're adorable, we know.” Martel seized Dolcetto and Bido by the chins, displaying their “cute faces” to the homunculus. The former slapped her hand away after a moment, but still had a smile on his usually stoic face.

“Who would've guessed the big, bad Mr. Greed was so charitable?”

“It's not charity-”

“Whatever you want to call it, I don't want your fucking pity,” growled Ed. Greed tilted his head, intrigued.

“Well then, what do you want?”

Ed stared, set off-kilter by the unexpected question. By all rights, he had no reason to tell him anything, but some unseen force pulled the words from his throat, clear and without hesitation.

“To put Al’s soul back into the body he was born with.”

“And you, very little brother?”

“I… I want to protect my brother. As I am, I can't do anything but make noise and go for the ankles… you saw how well that went earlier. If I had my body, I could stop Envy and Dante for good.”

He'd never get the chance, if Ed could help it. Al was fully human, and he could get away from swirling vortex of bullshit that had attached itself to Ed. Once he was back to normal, Ed planned to end his struggles with his enemies on his own, one way or another.

“How admirable. Something tells me you're not nearly as selfless as them in your greed, Ling.”

The teenager grinned widely, apparently taking no offense.

“Depends on how you look at it. Though, I'm curious how you came to that conclusion from just a look.”

“It's all in the name, kid. Wanting makes the world go round, and it's my job to know all about wanting. So cough it up, kid. I've got a feeling it's going to be good.”

“Well, let me inform you. You're currently talking to the future emperor of all fifty clans of Xing.”
He said it with such pride and certainty that Ed wondered if the somewhat lackadaisical teen could really pull it off. Greed threw back his head and laughed.

“Now that, that is greedy,” said Greed approvingly.

“It's a promise,” he shot back. For a moment, Ed thought that his smile looked nearly as sharp as Greed’s.

“Well, since we've already established the little guy’s got issues accepting something for nothing, I assume he's trading something for your help.”

“Something like that,” said Ling evasively. Suddenly, Greed took off his sunglasses and leaned across the bar towards Ed. His face was drawn and intense, startling despite the fact his hostility wasn't directed at him.

“What's his price, kid? Because, trust me, you don't have to pay it.” Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Martel flip her knife ostentatiously and use it to pick dirt out from underneath her fingernails, leaning against the bar next to Ling. No matter how Ed looked at it, it was a threat. He swallowed heavily, and questioned the wisdom of revealing so much information to a room of strangers.

However, the idea his mother had whispered to him since before he was old enough to understand came back to him. Honesty deserved honesty. That's all there was to it.

“A philosopher's stone.”

Greed sat back, took a thoughtful sip of the gasoline he called absinthe.

“Kid, I realize you don't have a lot of life experience, but let me tell you something. You don't have to swap Dante out for the first bastard that offers a way out. Nobody's gotta own you.”

“Wait, what?” Ling tried to stand up, only to be stopped by Martel's blade at his throat.

“Say the word, kid, and the debt disappears.”

“Hold up a fucking second. Who said anything about owning me? I meant this stone,” he said quickly, slapping it down on the counter, too angry to consider the wisdom of that decision. Annoying as he was, Ed didn't want Ling dead. Greed examined it, picking it up delicately with two large fingers.

“Where the hell did this come from?”

“It's an antique from old Xerxes,” said Al.


“Well, I worked hard to steal that, so I would appreciate it if you would put that down,” said Ling, voice strained.

“You stole it from the royal family, so it's me and Al’s more than it belongs to you,” reminded Ed.

“Relax, future emperor, I'm not gonna steal it. What's the point of taking something you've already got one of?”

Ed watched as the homunculus raised one suddenly clawed finger, drawing it vertically down his neck. The delicate skin parted like wet tissue paper, revealing a glowing red shard, embedded just above the cartilage of his throat. Within seconds, the wound was closed up. It was a familiar sight to
Ed, who had inflicted at least part of his fair share of damage on Envy in attempts to defend himself.

“Eugh,” said Martel, grimacing. “Just because you can slice yourself up like that, doesn't mean you should do it for no good reason.”

“You were soldiers once. Shouldn't you have gotten used to gore?”

“Just because you're used to it doesn't mean you want to see it all the time,” said Dolcetto reproachfully. Greed shrugged.

“I'll try to keep it to when it's absolutely necessary, I suppose.”

Ed watched the exchange with interest. Every homunculus he'd met only looked down on humanity. Envy saw them as inferior scum, Lust regarded the species as her own personal entertainment, and Gluttony never considered them as more than a food source. Greed seemed to be equal partners with the chimaeras, or an extremely informal leader at most. Ed wondered if it was a result of their travels together and living situation that bred that familiarity across such enormous gaps in experience, or vice versa. Perhaps it was their shared confinement in Laboratory Five that led to their bond, even if they were held separately. It explained why he was so willing to lend the Elric brothers his assistance. After all, they had all been Dante's prisoners in one sense or another, and the subjects of her experiments.

“Come on, Bido,” said Roa, getting to his feet. “We're going to market.”

“A-are you sure? What if someone sees me?”

“You can stick to the rooftops if it makes you more comfortable, but you know you need to spend at least a few hours in the sun every day.”

“Come on, Bido. You know no one will start shit with the bull around,” coaxed Greed. Ed suspected that getting the gecko chimaera into the sunshine was a daily issue, one that the others were used to dealing with.

“I…alright,” he said, doing his best to smile bravely. Roa patted him on the back with what appeared to be only a fraction of his strength, though it was enough to make Bido stumble.

“Bring back meat this time,” said Dolcetto.

“And enough eggs,” called Martel.

“Those two prefer their food raw,” whispered Greed conspiratorially to Ed. “Martel doesn't even take ‘em out of the shells.”

Ed couldn't help but be intrigued. For obvious reasons, he had never studied human-based chimaeras, or even the non-sentient animal ones. Though he appreciated and had never had an issue with agricultural alchemy and plant-based chimaeras, it had never been his area of interest. It required far too much waiting for modified wheat species to grow before examining the stalks for resilience to fungal disease. However, he was interested by the concept of ninety nine percent human chimeras experiencing shifting dietary needs. He wondered if intolerances for certain foods carried over too, but he figured Al would say asking was way too rude.

“Shut up. They're better crunchy,” she muttered. Greed shrugged, and poured himself another glass out of the mostly empty bottle.

“Hey, kid. What are my siblings like? I'm only asking because I really don't want to catch up with
them in person."

“You really wanna know?” Ed sighed. “Gluttony isn't so bad, since he's mostly motivated by food and whatever Lust tells him. The problem is that he'll eat anything, living or dead. Lust is mostly alright, she just wants us to tell her stories. She likes hearing about humans. Envy…”

“He's evil!”

“Woah, looks like the older brother's not the only one with pent up rage.”

“T'm telling you, he's evil. He steals Ed's food, even though he doesn't need to eat, he takes Ed's leg while he's asleep, and he...he changes into Mom and Dad so he can...and Dante doesn't even make him do it! He just likes hurting him!”

Al’s voice was thick, like he wanted desperately to cry. Ed wished that the hand he curled around Al could be felt, could offer any sort of comfort.

“Al, it's alright, you're not going back there.”

“No, it's not alright! I want you to promise me, Ed. No matter who they threaten or what they say, I want you to promise you won't go with them!”

Ed shifted uncomfortably, surprised by Al’s declaration. Though he was a sensitive teenager, emotional outbursts simply weren't Al’s thing. That was always more Ed’s speed. In that moment, he needed reassurance in the form of a steadfast vow. However, Ed could only remember those horrifying seconds in which Gluttony was about to eat Al. He'd been prepared to lay down anything he could to save him, the least of which was his own life.

“Goddamnit, Al.... You know I can't lie to you.”

His little brother didn't need a face to convey his horrified betrayal. Greed looked horribly uncomfortable, and Ed felt empathetic towards him, along with his own guilt. After a few moments, the homunculus sighed.

“Look, kid. You don't need to worry about it, because it won't come to that. These homunculi might think they're hot shit, but they've got nothing on their older brother, trust me,” he said, grinning widely.

“It'll work out, Al. I've got a few tricks up my sleeves they'll never see coming,” said the Xingese man, lips curving into a self-assured smile.

Ed turned, somewhat surprised Ling was comforting Al. His face was smiling but his eyes were hard, looking every inch the warrior monarch. Despite himself, Ed felt a little more confident. Sensing this, Al eased up a bit.

“You're right. We just need to make it to nightfall without being spotted, then we can get my body back and I'll be able to help you fight. Seven more hou-”

“We're all screwed!”

A hooded figure rushed down the stairs and into the bar, his tail thumping into table legs and chairs in his haste.

“Me. Greed, we're in deep shit now, they'll, they’ll-” he broke off, and Ed wasn't sure whether his harsh inhalations were an attempt to catch his breath or the start of a full blown panic attack. His
money was on the latter. Greed reached out, his hand dwarfing the chimera’s shoulder. His features 
crinkled in worry, before smoothing into something gentle and authoritative.

“Hey, calm down and breathe, Bido.”

He complied.

“Is anybody dead yet?”

Wordlessly, he shook his head, and Greed smiled.

“Well, then, it sounds like the shit ain't that deep.”

“You don't understand, there's Amestrian soldiers outside asking where the bar is. Roa pointed them 
in the wrong direction, but we only have so long before they show up, and, and…. Goddamnit! This 
is all my fault! They must have heard about a lizard monster roaming the city and decided to take 
back government property.” He paused, formulating a plan. “The rest of you pass for human, so you 
need to go, now-”

He was interrupted by Martel bodily lifting him by the collar and shaking him roughly.

“Don't be fucking martyr, Bido,” she hissed.

“And seriously, you can't expect the guy that's part guard dog to leave you behind,” said Dolcetto.

“Actually, guys,” said Al shyly. “This might be entirely our fault, but I'm not sure.”

“Did any of them look like a bastard?”

“Ed!”

“Well, actually…the leader was a handsome man that kept smiling, but it gave me a horrible feeling. 
It looked like he was stalking something. Is that what you mean?”

There wasn’t a trace of doubt in his mind that that was Roy Mustang, the dreaded Flame Alchemist 
of the extermination.

“If anything, we should be the ones to leave. Sorry to bring you unwanted attention,” said Al 
sincerely, bowing. Before Ed could pick up his brother and leave, Greed reached out and snagged 
his arm. Thankfully it was the metal, uninjured one, but Ed still tried to pull away.

“Did you seriously think we'd let you escape-”

Ed's heart leapt into his throat.

“without our help?” His smile was comparable to the devil’s, his teeth sharp and black eyes glittering 
in the low light. Ed couldn't help but smile back. Roa appeared in the door, stony face unreadable. 
Wordlessly, he began stacking tables and chairs pushing them to the sides of the room.

“Bido, Martel. You take the brats and go out the back. Go with them.”

“What the hell-”

“Don't argue with me on this,” he said sharply. Both chimeras looked very much like they wanted to 
argue, but kept their mouths clenched shut.
“This way,” said Bido grimly, and led them deeper into The Devil’s Nest.

Chapter End Notes

I estimate we're about halfway through this fic, plot-wise. We might be looking at less frequent updates in the near future as I'm studying for my AP European History exam and to retake the SAT. 1360 is my score to beat! Also: I'm thinking Greed POV for next chapter.
“Huh,” muttered Greed to himself, watching Martel and Bido lead the kids away. “That took less effort than I thought it would.”

“You're lucky Bido respects you, for some reason. But Martel looked even more pissed than usual. You'll have to watch your back for a while after this.”

Greed frowned, looking at his remaining subordinates.

“Listen up, knuckleheads, here's the deal. We haven't seen those kids, we don't know what these soldiers are talking about, and we try to be as vague as possible. Except that doesn't matter, because they won't even see you. You squishy humans stay in the kitchen until I take care of this.”

“Don't be stupid, Greed. You may not be human, but you have your limits too.”

“Sure, but I seriously doubt I'll be testing them today. How many soldiers are we looking at? Four?”

“Six, plus three civilians,” said Roa begrudgingly.

“Peanuts,” he proclaimed, putting all of his bravado into it. “I've taken out more men in my sleep.”

“Then why do I have this terrible feeling? Animal instincts are never wrong.”

“So you've said, Dolcetto. Besides, why are you so certain it'll come to blows? I am a master of subterfuge and misdirection, you know.”

“You're really not. I don't think subtlety is even part of your vocabulary,” despaired Dolcetto. Roa’s incredulous snort spoke for itself.

“You wouldn't recognize subtlety if it shoved its nose right up your furry ass,” said Greed haughtily, his own nose tilted up into the air. The homunculus played up his diva personality on purpose, hoping to elicit some sort of smile or laugh from his employees, strung tight as bowstrings. Out of everyone in the city, his chimeraes had the best reasons to simultaneously hate and fear the Amestrian military, and their tension was rubbing off on Greed.

“Now, get in the kitchen, and if I hear so much as a sneeze, I swear to God I am firing your asses.”

“How many times have you threatened that this week? Six?”

“Seven,” said Roa, though the two were still obeying Greed’s orders.

The homunculus felt himself ease up, if only a little. Though the words were clipped and uneasy, the banter was familiar in the easy volley of quips and barbs.
The kitchen door shut, providing Greed with the illusion of solitude at the bar. He downed the rest of the absinthe, barely grimacing at the taste. He enjoyed the burn of it down his throat, the closest thing he could have to the artificial warmth of drunkenness. He'd heard that humans could drink less than half a bottle and become susceptible to hallucinations, while his buzz couldn't last more than thirty seconds, the damage to his cells repairing itself instantly. He was a little jealous of the common experience of getting absolutely smashed, but it wasn't exactly the worst thing in the world. Except for the times when he wanted what people called ‘liquid courage’. Like when a former possession of Dante's, a fucking kid, showed up, trying to act like he wasn't coming off of the worst years of his life. Like when he realized the abomination of a woman he'd spent the last century trying to escape from was probably living in the same city as him. He debated cracking open another bottle, only to reject the idea. He'd gone all these years without guzzling his own merchandise, and he hardly thought it was the time to start.

After what could have been ten minutes or thirty seconds, he heard footsteps and voices on the stairs. He smiled despite his mood. At least he had the opportunity to be fantastically unhelpful to a group of assholes. He kicked up his feet on the bar and took a bite of Roa’s cooking, still excellent at room temperature.

Showtime.

He made a note of every figure that came through the door, watching through the corner of his eye. Five out of the nine Roa reported entered the bar, three civilians and two soldiers. In the front were a tall woman and a dark-haired soldier with his arm in a sling, followed by a civilian toting a bag of groceries and an amicable smile. In the rear was a truly enormous man and a small blonde, neither smiling. The female soldier was particularly suspicious, glaring at the confines of the bar with disapproval.

“Sorry, we don't open until four,” he called cheerfully through a mouth of food. He made sure to flash a fair amount of chewed up mush on his tongue, and was gratified by the concealed grimaces of a few of his visitors. “It's ladies’ night,” he added with a wink. “Half off all juice mixed drinks.” The civilian woman's nose wrinkled in disgust. It occurred to Greed that this Envy character could look like anyone, no matter how unrealistic it seemed. Any one of these intruders could be connected to Dante, or a homunculus.

“Really? That's too bad,” said the man in glasses with a sigh. “It's so hot outside, all I've been able to think about is a nice, cold beer.”

Greed briefly wondered how inhospitable he could be without attracting suspicion.

“Well, I regretfully have to inform you that the bartender is on lunch break.” He bit into a crisp snap pea, crunching it jauntily in his teeth.

“I assume you are the bartender, Mr….”

“Greed,” finished the homunculus, then almost hit himself for not thinking of a more conventional name. In his defense, most of his friends and customers didn't seem to care, so it had never been an issue. The male soldier blinked in surprise for half a second before extending his hand. Greed took it, making a point to use his grimy, crumb-and-grease-covered hand. Unfortunately, the man's glove undermined his attempt at subtle warfare. In his disappointment, Greed noticed that the cloth was weirdly rough against his skin.

“Christopher Hawkeye, and my friend Maes Hughes. We apologize for interrupting your lunch, but-”
“Pretty big lunch,” said the civilian woman darkly. Greed looked at the spread on the bar, partially demolished by the two teenage boys, but the enormous platters and leftovers remained. Greed decided very quickly that the woman was bad news. Her clothes were drab on her muscular frame, and her sandals looked older than her, but it did nothing to diminish her intimidating aura. She looked like the kinetic energy of a natural disaster condensed into human form, that standing still was nearly impossible, and the only way she could restrain herself from violence was by glaring at Greed. That, and she was far too perceptive.

“Well, I am a growing boy,” he said with a flippant shrug. Their staring competition continued for a moment longer before “Christopher” cleared his throat, a little upset at being interrupted.

“As I was saying, we apologize for interrupting, but we are on a time-sensitive mission to apprehend two dangerous criminals.”

“Whose mission?”

“I'm sorry?”

“I mean, you don't look like you belong to the city guard, or like you have the legal authority to be apprehending anyone. So on whose authority are you acting, exactly?”

Christopher (the bastard Ed had railed against, he assumed) went pale in a way Greed found extremely satisfying. Beside him the man in glasses (Maes, apparently) laughed nervously.

“Uh…. Citizen’s arrest?”

“Xerxes citizens, wearing Amestrian military uniform trousers?” They were easy to recognize, as Roa and Martel had both held onto their pilfered outfits from years ago, even if they didn't wear them.

Christopher’s features, once so smooth and self assured, fell deeper into despair. Greed suspected that a large portion of his willpower had already been destroyed before he entered the bar, and Greed’s appearance had merely shattered the thin veneer of calm. The man floundered for an explanation, mouth opening and closing repeatedly. His companions looked at him with a variety of expressions ranging from that of complete disgust at his incompetence, to exasperation, to the look of someone who is fully aware that their situation is less than ideal but is nevertheless extremely entertained by it. Greed almost felt bad for him, having run into a bastard like himself at the worst moment.

“You see, I only ask because the Xerxes legal code quite explicitly forbids fugitive extradition by a foreign nation. You westerners may do whatever you like with your kangaroo court of a constitution, but in this city, we have certain standards, like the concept of proper procedure, and respect for international boundaries.” Greed rarely got the opportunity to claim moral superiority, and he was enjoying it immensely to the point of perverse satisfaction, even if it did involve upholding the law.

“Oh, you are so full of shit,” growled the tall woman. “Just shut the hell up and tell me where these two are.” She shoved a notebook in his face, so close Greed couldn't read it if he wanted to. He plucked it from her fingers and narrowed his eyes. Sure enough, rendered in confident strokes of a pen, were Ed and Ling, glowering and grinning up at him respectively. He whistled appreciatively.

“Pretty impressive artwork, if I do say so myself.”

“Do you know them or not?”

“Well…” Greed pretended to examine the paper closely, making a big show of taking off his (purely
cosmetic) glasses. He even turned it upside down at one point, as if searching for a better angle. “Hmmm…” He rubbed his chin thoughtfully, scrunching up his features in concentration, before shrugging.

“Nope! Never seen these boys in my life,” he said brightly, snapping the notebook shut. A spurt of blood trickled down the woman's chin as her eye twitched, but Greed decided that mentioning it was only asking for trouble. Christopher Hawkeye’s face fell in comical disappointment, leaving it to his subordinate to catch the book Greed tossed back.

“Are you sure?”

“Very. We don't serve minors here, you know.”

“I find that hard to believe,” said the civilian woman, wiping her face.

“Really? It's illegal, after all. And let me tell you, we here at The Devil’s Nest take the rules and regulations very seriously. In fact, you could say we have an almost fanatical devotion to remaining on the right side of the law in every aspect of the business we conduct.” He finished his bit with a hand clasped to his heart, the very picture of altruistic sincerity. For a second, Greed could swear he heard Bido giggling at that, before dismissing it as his imagination.

“So, you deny having ever seen the suspects?” Maes seemed to be the only neutral party present, which Greed was grateful for. Judging by the groceries he held, he probably wanted to get this done with as badly as Greed.

“Mmm-hmm.”

“That's funny,” he continued, in a cold way that made Greed think that things were about to get decidedly unhumorous.

“How so?”

“Well, we have eyewitness testimony that puts both suspects at your bar inside of the last hour.” Greed’s stomach dropped down with a vengeance.

“Oh?” Greed’s voice was higher than he'd like, before he got ahold of himself. He coughed, as delicately as he could. “Who were the witnesses?”

“I don't see how that's relevant, Mr. Greed.”

“Was it Patrice and Thelma? Because, let me tell you, those girls are the life of the party at night, but in the mornings after they can be preeeeetty out of it. You know young people, they don't know the meaning of restraint when it comes to liquor. They'd tell you they saw the king and queen drinking mimosas down here if you put the idea in their heads after a night of slamming back vodka cranberries.”

The intruders looked unconvinced, with the exception of the elder woman. She refused to stay inactive.

“Izumi,” said the enormous man in the back, speaking for the first time. Izumi ignored him.

“Look here, asshole. If I had it my way, these useless government dogs wouldn't be here, and you
would've spilled your guts by now. Maybe these clowns are content to play along with this song and dance, but I'm not. There are consequences for lying to me, and you're going to find out exactly what they are if you don't tell me where Ed is within the next ten fucking seconds."

Greed counted to nine, before taking a deep breath and giving her the most shit-eating grin he could. It wasn't very hard, because his two base emotions at any given time were “smug” and “amused”.

“I don't know who, what, or where this “Ed” character is, but I sincerely doubt that insulting my integrity will help you with… whatever this is,” he said, adding a vague dismissive gesture at the end.

It was not entirely surprising when she hauled back and punched him in the face. It was more forceful than he expected, based on the sound of something breaking. Two or three somethings, in fact. Unfortunately for Izumi, those somethings were her own fingers. Greed wondered if he should've taken the full force of the punch to avoid suspicion, but he figured he could cover his error easily enough. He retracted the shield that covered his cheek before snapping his head back with a theatrical grunt.

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

“I should be the one asking you that, after you just decked me for no good reason!” Greed even rubbed his face a little, really selling the act.

“There's something fucked up about your face,” she said, cradling her injured hand as she dropped to her knees. The enormous man came closer, only for her to stop him with a raised hand.

“Now, that's just rude. Anymore of this and a fella would be perfectly justified in exercising his right to remove unruly patrons.”

“Let's not be too hasty. Miss Curtis is under a considerable amount of emotional distress, and—”

“What about the emotional distress she's causing me? Interrupting my lunch break, yelling at me, assaulting me, insulting my appearance. It's downright hurtful, you know.”

“There's something wrong with you, Greed.” Izumi clapped her hands in front of her chest, as if in prayer. Greed wondered if she was a religious freak too. It seemed to fit the pattern for the kind of day he'd been having.

“There she goes again! I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to ask you to lea—”

He was interrupted by an enormous stone fist slamming into his face. Of course, it only cracked and crumbled when it hit the ultimate shield, not even causing Greed to stumble. Unfortunately, success wasn't always about withstanding or delivering damage. Sometimes it meant, for once in your goddamned life, acting normal.

“What the hell is that?”

“Uh…would you believe me if I told you it's a really bad case of eczema?” Greed’s nervous laughter did nothing to sell his story.

Dolcetto was right. Greed was absolutely terrible at subtlety.

Before he could even register all of the ways he'd fucked up their little operation, the situation deteriorated further. The alchemist woman's attack displaced and destroyed a fair amount of material while creating a great deal of noise that, while unlikely to be heard from the street, was clearly felt by
those hiding in the kitchen or waiting inconspicuously in the stairwell. The soldiers entered in a neat line as the four fanned out, weapons at the ready. Greed’s men, on the other hand, were a bit less clean. It started with Bido rushing out of the kitchen, kitchen knife in hand. This in itself was surprising, as Bido didn't have much of an inclination for fighting. Out of all of the chimaeras, he was the only one without a military background. He looked about ready to cry from terror, but he was running in nevertheless, shouting something about leaving Greed alone. The homunculus felt an odd surge of pride, followed by indignation. Hadn't he told him to take the kids and leave?

“What are you doing? I told you to take the kids and run!”

“Take the kids?” Izumi got to her feet, confusion swapped out for focused determination.

“Shit.” Greed cursed his loose lips.

Behind Bido was Dolcetto, who just managed to snag the chimaera by the back of his clothes before anything irreversible could happen. Martel was also there, which was less surprising than it should've been. Roa was only a moment behind, before stepping up as the vanguard, hammer at the ready. All three of them had shifted, revealing bristling fur, stubby horns, and needlelike fangs. Bido’s tail was even more active than usual, lashing about his feet like a separate animal. In short, they looked more inhuman than ever.

“Goddamnit, Roy. You've gone and dragged me back into the freak show again,” said Maes. And that was it for Greed.

“Don't call them freaks,” he growled, slipping off his good vest. It really had been a long time since he last had to break out the ultimate shield, and he saw no reason to ruin his favorite clothes in the process of getting reacquainted. He flexed his hands, now tipped with claws just as hard as and even sturdier than diamond.

“Boss, are you going to explain what the hell is going on?”

“What the hell is going on,” began Greed, slowly advancing, “is that you bastards are going to leave my bar in the next twenty seconds, or else.”

“I'm leaving here with Ed, or in a body bag,” said Izumi, spitting a glob of bloody phlegm to the floor.

“That can be arranged.”

She charged, landing a kick to the join of shoulder and neck. It might've sent him flying backwards, if it weren’t for the fact that she had to pull her strength upon hitting his shield, or risk breaking her leg. Reaching up, he grabbed her by one muscled calf.

“If you do that, the only bones you'll be shattering are your own, you know.” He pulled back his arm, and neatly tossed her into two of the new soldiers, who went down like two bags of rocks. The big one came for him next, only to be intercepted by Roa and the flat side of his hammer. Greed noted with approval that he wasn’t aiming for ribs, but rather the round protrusion of his stomach. That was good, because Greed had no idea how to dispose of a body that size. Next up was the small blonde one, her bullets glancing off his chest. He smirked, then tapped his uncovered forehead, pointing out her target. He figured that if he showed off enough, their opponents might back down out of fear. It was a long shot, but whatever. Taking his oh-so-helpful advice, her next bullet hit him directly between the eyes. He had to admit, it was a little disorienting to have his brain scrambled, but the discomfort was short-lived. His tissues regenerated, pushing the bullet out in seconds. It hit the floor with a metallic tinkle almost as satisfying as the horrified look on her face as he grinned, good
as new. Unfortunately, it was cleanly wiped off as she raised her weapon again. Greed frowned. Did she think something else would happen this time?

They didn't get to find out, because Martel had slithered behind her guard and wrenched the gun from her hand, wrapping her limbs in her own. Greed expected the woman to be losing consciousness soon. Martel, quite literally, possessed the inescapable stranglehold of a boa constrictor. The woman's comrades attempted to help her, only for Martel to keep them at bay with her human shield and stolen gun. By then, Izumi had recovered and created a broad headed spear to attack Greed. However, she barely had time to charge before Dolcetto entered the fray, gracefully engaging her in a duel that led her away from Greed and the kitchen door. The homunculus grinned wildly. When his men were good, they were good.

Speaking of which, Bido was apparently making up for lack of combat experience with trembling bravery. He stood in front of Maes and Christopher/Roy, kitchen knife in hand. Greed considered intervening immediately, but it looked like the small man was trying to say something important, so he decided to watch for the moment.

“Ed…Ed isn't owned by anyone, and neither am I!”

“Wait, what,” began Maes, but it was too late, because Bido was already attacking. Roy/Christopher stepped up, fingers poised to snap.

Dolcetto had plenty to say about animal instincts, but it must've been more universal than that, because the homunculus had no other way to explain his next actions. There was merely a horrible tugging sensation in his gut, and he was pulling Bido behind him, satisfying the sudden need to place himself between his possession(friend) and that man. Then he got set on fire.

Chapter End Notes

Well, that doesn't sound good, Greed.
Chapter Summary

It's dark as shit, and it pisses Ed off. Meanwhile, Al tries desperately not to get ahead of himself.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Alphonse Elric wondered if it smelled particularly bad in the sewer. At least, that's what he thought the tunnel Martel had led them into was, judging by the sound of slowly moving water to their left. Why there was a secret exit out of the bar's closet, Al couldn't guess. He remembered the chimaera's final words to them, before heaving the concrete door closed with Bido's help.

“Left or right, pick a direction and stick with it. There should be manhole covers every few miles. Pass at least six before getting out. And Ed—if you ever need to fight that bitch head on...you know where to find us.”

Then, with a needle-sharp grin and a wave goodbye, the three were alone again, and chose to go right. They walked in silence, while Al fumed and worried about Ed's words. He was fully aware his brother had a self-sacrificing streak as long as the desert was wide, but he hoped he could at least put that aside when it came to Dante and her creations. And yet, part of him knew it would be hopeless. That was simply how Ed was. Growing up, Ed was most definitely the older brother. Though he didn't restrict or chastise, he watched out for Al, put him first in all their shenanigans, regardless of the consequences to himself. He'd only gotten more reckless after he gave up his limbs to save Mom. It had only justified further to him that sacrifice like that was natural. Sometimes his brother could be scarily idiotic.

And now, nothing about his behavior had changed. Except, perhaps, for the fact Al could no longer fight alongside his brother, or physically carry him away from fights he couldn't win. Ed listened to his brother most of the time, but his stubbornness was legendary when it came to certain ideas, such as self-preservation or common sense. He'd been reduced to a bystander, and it stung like acid eating away at the very core of his being, whatever intangible mess had been scooped from his physical form.

Ed's expression was unreadable, mostly because it was pitch black and Al could barely see his own hands. His gait was uneven, tilting his passenger up and down with his steps. After a minute, his foot slipped on the edge of the stone, almost sending both brothers into the shallow water that may or may not have been sewage. They would have fallen, if it weren't for Ling reaching out with both hands, grabbing Ed's shoulder and sliding about his waist. With his head over Ed's shoulder, Al could just barely see the prince's mouth relax as he exhaled, before his lips curled up in a grin.

“Watch your step,” he said, quietly amused. He moved away, but not very far, even as they continued forward. Al assumed, somewhat hesitantly, that he had taken Ed by the hand.

“Would you stop that?”

“Stop what?” It was said innocently enough, but Al sat a little straighter, paid a little bit more
attention to the princes’ interactions.

“Touching me,” he growled in annoyance. Al had no doubt his face was red with embarrassment, even though his meaning was innocent. Ed was never a tactile person, outside of the very small circle of friends and family. Even then, his tokens of physical affection were for special moments. Al hadn’t minded; he showed how he cared in other ways. Ling, on the other hand, never bothered to stay completely out of his space, in case the need for contact should arise.

“I don't want you to slip again. I don't think these sewers have been used in a long time, but I doubt you'll enjoy going for a swim all the same.”

“You're just as blind as me, so what's the point of leading me around?”

“Not quite,” corrected Ling. “My training taught me to use all my senses, not just sight, so I could orient myself in situations just like this.” He didn't sound like he was bragging, merely matter-of-fact.

“Sounds like pretty intensive training for a prince,” said the elder brother.

“It was. But it's necessary if an heir wants to survive in Xing.”

“What do you mean?” If Al had a mouth, it would be twisted in a frown.

“Let me put it this way. At the time of my birth, I had twenty-two older half siblings, the oldest of which was just entering his early thirties. Fifteen years later, the day I left home, I had eleven. None of them died of natural causes.”

“That's awful.” The royal bloodline of Xerxes had followed seamlessly from parent to eldest child, or, in the case of no heirs, a chosen advisor or celebrated academic, for the past three centuries.

“I’m not even counting the younger ones, that were taken out in early childhood.”

“Fuck,” breathed Ed.

“With the competition for the Xingese throne as fierce as it is, fratricide is practically tradition among nobles,” he said with a bitter laugh.

Al became quiet, considering their strange companion. Ed was hopelessly prone to stupid decisions, and though it pained him to admit it, Al was basically worthless as a fighter in his condition, and his ability to stop him was limited. Therefore, his brother's life depended on Ling Yao, more than Al would like. He appeared to be somewhat trustworthy, though Al's only evidence was that he hadn't taken advantage of his brother's blindness to steal the stone. He was a bit too laid-back, but a good, serious fighter. And supposing they all survived to the close of their deal, it was unclear whether they could trust Ling with the power of the stone. Al wished he could ask Ed what he thought of the man, but had to settle for guessing.

He'd saved Ling's life, but Ed would do that for anyone. Ed was abrasive in speech and mannerisms towards him, but they did work well together, padding out each other's weaknesses. They seemed to have reached an unspoken understanding between them, to fight alongside each other with everything they had, if only for the moment. Al supposed it was the same unshakable commitment to their word they both possessed. Despite his reservations, Alphonse had to admit that Ling Yao was an honorable man. Beyond that, he was quite charming, in a sly sort of manner, with his mysterious lopsided grin. Another part of Alphonse, childish and not fully understanding of their situation, couldn't help but find the romance in it. His brother had been rescued from the clutches of a monster by a handsome prince that quite literally swept him off his feet; it seemed identical to the plot of some fairy tale. And out of anyone, Ed deserved a fantastic ending, someone to make him happy in a way
friends and family couldn't.

But, he told himself, that was beside the point. If Al was forced to rely on the man (who was apparently barely older than himself), he should do his best to subtly interview him.

“Is that why you want to become Emperor?”

There was a beat of silence, in which Al wished he could see Ling’s expression.

“In a way, yes. You see, Xing is a country rich in natural resources and has established trade agreements all over the eastern hemisphere, yet it is hopelessly backwards in some aspects, such as our royal line of succession. Traditionally, the emperor attempts to produce an heir with the princesses of each of the fifty clans, in order to pit those children against each other to be named his heir. The infighting and jockeying for power between these clans already fractures and weakens our nation, and this tradition only exacerbates it.”

“Doesn't it have any benefit?”

“Supposedly it's to make sure there will always be an heir, so as to avoid a power vacuum in an emergency. Privately, I believe it is simply because it is the way royal business has always been conducted, and many are too complacent to change. In the case of our current emperor, I suspect he enjoys watching all fifty clans running around like headless chickens in search of his approval.”

“That's sick.”

“He is an old man, and dying slowly. He takes his entertainment where he can,” said Ling, sounding almost tired.

“Even when the entertainment is his own children killing each other?” Ed's words were forcibly detached, clumsily projecting an air of calm that Al saw right through.

“Most of my siblings will only lay eyes on him three or four times in their lives, let alone speak to him. I hardly think that makes us ‘his’, in anyone's eyes.” Al barely made out the slope of Ling's broad shoulders shrugging in the darkness. “Due to the circumstances of our birth, as well as the nature of royal polygamy and the politics that come along with it, it's impossible for him to be little more than a stranger to all of us.”

Al noticed that despite the violent conflict between them, Ling identified his siblings alongside himself. He wondered if it was the result of an abstract sort of empathy, or rather because he knew any of his siblings well. Quickly, a thought occurred to him, though Ed was first to voice it.

“If you become Emperor, you'll have to do the same thing, won't you? You'll be forced to marry fifty princesses and have as many heirs grow up to fight each other.”

“Not necessarily,” said Ling, the curve of his grin heard rather than seen. “When I ascend to the throne, there'll be changes. As I said, our division makes us weak; significant changes must be made to the current clan system. Who knows? Maybe I'll be the first emperor to marry for love,” he said lightly, almost wistfully. He laughed shortly after, dispelling the seriousness of the conversation.

“That's so…” Al struggled for words.

“Naive? I'm well aware.”

“More like hopelessly idealistic,” said Ed. “Not so sure that's a negative, though.”
There was a beat of silence, in which Alphonse imagined their expressions and beat back his inner hopeless romantic with a stick.

“That's so different, it's hard to imagine growing up in that sort of situation,” he continued, unwilling to let conversation die out.

“Well, apparently, you two are princes as well. Surely there must be some overlap.”

“Not really. We lived in the palace, which is pretty big, but we were pretty normal kids. We lived with Mom and Dad, studied alchemy, ran around…”

“Got into all sorts of shit,” interjected Ed.

“I envy that,” said Ling with a laugh.

“Are you sure? Half of that trouble was just because me and Ed kept having brawls in unconventional public settings.”

“Hey, those were friendly sparring matches for public entertainment. Well, usually friendly. Besides, I recall that you won each and every fight, so I don't know what you have to regret. Except maybe having a crush on Winry, that is. Gross.”

Somewhere, Al’s face was flushing, both from the praise and the teasing.

“Those fights were stupid.”

“Stupid fun.”

“That too,” he said, trying to contain the mirth in his voice.

“You were lucky,” said Ling. “When your best friend is honor-bound by four generations of ancestors to protect your life, it makes it difficult to get into much trouble.”

“Sounds like a boring life,” muttered Ed, before Al could pinch his ear.

“A bit. In some ways, this quest for the stone was the most fun me and Lan Fan ever had.”

“Was? Where are they now?”

“Certain alchemists, holdovers of the Bradley regime, didn't like the way we were searching for something so powerful. Lan Fan... was injured by one of them. Badly, and because of my stupid mistake. She was sent back to Xing a few months ago.”

“Sorry for bringing it up,” said the elder brother.

“It's alright,” he said, though Al got the distinct impression that it was not. “But you could make it up to me by answering an uncomfortable question of mine.”

“Shoot.”

“If you had such a normal childhood, how did you lose those limbs?”

Ed's hand must've tensed, because Ling stopped walking.

“I'm sorry, that was too far. You don't have to tell me.”
“No, it's not that. It's just…”

“The circumstances surrounding Ed's, uh, incident were a bit…unusual.”

Ed snorted.

“You could say that,” he muttered.

“Try me. It's been an unusual day.”

“Fine.” Ed sighed, walking forward. “Do you believe in a god?”

“An odd question.”

“Just answer it.”

Ling was silent for a moment, thinking it over.

“In Xing, the emperor is venerated as a direct emissary of the gods, only a step away from divinity. Of course, I privately think that is merely a tool to justify absolute rule to the people, as do many others. But as to whether I believe in the gods he is supposed to represent, I honestly have never given it much thought. I think…if there are gods above, then they don't seem to show themselves in the lives of mortals, and have little to do with the affairs of men.”

“A pragmatic approach,” said Al. “Very humanist, what with the reinforcement of free will and all.”

“And you? I assume you have an opinion on the matter, as you do with almost everything else.”

Despite the conversation topic, Al wanted to laugh. Ling had certainly hit the nail on the head just then.

“There is no god, as far as I'm concerned. But, as much as I hate to admit, there are things I haven't managed to explain yet. Truth is one of them.”

“The truth?”

“No, just Truth, with a capital ‘T’,” said Ed, annoyance creeping into his tone, though it wasn't directed at Ling. Al was aware his brother held a grudge against the being, but for surprisingly petty reasons. Rather than being upset over the theft of his limbs, Ed complained more about Truth being a smug bastard, in his words. Though he didn't agree with him, Al understood his brother's mixed priorities. After all, Ed regarded the loss of his own blood and bone as a fair trade, while being smarmy about it was unforgivable dickishness.

“Assuming I'm not mistranslating something, I'm still lost. What's the truth?”

“No, Truth. It's a being that lives at The Gate, behind which all knowledge of the world resides.”

“Is that a metaphor? Or is it a physical gate?”

“Yes and no. You can only reach it by attempting human transmutation.”

“Human transmutation? You mean bringing the dead back to life?”

Ed snorted derisively.

“Hey! Don't blame me, I'm not even an alchemist,” he said defensively.
“Yeah, no shit.”

“Ed,” chastised his little brother, as had become habit.

“Reviving the dead is impossible, because there is no equivalent for a human soul. The most an alchemist can create is a homunculus that bears no resemblance to the deceased. And if this is attempted without a philosopher's stone, even that creation would be flawed and deformed, and likely unable to survive for long. But whether the transmutation was successful or not, there is always a price. It's different for everyone, from what I've read and heard.”

“It could be your sight, half your internal organs, your alchemy…”

“Or an arm and a leg,” finished Ed.

“So, this is your way of telling me you attempted human transmutation?”

“No, I didn't attempt it. I succeeded,” he said proudly.

“Debatable,” muttered Al. “Dad could've saved her without you going to the gate.”

“Mom’s disease was completely unheard of, Al, and there wasn't any sign of a breakthrough after almost a year. She was running out time, so I did what needed to be done.”

Al wanted to sigh. The brothers had this discussion infrequently, but the pattern was identical every time.

“My body was the price for healing her, and I don't regret it.”

Alphonse didn't doubt his sincerity for a moment. Ling, surprisingly enough, chuckled.

“You're insane.”

“What?”

“I would never risk something so important as my sight or my limbs.”

Ed was silent, thinking.

“Not even for your own mother?”

“I'm not nearly as selfless as your brother, Alphonse. In fact, I'd say that most people wouldn't even consider doing what he did.”

They continued walking, silent for the moment.

“You think that, but you really don't know how much you're willing to give up until the moment comes,” said Ed sagely, uncharacteristically sober.

“How odd. I never would've guessed you would be so optimistic about human nature.”

Ed snorted derisively, as had become habit for him, and Al said nothing, at a loss for how to salvage the conversation. Suddenly, Ed broke the silence.

“I'm sick and tired of being underground. I swear I'm going to live on top of a goddamn mountain after I fix you up.”
“Brother, you hate the cold.”

“Well, if it means I never have to spend time in another sewer, cave, or basement ever again, I'll become a Drachman lumberjack.”

“I've never heard of such a short lumberjack,” teased Al, going along with Ed's distraction.

“Well, it's a damn good thing I'm not short, then,” he hissed in warning.

“You know, I briefly visited the Drachman capital of Kotehok, over a year ago. I don't think I saw a single man, or woman for that matter, under six feet tall,” chimed in Ling. “It was enough to make even me feel small from time to time.”

Ed looked alarmed, before narrowing his eyes in suspicion.

“Bullshit.”

“Well, I was fifteen then, and hadn't finished growing, but I don't believe that affected my perception very much.”

“There's no way there's just a whole country of freaks out there.”

“Are you sure that they're the freaks?”

“Al, you are on thin ice here,” warned Ed.

“If you want a change of scenery, I hardly see the need to go north. The southern Xingese seas are beautiful year-round.”

“You've seen the ocean?”

“More than seen. When I was thirteen, I spent an entire summer diving for pearls in between lessons.”

“No shit. Really?”

“Would I lie to you?”

“Probably,” was Ed's easy reply, though the tone remained light. They continued on in the darkness, though their thoughts remained firmly fixed on an endless expanse of blue that existed only in the far-off future.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this took so long! Every time I had a free moment i would usually use to work on this, i just ended up falling asleep. I think I've got some sort of low-grade narcolepsy (am i joking? i can't really tell). Up next is some shamelessly erratic perspective-hopping from chapter to chapter to chapter, and characters will return.
The Big Bad Mr. Greed

Chapter Summary

In which Greed loses several arguments, and Roy exasperates his right hand man, as well as everyone else.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Greed!”

The woman's voice in Riza Hawkeye’s ear was raw with horror, loud and heedless of her captive. Her companions reacted similarly, staring with the differing emotions of fear, rage, and disbelief. Riza’s opponent loosened her grip fractionally, only allowing her a shallow gasp of air. The lizard man sunk to his knees, features contorted in grief.

Of course, none of their reactions compared to the spectacle that was Mr. Greed. The pillar of fire screamed like a banshee, somehow piercing the air and shaking the ground of the small room all at once. It was truly inhuman, yet unlike any animal Riza had ever heard. Several of her comrades clapped their hands over their ears, and Riza wished she could do the same.

The first clue that something was wrong was the smell. Or rather, the lack of it.

A burning body is an assault on all the senses. Greasy black smoke billows up, and beyond the acrid stench of hair and nails burning up, there is the smell of something far too similar to cooking pork. That, throughout all her years by the president’s side, was the thing that consistently made her stomach churn.

However, that scent wasn't present. It smelled clean and hot, like a candle. That was when that horrible scream began to morph, into deep, throaty laughter. Riza wasn't sure if that noise was any less horrible in her ears. When the flames died down, the creature that stood before them was even more monstrous than before.

His skin was a smooth dark charcoal all over, including his face, and striped with strange red lines. The sclera of his eyes were pitch black, and his mouth was lipless, exposing protruding tusks. Still chuckling to himself, Greed put out a smoldering patch on his pants. He spread his arms out, like a showman proudly displaying his latest trick.

“Just kidding!”

“Mr. Greed, you…” The lizard man was actively crying some sort of thin red liquid, which was alarming, but still the least of their problems. “You asshole!”

With that, the man launched himself at Greed, forehead knocking against his hardened abdomen even as the monster awkwardly patted him on the back. He almost looked a little sheepish.

“Hey, I'm sorry! Don't go losing blood over it! I mean, you have to admit it was a little funny…”

The president backed up, which seemed like the best option at the moment. Greed squared himself
towards him, intimidating without moving forward.

“What the hell are you?”

“Too much for you to handle, that's for fucking certain. Now why don't you kids run on home before I do something you'll regret.”

“Wait, isn't it “before I do something I'll regret”? I'm pretty sure that's how the saying goes,” said Fuery.

“Did he fucking stutter? Take a hint and leave us alone.” The woman abruptly released Riza, who involuntarily fell to one knee. The sniper took two measured breaths before speaking.

“Mr. President, I strongly suggest you comply,” she said, voice rougher than usual.

“What the hell, Hawkeye? We can't just leave this…this monster loose on the streets.”

“You assholes were the ones that walked in here and started throwing haymakers, and that makes me a monster?”

“Fuckin’ Amestrians,” muttered the snake woman.

“With all due respect, sir, it's obvious that you are useless against him—”

“Ouch,” said Greed, sounding not at all sympathetic.

“—and your safety is more important than your pride.” If Riza was truly being candid, there would one or two expletives in that sentence, but she did have certain standards of professionalism. The president was no longer a soldier, and his recklessness was even less acceptable than before.

“Double ouch.”

The president glared, tensed in the moment between moving back and standing his ground. Before a decision was made or the standoff began in earnest, Miss Curtis decided she had had enough. Before anyone knew exactly what had happened, Fürher President Roy Mustang was halfway across the room, sprawled on his back after hitting the wall, and Izumi Curtis was lowering her leg, looking absolutely livid. Riza almost gasped in awe. She had never seen someone put so much force into a single blow, or at least, no one outside the Armstrong family. How strong was this one woman? She seemed to be in ill health, judging by her coughing fits and internal bleeding. How strong was Greed, to take those hits and not move an inch?

“You shut your filthy mongrel jaws. The only reason we're here is to find Ed. Your ego isn't worth a damn to me, so either step aside or leave.”

At some point, the chimaeras had all moved in beside Greed, as if to protect him. Likely, he would be the one guarding them instead, judging from his broad stance, which made him seem even larger than before.

“No offense doll, but considering that you can't even give me a paper cut, I don't think this interrogation is going to go so hot for you.”

Her eyes narrowed dangerously.

“I'm going to give you one last chance. Where. Is. Ed.”

The thing before them chuckled in response, the sound deep and dark and steely.
“I know I can be a real bastard, but I'm offended that you think I'd be evil enough to give the kid over to you. Not after everything you did to him, Izumi. Or should I say, Envy?” His voice rose on a dramatic crescendo, only to be met with confused silence.

“Envy? The hell are you talking about?”

“She's not lying,” interjected the swordsman, with a grave certainty Greed took at face value.

“Damn,” was his reply, mildly disappointed. “I was really convinced I had it right. Well, whatever. It's easier to take care of Dante's human henchmen than a sibling of mine. Over a century's passed, but it looks like she's still the Amestrian military's puppet master.”

“It's like every word he says is chosen completely at random,” despaired Falman to his comrades.

“Don't look at me; I'm just as lost as you are,” said Breda.

“Look, I don't know who or what Dante is, but I've known Ed his entire life, and I promised to watch out for him, so don't go trying to pull the moral high ground or whatever this is.”

“Dolcetto?”

“Still not lying, boss.”

“Looks like I'm zero for two, then.” Greed sighed, before gathering himself with a shrug. “Well, whatever. I don't care if you're the damn Virgin Mary, the Elric brothers don't want to see you, so why don't you just go home and let them take care of their business.”

There was a short silence in which Greed looked self-satisfied, and Riza, in spite of herself, wondered what exactly a virgin Mary was.

“Wait, what did you just say?”

Greed locked up straight, while his companions looked on in exasperation.

“Damn it, Greed.”

“Master of subterfuge, my ass,” muttered Dolcetto.

“Nothing! I didn't say anything!” His voice was oddly high-pitched compared to his earlier rumble.

“Oh, yes you did. You said brothers. That's interesting, because Ed only has one brother, and he's in a coma.”

“Did I say that? You must've misheard me.”

Abruptly, Miss Curtis seized his arm and twisted it sharply around his back, forcing him to his knees. Despite his ability, it appeared he only had control over the hardness of his skin, not his muscles. His henchmen did nothing, apparently unconcerned by his situation. Riza supposed it was because a simple arm lock didn't constitute a threat.

“No, I didn't.”

“Wait wait wait! I just thought that the two young men whose portraits you showed me were brothers, that's all!”

“Yes, because they look so much alike,” she said sarcastically.
“What, you don’t see the family resemblance?”

“The thief is a Xingese giant,” she deadpanned.

There was a brief silence, in which Riza had to admit she was intrigued as to what verbal evasion Greed would attempt next.

“I didn’t notice,” he said, doing a poor job of feigning innocence while conspicuously looking away. She gave him a look that was completely and utterly unimpressed.

“What? I’ll have you know that we here at the venerable institution of The Devil’s Nest pride ourselves on not seeing race.”

Suddenly, Izumi released him with a frustrated sigh.

“My god, this is getting us nowhere.”

“Agreed,” said the president, stepping forward. Riza assumed it was to negotiate, as the man was truly exceptional at exactly two things: diplomacy and setting things on fire. When one didn't work, he would typically switch to the other. He cleared his throat quietly.

“Anyway, I apologize for the abrupt change in topic, but you were all test subjects at Laboratory Five in Central, were you not?”

The group of fighters moved closer to each other, protective and angry and afraid. Weapons rose to the ready, clenched in white-knuckled fists. Greed stood at the front, simultaneously guarding and preventing them from bolting into action.

“More or less,” he said with forced nonchalance. “What's it to you?”

“As has been the policy of the new republic following the dissolution of the Bradley regime, human test subjects such as yourselves may be entitled to reparations.”

“What, are you trying to bribe us now?”

“Not at all. Every victim of the experiments that survived the laboratory collapse eventually received financial compensation, at the very least. Except,” he added. “of course, for those who disappeared in the aftermath and were presumed dead.” He gestured to them politely. “However, if you were to, in your gratitude, cooperate with our investigation, we certainly wouldn't refuse your help.”

“Well, we are certainly not in the habit of refusing money, but…”

He twisted around, gauging his companion’s reactions. Almost in unison, the four of them shook their heads. The woman even flipped the president off, for good measure. Greed clapped his hands once, grinning broadly.

“Well, I think Martel speaks for all of us on that front. We disrespectfully decline.”

There was a tense standoff, before Izumi stepped forward, spear in hand. Sig Curtis stood beside her, ready to support her inevitable attack.

“Well, it's not like I really need your help to find Ed.”

“What, you've got him chipped now?”
“No. I’ve simply noticed that every time I ask a simple question, at least three of you jump and look at the kitchen door.”

All five jumped and glanced at the kitchen door, twitching forward as if to defend it. Almost immediately afterwards, they snapped back into place, attempting to smooth their expressions into something neutral, with limited success.

“You're bluffing.”

“Am I?”

The woman stalked forwards, reaching out for the door handle, only for Greed to firmly close his fingers about her wrist. He seemed uncomfortable, and the look on her face only seemed to exacerbate it. In a show of good faith, he retracted his shield, revealing a pained expression.

“Alright, just—wait a minute, okay? If you really are as important to Ed as you say you are, don't follow him. He doesn't anyone else to get hurt.”

Something about the sincerity in his voice made Izumi pause, though she lost none of her intensity. She thought it over, and when she spoke, it was quiet and collected.

“Greed. What happened to Ed in the past five years?”

“Do you seriously think he would want me to tell you? I only met the kid this morning, and I can tell you, the last thing he wants is for his loved ones to pity him, or get hurt chasing him.”

“Of all the stupid, self-flagellating bullshit that kid has pulled—” she broke off with a frustrated groan, roughly pulling her fingers through her sectioned hair. Silently, Sig Curtis placed an enormous hand on her shoulder, lending her strength in his silent presence. Greed leaned down a little, making deliberate, condescending eye contact.

“Look, doll. It's for the best that you stay away from him.”

“I can help him. He knows that.”

“You can't face one homunculus that isn't fighting back. What do you think is going to happen when you go against three that have no issue ripping you apart and crunching your bones in their teeth?”

The man claimed to be an artificial human? Unfortunately, Riza knew it was all too possible. Izumi went pale in a way Riza instinctively knew was unrelated to her health. After a moment, she steeled herself somewhat.

“Homunculi are theoretical at best, closer to fairytales than alchemy,” she said firmly. “It's—”

“Impossible?” Greed sighed. “Roa,” he said calmly. “A demonstration, if you please.”

Faster than anyone of them could react, much less stop him, the hammer was up and swinging. It collided solidly with the man's skull, instantaneously blowing off the top half with a wet crunch. His body toppled directly over onto the ground, bouncing a little on impact. One moment, he was smirking proudly. The next, he was a puppet with his strings brutally severed. For all the violence Riza had seen in her life, none of it compared to the act in terms of brutality. Riza felt disoriented by the suddenness, at a loss for thought beyond a single question.

“Why?”
Riza knew Maes Hughes to be a remarkably kind person who knew how to emotionally remove himself from violence, after several years in the Investigations department. It was a necessity in his line of work to control his reactions to murders, crime scenes, and collateral damage, for the sake of doing his job. Riza could see that detachment wasn’t coming easy to him in the moment. His movements were shaky and unsteady, his voice even more so.

“Why would you kill him? I thought he was your—”

He was interrupted by a dead man’s finger rising into the air, calmly calling for silence. Riza heard her comrades curse sharply, a single terrified concession to the situation. The body followed shortly after, rising as if pulled by strings. Only then did his body regenerate. The skull calcified in an instant around his exposed brain, followed by waving muscle fibers, wrapping around bone. His dark eyes blossomed like horrible flowers in his eye sockets, sprouting from hidden optic nerves. Before his face had even finished…growing, for lack of a better word, he began to speak, exposed teeth bouncing behind flapping lips.

“Does this look impossible to you?”

Miss Curtis, remarkably, stood her ground.

“Is that supposed to scare me?”

“I’m trying to prove a point,” growled the abomination. “You’re outmatched. Go home.”

“Don't be stupid,” she scoffed. “You've already admitted Ed is in horrible danger, and now you want me to leave?”

“Look, lady! They won't die, no matter what you do. We can't.”

Greed’s earlier demeanor, with broad, cat-like grins and mocking words, had all but disappeared. His words almost sounded on the edge of desperation, panic, even. Riza wondered if it was homunculi that scared him, or something else, like the figure he referred to as Dante. The president butted in once again, as he was wont to do whenever he had something unexpected to say. Except, in this case, Riza knew exactly what he was about to say.

“Not necessarily.”

“How would you know, bastard?” Greed's distress was transitioning to anger, evident in his bared teeth and tensed shoulders.

“I know, because I've killed a homunculus before.” The president’s mouth tilted up in a lopsided grin, clearly enjoying the way he’d rendered the room speechless.

“Bull. Shit.”

“I've got five trustworthy men in this room that can testify, if you want. Though, I have to admit, I was unaware that he was an artificial human until now, seeing you exhibit the same capabilities. I was too busy fighting Wrath to examine him very closely.”

“Wrath,” said the bartender, rolling the sound over his tongue.

“Yes, that was what he called himself. However, most people knew him by a different name: King Bradley.”

The information wasn't common knowledge outside of the other members of the coup, and left the
rest of the room appropriately speechless.

“How?”

“Your regenerative abilities have a limit, like everything else. If you were decapitated a maximum of, oh, let’s say two hundred times, or if I were to, say, continuously set you on fire for several minutes, the power of the philosopher's stone would be overtaxed, and you would crumble into dust.”

“Except that's not possible. I can make myself harder than diamond, and just as inflammable.” Having found himself what he considered to be an airtight argument, he squared himself off, an impassable wall. It was at this moment Riza chose to examine Greed's motives. He seemed to be trying to keep pursuers away from Ed, likely at the teenager’s request. But why? According to Greed, the two had only met this morning. Of course, he could be lying, but...

Riza Hawkeye was not a stupid woman, merely one that played her cards close to her chest. And yet, she couldn't make heads or tails of the situation. For some unknown reason, the crown prince was being chased by artificial humans, but had another homunculus (who apparently had some sort of falling out with the figure known as Dante) working on his behalf. Additionally, he was (willingly or otherwise) cooperating with a thief in possession of a philosopher's stone. She was cut off in her musings by Miss Izumi, moving the negotiations further. She did so by dropping her weapon, clapping her hands, and placing them on his chest. Sig Curtis seemed to have no issue with this.

“Lady, you're attractive and all, but—”

A fist slammed into his solar plexus, only unlike every other attack, its effect was immediate. Radiating from the point of impact, the shell of his skin cracked and flaked away, exposing raw muscle fibers. He bent double, gasping.

“How did you even—”

“Your body is harder than a diamond, right? That's because it has a similar carbon structure. Once I understood, it was easy to manipulate that structure into something exceedingly brittle.”

“Son of a bitch,” he muttered.

“We're more than capable of taking on these supposedly unbeatable homunculi, if they're anything like you. Now, will you finally start cooperating?”

Greed ignored this in favor of turning to the chimaeras.

“Did any of you even try to help me?”

“Not even a little,” said Roa bluntly. The swordsman stepped forward, arms crossed over his chest.

“We agree with her. We want to help Ed, and having one good alchemist on our side could mean a lot. Besides, we've already got beef with Dante for everything she did to you. Might as well get revenge while we're at it.”

“Got beef?” The human-cow hybrid looked down at the man disdainfully at his choice of slang. The swordsman shrugged in apology, though his primary response was obviously amusement. The snake woman, still holding Riza’s gun, spoke up.

“Well, I had those reasons too, but I mostly wanted to see you get decked.”

“No! None of you are going up against Dante,” he growled, pointing aggressively. He received four
unimpressed looks in return.

“I mean it!” A note of desperation entered his voice, and Riza could practically smell his impending defeat in the air.

“What are you, scared?”

Greed narrowed his eyes at Roa.

“I know what you're doing, and it's not going to work.”

“I don't know, but it sounds an awful lot like you're scared, Mr. Greed.”

“Come on, Bido! You're supposed to be on my side here!”

“What do you think, Martel?”

“I think the big bad Mr. Greed is scared shitless by the thought of some saggy old witch.”

“I am not!”

“Yes you are!”

“No I'm not!”

“Then why won't you face her?”

“Because…because…”

“Damn, Greed. Who neutered you?”

That, apparently, was the last straw. Greed tensed, teeth bared, before throwing his head back with a theatrical groan. He dragged his hands over his face, petulantly whining in a way unfit for a grown man.

“Gah, fine! Let's just get this over with before happy hour.”

“Glad to hear you've still got a pair,” said Martel approvingly with a slap on the back. Miss Curtis cleared her throat loudly.

“I take it that we're finally on the same page here? Good. Now, spill it. Where's Ed?”

Greed turned to Martel and Bido, who suddenly had a very strange look on their faces. Riza inexplicably had a sense of foreboding.

“Well, about that…”

“We don't really know.”

“What.” Izumi Curtis’ right eyebrow was twitching in an alarming manner. After a panicked look from Bido, Martel explained.

“You see, we set 'em loose in a tunnel system that branches all over the city with doubling over the city. They could be just about anywhere by now, above or below ground.”

"Anywhere?"
This feels like it took a while, but wow! 50k words. From here on out, we hurtle towards our ending at breakneck speed. Well, maybe not that fast, but pretty fast. I’m actually pretty excited, despite not having written the incoming chapters.
Chapter Summary

The sun is on its way down, and Ling is hungry again, leading to an encounter with an old friend of the Elrics, which of course leads to an encounter with a not-so-old enemy of Ling's. He could've sworn Xerxes was a much larger city.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

By the time Ling finally stopped and pushed up a grate, they had been walking for several hours. Grunting under the weight, he grimaced at the sound of metal scraping over stone loudly. Luckily, he immediately noticed upon popping his head out that they were in an alley removed from a main street. Ling wasn't really sure how to justify climbing out the sewers in a bustling city in broad daylight. With a jump and a push of his hands, he was above ground once more. Ling took a moment to observe his surroundings. The alley provided a narrow view of the street, largely populated by people merely using it as a means to other destinations, and few food vendors. Disappointing. However, he could smell something sweet and spicy in the air. Stewed fruit with some sort of spice, if he had to hazard a guess. Cinnamon, of course, but perhaps with the addition of allspice? As much as he hated to admit it, he had more important things to worry about than food.

He looked down at Ed, still in the tunnel. Ling could tell just by looking that Ed was currently evaluating how best to use alchemy to get his vertically challenged self topside. Ling stuck his hand out, hoping to cut that off.

"Has anyone ever told you that localized lightning storms aren't exactly inconspicuous?"

Ed eyed the hand suspiciously.

"More than I'd like."

The glare remained, and Ed made no move to grab his hand. Ling got the distinct feeling the older teenager didn't like to rely on others. While admittedly understandable, it was hardly helpful in this situation. He sighed, a smile coming to his lips without him forcing it.

"Come on, I don't bite."

Ed rolled his eyes, but grasped the offered hand tightly. Like before, he was alarmingly light. Wordlessly, he insisted on helping Ling drag the grate back into place. The sun in the street stung at Ling's eyes in a surprisingly welcome manner, dispelling the remnants of darkness from his vision.

"It's about four in the afternoon, I'd say. We'll be losing daylight relatively soon," muttered Ed, tapping his flesh foot impatiently.

"Calm down. We've still got time."

Ed shot him an irritated look.

"I don't recognize this place. We could be on the on the other side of town, for all I know. What
about you, Al?”

“No, I don't see any landmarks,” said the younger brother, sounding mildly distressed.

“It's alright, we'll just—” Ling turned around to see Ed halfway up the street, without giving any indication of where he was going. For a guy with one leg, he was surprisingly quick. Ling cursed and set off after him, taking long strides to avoid running.

“Ed,” he said once he was close enough to catch his attention. The golden curtain of his hair didn't pause for even a moment, giving no indication he'd heard a thing. Ling reached out for his shoulder, only for Ed to harshly jerk forward out of his grasp.

“Ed!” Again, no response. That wasn't exactly unexpected, but Ling still didn't understand why.

“Seriously, what's wrong?”

Then, just as abruptly as he started running, Ed came to a stop. Ling almost fell over to avoid running into him, a spectacle that Ed thankfully wasn't paying attention to. The square was mostly empty, save for some children playing or cooling themselves by a large central fountain. Students released from school for the day, he assumed. Offhandedly, Ling noted that the majority of them had snowy hair and deep brown skin, lending credence to the theory that they were in the Ishvalan quarter.


At that, Ling examined the object of their attention more closely. The first thing he noticed was how ornate it was in comparison to the plain stone buildings around them. Around a short stone ziggurat, an enormous lion and a snake-like dragon were locked in fierce combat. Ling noted that they were the symbolic animals of Amestris and Xing, and wondered if it was a deliberate choice on the artist’s part, or rather a bit of unintentional social commentary. In a similarly baffling decision, the creator had decided to forgo the obvious conclusion of having water spout from the beasts’ mouths. Instead, clear water gushed from their battle wounds, where claws and teeth appeared to have torn stone flesh. An oddly macabre detail, in Ling's opinion. Atop the ziggurat was a statuesque ibex, its face proudly tilted to the heavens, untouched by the battle below. Between it's enormous spiraling horns rested a single symbol: the sun. Once he'd glanced at the frozen scene, Ling found he couldn't look away. The lion’s face was curled up in a snarl, top canines exposed in great, surprisingly lifelike detail. The dragon was paused mid-roar, though its fearsome look was somewhat tempered by the child astride its back, giggling to her friends below.

“You own this?”

“Own? I built it.”

“That explains some of the decorations,” muttered Ling. “Wait. I thought you…left when you were twelve. You made this back then?” Ling wasn't an alchemist, but he could recognize skilled craftsmanship when he saw it.

“Of course not, don't be stupid,” said Ed. Despite the content of his words, his voice was soft, distracted. Ling suspected he wasn't paying attention to him, focused on some memory instead.

“Ed did this when he was only nine,” said Al proudly. “I was there.”

“Oh. That's…” Bullshit. Impossible. Amazing. “…neat.”

“This is good,” said Ed, breaking his silence. “I know where we are now. Assuming they haven't
completely filled in the passage me and Al used to sneak out when we were kids, we're about ten minutes from a secret entrance. Let's go now.” He started walking, only for Al to viciously yank his hair with all his strength.

“Ow! What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Don't be stupid, brother. Stick to the plan, and wait until tonight.”

“But it's so close. Don't you want your body back?”

“Of course I do! But it's my body, and I say wait.”

“Fine,” said the elder brother moodily, and began to pace. “But what do we do now? Just sit on our hands?”

“Well, I know what I'm doing,” proclaimed Ling. “I'm starving.”

“We just ate at Greed's.”

“That was hours ago. I'm starting to feel faint. Tell me, do I look pale? I can feel the hole in my stomach growing with every passing minute…”

Ed rolled his eyes, but Ling was gratified by the smile on his lips.

“Well, make your peace with god, 'cause we're flat broke. No money for food or anything else.”

“Not for long!”

“Wh—”

“Just take a seat and watch,” he said with a wink. Ling had gotten very good at this during his travels, and his arrogance was well deserved, in his opinion. He scanned the square quickly for a victim. Almost immediately, his eyes landed on a man perusing a collection of pots and pans laid out on a vendor’s blanket alongside two other shoppers that were obviously unrelated. He sized him up quickly. Large, broad, and most likely, slow. He wore a brown leather jacket and a faded yellow headscarf, loosely wrapped in some semblance of shade.

Ling moved quickly, aiming for the space between the man and the other customers. Only, he purposefully brushed his side, jostling his arm enough to clearly notice and mistake for an accident without being overly obnoxious.

“Oops, sorry,” he said with a quick smile, his left hand reaching for the man's pocket, clever fingers teasing out the target’s wallet without him noticing a thing.

Or so Ling thought. It happened so fast, almost too fast for him to register, much less react to. One moment, money (and food, by extension) was in his hand. The next, his arm was in an iron grip, an enormous hand shackled about his wrist.

“Let's not overreact, now. It was an accident, and I did apologize.” Ling winced as the wallet, halfway retrieved from the man's pocket, fell to the dusty ground.

Abruptly, Ling's arm was wrenched directly upwards, forcing him onto the balls of his feet, mere inches from dangling off the ground. Incidentally, it brought him face to face with his poorly chosen target. If Ling had to describe the man in one word, it would be unamused. His face could've been carved from deep brown wood, if not for the enormous pale scar that discolored his features. Ling
couldn't discern his age, as his skin had few wrinkles, but his features were twisted in a stern expression that aged him. For a moment, he stared at the Xingese prince with uncomfortable intensity. Ling felt sweat gather on the back of his neck, completely unrelated to the heat. His piercing red eyes reminded him of something Ling couldn't possibly remember, but unsettled him greatly. Just as he looked as if he was about to speak, his entire expression changed.

His red eyes widened, mouth falling open ever so slightly. He looked as if he'd seen a ghost. With a bit of uncomfortable maneuvering, Ling managed to twist his head and shoulders around. He swore under his breath. At some point, Ed had come forward to get involved, and was currently a mere few feet away.

“Edward Elric.”

Ling froze. Had they really been recognized so quickly?

“Scar,” said a high voice. Ling was so caught up on the fact that they called the man “Scar” that he barely noticed that it was the possessed child’s toy that had done the talking. Scar looked only slightly more surprised by that turn of events.

“Alphonse?”

“And I'm Ling! Now that we've all been properly introduced, do you think that you could perhaps—ow!” Ling rubbed his arm, sitting in the dust where he'd been unceremoniously dropped. Scar moved forward to the brothers, and Ling was even more clueless as to what was going on inside his head. His right hand reached out, landing heavily on the blond’s head. A gesture of affection, perhaps. Or maybe he was simply verifying Ed's existence.

“I thought you were dead,” he said, soft and gravelly. “And you—I don't even know,” he sighed, presumably at Alphonse.

“It wasn't our choice.” Then: “A lot’s happened,” said Ed simply.

“Obviously,” said the man dryly. “What did you do with that automail you promised Winry you would take such good care of?”

Ed winced.

“Believe it or not, it got eaten. Wasn't exactly an avoidable situation either.”

“Let me guess. Short, bald, tattoo on his tongue?”

“How did you even—”

“I've been running into those two for a couple years now. I had a feeling they were connected to your disappearance, but I could never interrogate them.”

“Scar, why would you be running into them? They're dangerous,” said Al, a reproachful note entering his voice.

“What exactly have you been up to these past five years?”

Scar said nothing for a long moment, while Ling picked himself up.

“We can talk about it in private. Follow me.” Scar turned around, his face twisted in a grimace after realizing Ling had never left. He pointed rudely.
“Is he involved at all?”

“I owe him, and he's sticking around to collect.”

“Hm. Unfortunate,” said the man, and started walking. Ed followed at his side.

“That wasn't a ‘no’, ” he said, waving Ling forward. The prince obeyed, but not without a horrible feeling of dread. They walked in silence for a few minutes. Ling noted that as they reached the edge of the city, the stone buildings became smaller, less dense. They had entered the slums of Xerxes. Though they probably had no running water, and were forced to rely on public baths, latrines, and wells, Ling couldn't help but think that it was better than Central. There, the impoverished were relegated to living in garbage, with even poorer conditions.

“You haven't grown much,” stated Scar, matter-of-fact.

“And you're still terrible at small talk.”

“Maybe. You stick out, dressed like that. Children your age tend to at least wear shoes.”

“I'm not a child,” said Ed indignantly.

“Which only makes it worse.”

“It's not like I've had much of a choice in clothes these past five years.”

“No,” grunted Scar, a strange look on his face. “Guess not.” There was a loaded silence. “We can find something for you at the house.”

“You have a house now? I always thought you were pretty adamant against that.”

Scar sent Ed a sharp look.

“I never said it was my house.”

And with that ominous comment, they turned the corner. At the end of the street, there was a lone wooden house. Beyond it, only desert. The coat of paint was faded and scratched after years of being periodically blasted with sand, though the rest of it was in good condition. Out front was a sign on a post, simply emblazoned with the words “Rockbell Automail”. The intense feeling of foreboding from before increased exponentially.

“Shit.”

Ed turned around, only for Scar to shoot out and grab his arm. He dragged Ed up the street, his heels creating two parallel lines in the dust.

“You're getting your automail replaced, and that's final.”

“Don't you want to see Winry again, brother?”

“Of course I miss her, but you know what's going to happen, don't you? She's gonna cry and ask a bunch of questions she sure as shit isn't gonna like the answers to and I'm gonna feel like shit and—aw, fuck.”

Scar mounted the porch steps, dragging Ed behind with some difficulty. He sighed, nodding his head towards the door.
“You. Ring the doorbell.”

And since he couldn't muster up a good enough reason not to, Ling obeyed.

“Coming,” called a muffled female voice from indoors, followed by what sounded like six horses running down a flight of creaky stairs. “I'll be there in just a second!” Something large and metal fell over, accompanied by some frantic cursing. Suddenly, the door was wrenched open, and Ling was face to face with Winry Rockbell for the second time that day.

There was a moment of silence, in which neither party fully believed their eyes. That moment ended all too soon, in Ling's opinion. Winry launched out of the doorway, a snarl on her face. With both the element of surprise and Ling's sudden freeze, she landed a solid hit to his temple that made him stagger backwards, seeing stars.

“What the hell are you playing at?”

Ling's only response was long groan.

“Winry, what the hell? Do you just attack everyone on sight now?”

Ed's hand was on his back, steadying him. For some reason, Ling found himself embarrassed that the silk of his jacket was damp with sweat. Then, his vision was occupied by tears welling up in the girl's eyes, shock giving way to disbeliefing joy. In retrospect, it shouldn't have been that surprising that she would grab Ling by the face, shove him away, and wrap Ed in a hug.

“You're alive! Holy shit, you're alive!”

“I won't be for much longer if you keep me in this death grip,” he wheezed, but hugged back all the same.

“Hi, Winry!”

She screamed and jumped backwards, which Ling supposed was not an entirely unjustified reaction to an inanimate object speaking with the voice of her childhood friend.

“Ai?”

“Sorry for scaring you,” said the younger brother, rubbing the back of the helmet that was, for all intents and purposes, his head.

“No, no, don't worry about it, I'm adjusted now. It's just...how the fuck does this sort of thing even happen?”

“First of all, I'd rather not have this conversation on your front porch,” said Scar, casting his eyes about in a way that seemed almost paranoid. “Second of all, Ed needs you to conduct repairs.”

For the first time, Winry seemed to take notice of the arm and leg lying stiff at Ed's side. Ed smiled, though it was a bit more of a cringe, in Ling's opinion.

“Well, I wouldn't say I need repairs, exactly.”

“No, just an entirely new set of automail, after you lost the last ones! At least tell me you didn't sell them, Ed. I don't think my heart could take it.”

“Well. No...I didn't sell it, exactly.”
Winry must've seen something solemn in his eyes, because her excitement was quickly toned down as she held the door open for them.

“I didn't know that the Rockbells opened another location,” he then said, smiling. Winry took that smile and returned it tenfold.

“Yep. And it was all my idea! This way, I don't have to share a workshop with my parents.”

“Geez, you're just as much of a spoiled gearhead as ever,” he said, earning a glare from his friend. Ling examined a long piece of metal leaned against the stairs, when a question occurred to him.

“Why set up here? You're practically in the desert.” He reached out to inspect the object further, only for Scar to immediately slap his hand away.

“The majority of Ishvalan candidates for automail and prosthetics live in this neighborhood,” said the towering man.

“She's got the market cornered,” said Ling, understanding.

“I can't afford to put high-end automail out completely for free, but I do get enough donations and business the rest of the time to offer a reduced rate.”

“Winry, that's amazing,” said Ed.

Not as amazing as becoming the divine ruler of Xing, thought Ling, giving in to some bitter feeling he refused to identify.

There was a weird, sniffling noise, interspersed with little choked gasps echoing around a tiny metal space..

“Al, what are you…”

“Don't worry, he's just crying.”

Winry shot Ed a look that was very much worried.

“Al, what's wrong?”

“N-nothing! I'm just,” Alphonse interrupted himself with a sob, “so proud!”

“Okay,” said Ling cautiously. “But why is he crying like that?”

“I, I, I don't have tear ducts or anything, so—” here, Al made an odd honking noise, like he was trying to suck air through a congested nose, followed by a hiccup. “Frankly, I'm just as confused as you are,” he said, voice fading back to normal.

A few scant miles away, Van Hohenheim looked up from the book on noble gas alchemy he was reading out loud. A quiet sobbing came from the bed he sat by, but the king did not react much. He had already learned the hard way that these occurrences were only false alarms, and not signs of consciousness. Still, some masochistic, stubborn, and foolish part of him observed the scene with hope in his chest.

Alphonse Elric, his youngest son, lay prone in his bed. Five years ago, he had seemed so small and fragile, taking up only a third of its length. Now, his feet approached the edge. The room was sunny and the window was open, with a fan lazily circulating air overhead. The boy could have been mistaken for sleeping in his pale blue pajamas, if it weren't for the array of equipment surrounding
him. That, and the tears streaming down his temples, soaking into his neatly trimmed golden hair.

Though Hohenheim knew it would only be fruitless to ask himself the question, he often wondered what his son dreamed about. What was so sad, it made him cry like that in his sleep? It was a painful reminder that his son was not only not brain dead, but was somehow suffering, without any hope of being comforted. It had almost destroyed Trisha and Hohenheim, losing both children in one night. Ed and Al were both undoubtedly alive, yet equally unreachable, wherever they were suffering.

And yet, the look Alphonse had on his face as he cried this time wasn't sadness or frustration. No, it was a smile, wavering at the edges, but a smile all the same.

Chapter End Notes

Shorter chapter, but I'm excited for the next action scene I'll be writing in the next chapter or the one after, because it's going to be A Lot.
Winry is happy her best friend is alive. It doesn't change that losing him hurt like a son of a bitch, though. That hurt doesn't just disappear.

Ed's plan for retrieving Al's body, though perhaps not the most fleshed-out, had started with at least one rule: don't get other people involved. Frankly, Ed had been doing a piss-poor job of sticking to that prerogative. First, he humiliated a squad of Amestrian soldiers and a State Alchemist, attracting a team of avid pursuers. Next had been the fiasco at The Devil's Nest. The latest: a chance meeting with Scar, followed by being dragged to Winry's front porch.

All these people could be divided into two groups. Those attempting to stop them, and those that could be collateral damage when Dante caught up with Ed, sooner or later.

Despite that, he really had missed Winry. Her mile-a-minute brain and lack of filter were as familiar and comforting as always. They were in her workshop/office as she took his measurements, with Scar standing by Ling to make sure he didn't touch anything.

"Woah. Looks like we're pretty much the same height, now that you've finally caught up with me," she said, holding up the measuring tape. She smiled, knowing full well the comment would get under his skin. And yet, it wasn't so bad. In a weird way, he was almost glad that she teased him like always.

"Not my fault you're some sort of freakish Amazon," he muttered, for the sake of appearances.

"Sure I am. Well, we're in luck. I took possible growth into account for the automail I've been making for you the past five years, so I made it adjustable." She rolled her stool away from the table to her desk, rifling through her papers for diagrams and corresponding limbs. Ed found himself speechless, if only for a moment.

"You…why would you keep making automail for me after—"

Winry cut him off with a look that plainly told Ed she thought he was being tremendously stupid, before turning back around.

"I had a feeling you would show up, sooner or later. And I was right, wasn't I? Here you are, five years later, with your arms and legs either bruised up or missing, and—" Winry choked herself off abruptly, her smile cracking down the middle.

"Winry…?"

She turned around, the schematics for Ed's ports in hand. She swiped at her wet eyes, and the smile she directed at him was watery and rueful.

"Well, whatever. I was right, and that's what matters. Now, how do I take these poorly designed
hunks of crap out of my ports?" Ed decided to take the awkward segue for what it was, and move onto a subject that was far more comfortable.

“You push this catch here, then twist,” he said, indicating the important places. With a heavy click of the internal mechanisms, Ed was abruptly down a leg. For a second, he felt naked, before realizing this was Winry, and she’d seen him in far worse condition. Ling was there, but he wasn't staring, instead engrossed in conversation with Al. Judging by the tiny trickle of drool at the side of his mouth, it was about Ling being hungry. More importantly, Envy wasn't there at all. Without any further instruction, Winry removed his arm as well, and promptly began sticking her nose in his ports.

“These are in pretty good condition,” she said, so surprised it made Ed indignant. “At least you haven't been swimming much.”

“We're in the middle of a desert, Winry. Where do you think I'd be swimming?”

Winry jerked her shoulders in an agitated shrug.

“How should I know? For all I know, you could've been running halfway around the world all this time.” Despite obvious attempts otherwise, her voice held a distinct note of accusation, hurt.

Did Winry think that he'd run away from home, from Al's body? It stung, that his friend would even suspect that of him. But then, hadn't part of it been his fault? He'd wasted so much time, too weak to properly escape. He felt the shame he tried to keep from interfering in his life flood his chest, drowning him from the inside.

“If I were you, I wouldn't make so many assumptions.”

Ling had turned his quiet stare and voice on Winry. It was the same as when he talked to Envy: his tone was deceptively light, while every word was its own warning. Ed wasn't sure how he felt about that voice being directed at Winry, especially since it was clear the two knew each other somehow, which was just plain weird. Winry looked at Ed, then away in remorse.

“You're right. The past isn't what's important right now—wait a minute, why the hell am I listening to you?”

Ling gave her a wide grin and a shrug.

“Butt out, asshole. I still haven't forgiven you for dropping a painting on me.”

“Seriously, how do you two know each other?”

“You heard the mechanic, Ed. The past isn't important right now.”

“You know damn well I wasn't talking about you,” hissed the mechanic.

“So, uh, Winry…” Ed cleared his throat awkwardly. “Are my ports in good enough shape to use as is?”

“Surprisingly, yeah.” Winry reached under the table and retrieved a leather case almost half her size. The metal latches made satisfying thunking noises when thrown open, lid lifted up to reveal two shiny limbs resting on foam inserts.

“Woah.”
“Right?” Winry didn't bother to disguise her pride. “I've been experimenting with ceramic parts, like the ones used in car brakes, to avoid overheating. These, however, are carbon fiber. Tough, light, and weather resistant. It's perfect for the more active automail user. I took inspiration from northern cold weather automail used out west. Say what you want about the Amestrian army, they know their automail. Additionally, I've been taking notes from other mechanics on how to cut down on sand particles, because so many of my new clients live closer to the desert. I hate to say it, but some of the Amestrians that came here from Rush Valley really know their stuff. My friend Paninya, she has these legs that are so simple and elegant, except they have rocket launchers. Rocket launchers!” She shook her head in amazement.

“Sounds like someone's got a crush,” he teased, because it's his job. True to form, Winry flushed.

“Do not!”

“You've at least got the hots for her automail, then.”

“I'm not letting you distract me. Now hold still or I'll hit you with a wrench.”

“Yes, Ma'am.”

She lined the leg up with his port. The two parts slid together with a satisfying click, as if perfectly made for each other. Of course, that was exactly the case.

“Like a glove,” said Winry, well satisfied. “Now, you know the drill.” Her finger ran down his artificial thigh, before her fingernail caught on an almost completely imperceptible seam, before flipping open a small panel. Inside was nothing but a small knob that made Ed grit his teeth in dread.

“Hey, just give me a sec—”

For one embarrassing second, Ed's mouth was open in a scream, strangled by the seizing muscles of his body before he clenched his jaw shut. Of course, his shame was hard to focus on with the spears of electric torture radiating from his stump. It was a unique form of pain, separated from and worse than any cut, stab, bruise, break, or burn. It was in his skin, his bones, the very fibers of his muscles. It shot along his nerves, simultaneously flaying him from the inside and making his stomach roil with nausea.

Then, after what was only a moment, but certainly felt like minutes, the pain subsided to a sharp ache.

“What the hell did you do to him?”

That was Ling's voice. Ed forced his eyelids open to see the prince on his feet, teeth bared and stance threatening. It was a complete contrast to his normal easygoing manner. Was he really mad at Winry for hurting Ed? It seemed unlikely, but….

“She's just reconnecting the nerves,” he croaked out. “It’s normal.” Ling's face softened, and as a result Scar dropped the right hand poised to intervene. Winry, however, did not relax.

“Like hell it is. You haven't reacted like that since you were a kid,” she said, brow furrowed.

“Jeez, rub it in my face a bit more, why don't you?”

“Ed,” she said, her voice warning him to be serious. “How long has it been since you lost your automail?”
Ed winced, but answered honestly. Winry breathed out a frustrated curse.

“I'm such an idiot. If you let the nerves go unconnected all this time, especially if you've been taking care of the port, it's going to be even worse than the first time the limbs were attached.”

“It's not as if you can do anything about it,” said Ed stubbornly. He was right, though. The feedback from the connected nerves was essential to automail, and it would be unwise to suppress the pain, even if it were possible.

“What happened to you, Ed?”

“It's not as if you can do anything about it now,” he repeated, not meeting her eyes. Winry sighed, and retrieved the arm from the case, cradling it with almost parental care. Ed felt a pang of something bittersweet in his chest. His best friend had grown up into the fantastic mechanic she'd always wanted to be, but he'd missed it all.

“I figured you would say something like that.” She fit the arm into place and flicked open the panel. “Ready?”

“Not real—fuck! Fucking piece of shit bastard cunt cactus dildo shit eater, why the hell didn't you warn me first?”

“Anticipation just makes it worse,” said Winry with a smile that did appear to be genuinely apologetic. Ling raised a hand to his mouth, faux-scandalized.

“What a filthy mouth. Is that really appropriate for royalty?”

Ed immediately flipped him off, with his right hand. The satisfaction he got from seeing his fingers curl so fluidly surprised him, and he felt himself grin wildly. It almost felt as good as if the original limbs had been returned to him. The stump around his port still ached, but the pain was negligible in his excitement. His dangling feet hit the floor, artificial one first.

“How do you feel, brother?”

“Like myself,” he said, chuckling a little breathlessly. “You're next, Al.”

“That was quick,” commented Winry. “You know the drill. Keep testing it out.”

Ed rose onto the toes of just his automail foot, arms thrown out for balance. His leg was steady under him, bearing his weight perfectly. His smile faded into something a bit more serious as he turned to Scar.

“Now,” he began, “It's time we had a talk.”

“Agreed,” said the man, then turned and walked from the room. Ed and the others quickly followed him to the kitchen, where the man was busy making himself tea, with the ease that came from familiarity with his surroundings. He'd visited Winry before. That was good. Scar became reckless when in solitude, with only his impulsive ideas to guide him. Ed could tell that the past five years had definitely been marked by those sorts of decisions.

“You're holding yourself weirdly. You were injured,” he said, a statement rather than a question. Scar almost smiled.

“Such a perceptive kid,” he muttered. He raised the hem of his shirt, revealing a swath of bandages across his ribs with a rust-colored bloom in the center. Al and Winry inhaled sharply. He let the
“How?”

“A gift from a pair of creatures that have been wandering Xerxes for the past five years, killing indiscriminately. They call themselves—”


“It’s been five years, and I’ve yet to find any real clue to their origin, allegiances, or motives. Shortly before your disappearance, bodies began to turn up with pieces bitten out of them, or cut to ribbons. I’ve been doing all I can to predict where they’ll strike and drive them off ever since, but…” He gave a frustrated sigh.

“If you’re looking for a motive, you won’t find one. They do this because they’re bored. Bored and hungry, even if it won’t satisfy them. They tear people and things apart because they like the way it feels. They won’t feel pain, fatigue, or even satisfaction.”

“Are you suggesting I should just ignore them, let them do as they please with the people that slip between the cracks?”

“Of course not, it's just,” he broke off, shook his head. “It's amazing that you're still alive. You've been doing this for the past, what, four years?”

“I keep an eye on the city besides the homunculi. Although they're the most dangerous in the city, it's debatable whether they're the most harmful.”

“I wonder what your definition of “keeping an eye on it” is.”

“The way he pushes himself, it's like he's angling to collect more metal parts than you,” lamented Winry, brows furrowed. “I don't even know the half of what he gets into these days.”

“He's a superhero,” said Ling, an almost childlike delight on his face. Ed laughed, and blamed exposure to western comic books.

“He's a vigilante,” corrected Al disapprovingly.

“Tell us more,” demanded Ling, though the Ishvalan ignored him. Ed smiled at the man, just a little.

“Old habits die hard?”

“I'm too old to change my ways.” Ed frowned, knowing for a fact that Scar had yet to bid his thirties farewell.

“If you're that elderly, you're too old to be running around getting into trouble and starting fights with thieves, murderers, and other creeps,” said Winry with a huff. “You know the elders at the monastery would take you back, no questions asked. It could be good for you.”

Scar sighed, but didn't get upset at all, so Ed assumed they'd had this discussion before.

“I left the monastery for a reason, Winry. Our differences are too great. Besides, I already took the teaching job. Isn't that enough?”

“Teaching?” If the tea was finished and in front of Ed, he would've spit it out in shock.

“You?” Al was obviously in a similar state. Scar looked vaguely embarrassed, and turned around to
pour the hot water over the tea bags.

“My brother was one of the only practitioners of Ishvalan alchemy in the world. He wouldn't—I don't want his work to disappear with time,” he said, as if he had to justify his actions.

“I understand. It's just hard to imagine you teaching alchemy,” said Alphonse.

“It involves a lot of talking at length, which isn't exactly your forte.”

“Ed!”

“He relies pretty heavily on demonstration,” chimed in Winry.

“Who cares about that? Tell us about fighting crime.” Scar leveled a stare at Lin that surprisingly didn't make him shrink at all.

“What age group?” Clearly, Al had no intention of letting go of the subject. Scar grunted and set a mug in front of Ed.

“Brats,” he said, which could mean anyone younger than him. Ed couldn't help it, he burst out laughing. Scar gave him a silent look before opening the fridge and pulling out a bottle of milk. Ed recoiled, pulling his tea close to his chest to protect it from dairy products.

“Get that shit out of my face,” he hissed like a cat being dunked in water. Scar only continued to make direct eye contact as he placed it in front of him. Ed scowled into his tea, which was only a degree away from boiling.

“I take it you don't want this?” Ling didn't even wait for an answer before stretching one arm over the table, unscrewing the lid, and chugging straight from the bottle. Ed felt his stomach churn at the sight.

“What the hell is wrong with you? Don't drink from the bottle,” said Winry, swatting Ling upside the head. This appeared to bother him not at all, which was kind of impressive. It hadn't exactly looked as if Winry was pulling her punches.

“Hungry,” he whined, before continuing to drink.

“That's no excuse to be disgusting! I just bought that, too.”

“Ugh. I think I'm gonna be sick. Winry, where's the bathroom?”

“Door to the right of the stairs.”

“Thanks.” Ed left without further preamble. Though he wasn't nearly as nauseous as he dramatically claimed, he still needed to use the bathroom. Though the trip through the house was short, Ed relished every perfectly articulated step he took. A minute later, he emerged from the closet-like room, feeling slightly lighter. He stepped forward to make his way back to the kitchen, when he saw a large shape at the corner of his eye. There, upon the third stair, sat his mother, looking as beautiful as ever.
Sorry for the doubled wait time, but I promise I have a good excuse. I spent the past week in the Appalachian mountains fixing houses with a local nonprofit, and didn't have internet access (of course). I somehow ended up treating a dog for mange, having a kitten named in my honor, and chasing middle schoolers with a crowbar too, but that's neither here nor there. Point is, I had a great time, and I'm ready to bust out the rest of this story.
“Ed,” she said, voice like warm honey. She stood, unfolding her limbs gracefully. Ed stood stock-still, eyes wide. She looked just as she had five years ago, the last time he saw her. He'd refused to kiss her cheek before going to bed, citing something about being twelve years old and practically an adult. His chest tightened painfully, and he could not move despite himself. She stepped forward, arms spread out in invitation for an embrace.

“Won't you come here and give me a hug, baby? It's been so long.” She smiled, as gentle as ever, and Ed felt heat prickle the backs of his eyes. A part of him wanted to collapse into his mother's arms and cry on her shoulder for all the years he'd missed her, for the entire world that had continued moving and left him and Al in the lurch.

Only, this wasn't his mother.

“You take that off right now, you sick son of a bitch.”

Trisha Elric’s features twisted in an expression of unrestricted hatred, rendering her almost unrecognizable. Ed grit his teeth, and forced himself to stand his ground, though it was hardly advisable. Soon, that face melted into one almost as familiar as his mother's, though infinitely more hated.

“Goddamnit, pipsqueak! You could've made this easy on us. If you had just come over here, I could've taken you out gently.”

“Sure you would've.”

“It's not too late, either. I could take you back now, no consequences. No one would have to know. Nobody has to get hurt, as long as you come over here now.” There was that pleading tone again, so foreign in Envy's voice.

“Not fucking likely,” bit out the alchemist. Then he realized something. “Wait, you didn't tell Dante and the others about this?”

“Of course not. It'd be my ass on the line if she found out,” scoffed Envy, as if Ed was the one being an idiot. The prince grinned wide, the momentary panic in his chest becoming manageable.

“So, you're saying I only need to take you out of the equation, and I'll be home free?”

Envy tilted his head in confusion.

“Huh? I guess, but it's not like you can get the drop on me this—”
Envy was interrupted by the spike punching through his chest that shot from the ground at Ed's feet. Envy writhed on the improvised spear, the energy that normally healed him crackling somewhat uselessly at the edges of the obstruction. The homunculus was breathless and rasping, so Ed assumed he'd skewered a lung.

“Son of a bitch...” Envy began to push himself off the spike, only for an enormous, alchemically-controlled fist to immediately do the job for him. The force of the punch sent him directly through the door into the street, where he bounced once on the dirty pavement. Ed mentally apologized to Winry before following. He stood in the street and ostentatiously cracked the knuckles of his left hand.

“You and me have never been in a fair fight. That changes now.” He clapped, and transmuted the outer guard plate on his arm into a wickedly spiked set of brass knuckles. Though, if he could pull off what he'd planned in theory for the past three years, he might not really need the weapon. Still, that was a very big if.

“You'll wish I'd killed you by the end of this!” Envy charged forward, unnaturally quick. Despite that light frame, Ed knew he hit with the force of a truck. He theorized that Envy’s body was incredibly dense, though how that related to his shape changing ability was unknown. It wasn't entirely relevant, except for the fact that his high mass was easy to manipulate using Teacher's method of hand to hand combat. He struck low, knocking out his legs, using the homunculi’s forward momentum to drive his armed fist into Envy's gut. The thing doubled over, but quickly rolled into a crouch as he recovered. Envy was breathing heavily as his body attempted to heal, and Ed only felt his confidence that he could beat the homunculus into submission rise.

His opponent switched tactics and approached with the stance of a boxer, aiming swift, concise jabs at Ed's face. Ed found himself on the defensive, blood and adrenaline pulsing in his ears. He was rusty when it came to fighting with four limbs, but it was coming back to him quickly. He blocked or deflected the force of the blows, expending minimal energy as he did so. However, Envy managed to hit below his guard, punching a kidney. Ed gasped and tensed out of pain, which was exactly the opening Envy needed. One cruel hand clamped around the back of his neck, while the other ruthlessly slammed into his abdomen again and again. It was a favored technique of Envy's, as it inflicted great amounts of pain, but not slow-healing bone trauma. However, Envy had not taken into account Ed's automail, as he had never faced him at full capacity.

Ed’s leg came up, his knee cracking at least two ribs. A similarly brutal right hook to the jaw sent Envy sprawling in the dirt. When the homunculus wiped off the blood and looked up at Ed, his face was not his own, if it ever was.

“Ed,” whispered a voice that had wished him goodnight thousands of times, accompanied by a gentle kiss on his forehead. Without hesitation, he kicked the facsimile of his mother in the abdomen. The force of the kick lifted Envy off the ground, sending him bouncing and rolling in the street. When he struggled to his feet, he switched tactics.

“Brother?” Al’s golden eyes, so unusual and so similar to his own, stared up at him, guileless and afraid. Afraid of Ed. That fear, feigned as it was, was immediately justified when the first thing Ed did was deck his little brother's eleven-year-old image. Envy’s head snapped back, and returned with a pale golden beard and a pair of rectangular spectacles in the center of his kindly, mature face. Again, his father's likeness was attacked with the strongest uppercut Ed could muster. Envy staggered backwards, spitting blood from a bitten cheek or loosened tooth.

“Jesus, pipsqueak. You're absolutely heartless. You punched your baby brother's lights out, for Christ’s sake.”

“You've been showing me those faces for half a decade now, trying to fuck with me. They've lost
their effectiveness.”

“Really? Then let's see how you feel about your knight in shining armor.”

Nothing could've prepared Ed for the sight of Ling, smiling so easily. His wide shoulders were relaxed, palms up in a gesture of harmlessness. Ed froze, mid-lunge.

“Ed, I'm hungrryyyy,” whined Ling’s voice, down to the timbre and inflection. It was so unnerving, yet so familiar, it set his teeth on edge.

“Pretty good, right?” He grinned, obviously pleased by Ed's reaction.

“Stop it.” The authority in his voice was undermined by how it shook. Envy/Ling advanced, and Ed could barely force his body to take an unsteady step backwards.

“Why should I? You obviously prefer this look to the original model, though I can't imagine why. I don't think your dashing prince has showered in weeks.”

Ed sent another spike upwards, but his concentration was shot. His aim was off, and the stone weapon merely carved a shallow red line on Ling’s, no, Envy's cheek. Envy didn't react, didn't stop his leisurely advance. His smile became something perverse and sadistic, unlike anything he'd ever seen from Ling.

“Wow, pipsqueak. I thought this relationship had gotten stale, but it turns out we've barely scratched the surface!”

“I told you to fucking stop it!” But Envy was undeterred.

“You and me are going to have so much fun togeth-”

Envy was interrupted by a knife handle sprouting from between Ling’s eyes. The homunculus sank to his knees before face planting in the dirt, his illusion thankfully disintegrating. Yet, the image of Ling, instantly killed by a knife to the head, was already preserved in his memory, along with every fucked up thing Envy had ever shown him. He spun around, revealing the figures running from Winry’s house. At the front was Ling, concern and anger and determination all over his face, hand poised to throw another deadly knife. He looked so human Ed could cry.

But he didn't, because he still had his dignity.

But when Ling rushed over, hands up indecisively as if to check Ed for injury before ultimately letting them drop, it was a near thing. For some reason, he felt the urge to hug Ling like it was the end of the goddamn world.

“What the fuck did you just kill on my front porch?”

“Brother! Are you hurt?” Ed couldn't decide whether he was relieved to see Alphonse or angry he'd been taken into danger, on Scar’s shoulder.

“There are more than two homunculi?”

“Did I kill him?”

Ed decided to answer each question succinctly.

“Homunculus, I’m not hurt, there’s three hostile ones, and no, he doesn't die that easy.” With that, Ed clapped his hands and ran forward to Envy's corpse, only for a set of strong arms to wrap about his
“Ling! What the hell are you doing? I had this under control.”

With some effort, the prince maintained a firm hold on a struggling Ed over his shoulder while pointing behind him.

“Are you trying to tell me you had that under control?” Ling’s normally mild tone was strained by panic and distress.

Envy's body was pulsing erratically, his flesh bubbling, expanding and contracting but growing all the same. At the same time, he was turning green, extra limbs sprouting from his sides. It was different from his usual shape-shifting, in that it was…messier. Less choreographed. That alone filled Ed with dread. Envy's earlier attacks had been unnerving, but expected. This, whatever it was, was new. Unpredictable, and terrifying.

“Winry! Get back in the house!”

“Ed, what's going on?” The normally unshakable Winry was lost, looking about in confusion and fear. And yet, she wasn't running, because she was still Winry, no matter the situation. Ed would feel better if she was putting as much space between her and Envy as possible, but since he could definitely relate to the feeling of being horribly confused, he tried to explain as briefly as possible.

“He's our jailer. We escaped this morning, but he followed us, and we led him right to your house,” he said bitterly. They'd been so fucking stupid, to think they had at least twelve hours until Envy found them. This was the nightmare scenario, really. He just needed Teacher and his parents to show up to get hurt, and the situation would be complete.

“He was your jailer,” said Winry firmly. “Scar?” The man nodded and pulled off his jacket, revealing the tattoo that had never failed to fascinate Ed. And on the left, a new array, one Ed had only ever seen rendered in two dimensional form, in Scar's brother's notes. Ling drew his sword, a wickedly sharp smile that gleamed in the dying light.

The thing was moving again, despite being half-formed. It struggled to move, growing forelimbs almost unable to hold the weight of overflowing flesh. Envy's clothing melted away, absorbed into the new form. Ed took the sight in pieces, fractured and disjointed, unable or unwilling to take the full picture in at once. The flattened, dog-like shape of the head, contradicting square, dull teeth. The thick, hairless tail. The eight limbs, bulging with both muscle and veins and tipped with stubby-fingered hands. The greasy green-black mane, a reminder of the form Envy usually took. As big as a horse, a truck, then a house, looking down at them with rage and sick delight in its horrible eyes. And yet, the worst thing by far was the faces. Moaning, twisting, barely recognizable as human. They randomly covered Envy, pushing out of the surface of his skin before sinking back into his body, quietly wailing as they did. As if trying to break free of their prison, only to lose strength and fall back.

“Brother, what are those?”

Ed swallowed, tried to keep his voice calm, detached. A safe counterweight to Al's fear.

“Homunculi are formed from raw philosopher's stones. Philosopher's stones are comprised mainly of…”

“Human souls,” finished Ling quietly. His eyes were fixed on Ed's hip, where the philosopher's stone he so desperately needed lay. All the human lives, trapped in eternal agony. It was one thing to
speculate, make conjecture about the nature of the stone, and another to see it confirmed in horrifying
detail. He wondered if Ling would still want it if they survived this. Probably. Desperation on behalf
of one’s family was funny like that, Ed knew from experience. Well, maybe ‘funny’ wasn't exactly
the right word.

“An abomination,” muttered Scar, disgusted by the four hundred years of suffering encapsulated in
one being. Ed almost physically winced. In some ways, he was like Envy. Brought into the world
bonded to an act of violence they had not personally committed, yet continued just by existing. As
far as Ed could tell, their original purpose had simply been to prove it could be done. A selfish
curiosity on the behalf of his father, of Dante. In some ways, he was just as disgusting as Envy. The
same screaming on the homunculi’s back was somewhere in Ed, in a place he'd always ignored.
What would Scar do if he knew?

“Brother,” said Al, warning, calming. It was almost a form of telepathy, the way the underlying
message of *you're not a monster, stop thinking about it* came through loud and clear.

It worked, a little. Or perhaps it was Envy's growth stopping, him reaching what Ed suspected to be
his ‘true form’ that distracted him.

“Ah, I can't tell you how good it feels to stretch out, pipsqueak.”

Envy's voice was worse than anything Ed could imagine. Thousands of human voices layered atop
each other, coming together to reverberate in their ears. Ed felt the urge to grab Al and run, as fast as
he could. But he didn't, he couldn't.

“I'll tell you what, beansprout. Since I'm already out and about, I might as well go have a little stroll
through town before I take you back. Meet some new people, maybe grab a bite to eat.” If Envy's
voice was disturbing, his laughter was nauseating. Out of sync, disjointed, cruel. One could hear the
children, higher voices rising above the rest. They were so unnaturally cruel, co-opted by Envy's
consciousness for mocking them. Ed's stomach roiled like a pot of boiling water, but oddly enough,
felt a sense of clarity. He knew what he needed to do, and had a half-formed sense of how to do it.
Step one: demoralizing the enemy.

“Shove it up your ass, you stupid fucking lizard!”

Dozens of gleaming purple eyes rolled in their deformed sockets.

“Real mature, pipsqueak. I don't know what I expected from a little kid, though.”

“Alright, that's it!” Ed lunged forward, only for a thick leg to take him out at the knees, knocking him
flat on his ass. Dazed, Ed watched as Scar took his place, throwing Al behind him to Winry.

The Ishvalan ran forward, large body held low to the ground. The fingers of his left hand grazed the
ground, rearranging the grains of sand into a solid stone ramp under his feet, never slowing his pace.
Ed was floored by Scar using the creation array so fluidly, but terror and rage overrode how
impressed he was the second Scar used the last-minute construction to launch himself atop Envy's
head, grabbing at the oily mane to keep his balance.

“Aww, that's adorab-”

That was as far as Envy got before Scar shoved his hand into his largest eye, and the only sounds he
was making anymore were deep, bellowing screams of agony. That was before Scar used his
alchemy, and his cries became earth-shaking. Blood actually propelled out of the eye socket along
with gel-like fluid, which might actually be the grossest thing Ed's ever seen, and Scar had his *entire*
Still, there was no time to be disgusted/impressed. He needed to begin step two: organization of assets. Preferably within the next two seconds. He turned to Ling, who seemed to be taking this whole scenario as well as one could expect. They locked eyes, and his were more pissed than scared, so Ed took that as a good sign.

“You help Scar, keep the distraction going. I'll take care of Envy.”

Ling looked as if he wanted to contest that, but didn't, because he was well aware of the time-sensitive nature of their situation, as well as the precarious position Scar had managed to get himself into. He sighed, but grinned at Ed.

“And to think, my last meal would be a gallon of milk,” he said, sounding not at all resigned to his fate. More...excited than anything. Determined.

Ed knew there was something he liked about Ling.

Now, step three: launching an offensive. They both ran forward, just in time. Envy shook his head once more, finally dislodging Scar (and half his entire right arm, holy shit) with a screech of pain. While Scar regained his bearings (and shook ocular goop off his fingers), Ed and Ling approached from the freshly created blind spot. Envy was too busy cursing hard enough to make the paint on Winry's house peel to keep track of where the other humans had gone. Winry had already taken Al and torn off down the street, warning arriving concerned citizens to stay the fuck away. Only she probably said it differently, because Winry could have a filter when the situation required it.

With a graceful flash of his blade, Ling lopped off one of Envy's forelimbs, only to have to run like hell to avoid being crushed by the falling arm. It fell to the ground with a crash, slowly disintegrating. Thick arterial blood sprayed out, staining the desert sand. Envy rose up on his hind limbs, writhing in confusion and pain and confusion until his eyes (healing or otherwise) landed on Ling.

“Oh, come on. Why are you even still here?” Confused, frustrated, angry, and hateful as it was, the question was rhetorical. And yet, the second Ed sent a spike up, a moment before it pierced Envy's side, Ling answered.

“For Ed,” he said confidently, bloody sword raised for a fight. Ed's world constricted in that moment to the Xingese prince, disregarding everything else. Even Envy's roar of outrage became mere background noise as he looked at Ling, and questions flooded his mind.

What is that supposed to mean? What about the stone? Your family? Aren't those more important? Are you lying? Why would you lie about that? Do you actually give a shit about me? Why would you? Why me?

Of course, he voiced none of these. He had a homunculus to skewer, after all. But it was quickly getting out of hand. Envy continued the short trek into the populated areas of the city, hampered only slightly by his healing injuries and the giant stone spike broken off inside his body. Clearly, they needed a bit more. Scar ran at Envy's right flank, left undefended by his larger form. With the press of his hand like a branding iron, green flesh began to smoke and burn, charred pieces falling off of the homunculus into the street. But he didn't stop.

There were people at the end of the street, filing out of crowded tenements, frozen in horror, or spellbound by curiosity. People screamed, pointed, ran for dear life, but it didn't matter. Envy would kill them all, unless Ed got his shit together. The alchemist cursed and scowled; he'd already determined a long time ago that there wasn't going to be any collateral damage on his watch.
Ed stomped, willing all available particles of sand and stone to condense into a single spear, shooting up from the ground and into the base of Envy's skull.

There was a moment of silence. A bloody spire reached up into the darkening sky, amongst the winking stars. A moment in which Ed almost felt relief. Then Envy began to struggle anew.

His enormous body shuddered back to life, and low-pitched labored noises came from his throat, not unlike the baying of a dog, or an enormous animal on its deathbed. Envy gasped for air, muscles convulsing.

“You filthy…repulsive…humans! You think…you've beaten me?”

Envy's head tilted up, backwards, to the point Ed was certain he was staring at him, wild-eyed and more furious than he'd ever seen him. The thousands of voices that comprised Envy's seemed even more out of sync than before, distorted, with an underlying rasp of something deep and primordial that wasn't human at all.

“Did you…think you could…humiliate me? Envy?”

There was a cracking noise, like a gunshot times ten. At first, Ed thought it was Envy's neck, only to see the monster's head moving a bit stiff, but freely. The spire had snapped, and Envy was free once more.

“Damn it, damn it, damn it!” Ed clapped once more, rearranging the world around him into a set of manacles for the gigantic wrists (ankles?) available to him. He did a mental tally in his head of Envy's limbs. Two completely functional, two taking steady damage from Scar, one still regenerating, and three in chains, eight in total. In a second, he corrected his count to nine. A massive tail whipped around, slammed into his ribcage. Ed didn't even feel it, not at first. One moment, his feet were firmly on the ground. The next, he was airborne. As Ed flew past a world of dusty brown and sickening green, he saw a bright yellow blur he immediately identified as Ling. That was his last thought before impact.

Ed hit the brick wall back first. That was good; he didn't want to damage his limbs. His body slid to the ground, the wind knocked out of him. Fuck. Maybe hitting his back was worse; he felt like he'd fractured his fucking spine. Ed's head swam, and blinking only seemed to exacerbate the issue. He heard stone cracking, one, two, three chains. Apparently, improvised restraints didn't do the job. The green was growing, Envy emerging from the haze and sharpening into the shifting mass of flesh Ed knew him to be.

“You've really gotten on my last nerve, you little shit. I might as well put you somewhere you can't cause me trouble.” He laughed again, the sound harsh and somehow even more unstable than before. He took a step forward in Ed's direction.

Ed knew he should move, run, clap, anything to fight back. And yet, he couldn't. It was more than pain or injury that paralyzed him so completely. His limbs were jelly, his head light and fuzzy, his body uncooperative. He was a broken doll, a puppet with his strings abruptly snipped. Before half-lidded eyes, Envy's mouth yawned open, jaws moving with no intent to close. Every tooth was exposed, a perfect ivory shape, unnaturally white.

*Oh, Ed thought. He's going to eat me.*

Then:

*I can work with this.*
A pink tongue extended from his mouth, wrapping about Ed's waist to lift him to his split jaws. The flesh had a give not unlike warm, slimy rubber, if rubber moaned in agony and writhed constantly. Ed's skin crawled like it was about to peel away from his flesh in an effort to escape, but he did his best to stay still. Or rather, limp. He let his head tilt back, staring up at the sky above him. His first sunset in five years, and he'd barely had time to enjoy it. The light was fading fast, the beautiful pallet of colors replaced by a spread of sparkling stars, like diamonds on blue velvet. The night sky over the desert was always breathtaking, and Ed took it in like it might be the last time he ever saw it. For all he knew, it might be. His research, his drafting, his array, it was all theoretical. It might not even work, after five years of covertly making progress.

Being dragged in closer to a horrible unknown, and trying to stay calm, it was just like that gate. And just like then, Ed wanted to cry from fear, but he choked it down.

Then, a flash of yellow, racing towards him. Ling. His sword was raised, likely to slice through Envy's tongue. Ed wished he could say something, tell him to stop, tell him this was the only way to defeat Envy, tell him to not be stupid. But of course, it didn't work.

It occurred in only an instant: Envy's regenerated arm snapped out, slammed Ling to the ground. His sword skittered across the ground, coming to a stop at a building's front step. Envy's enormous hand splayed over his chest, pinning him completely to the dirt. Judging by Ling's expression, he was well on his way to cracking ribs, if he hadn't already. Ed felt a horrible ice cold trickle of fear run down his spine, worse than anything from before.

“Ling!”

Like a rubber band, Ed snapped back into his body, tensed and struggled to look Ling's way. To his surprise, the prince was looking straight back at him. His teeth were clenched in pain that Ed could only imagine, but his eyes spoke of something else entirely. Something tragic and desperate that made Ed's stomach flip over and over. Envy scoffed, the sound coming from inside his body and his skin while his mouth was occupied.

“You're willing to die for some silly rock you can't even use?”

Ling's gaze shot back upwards, to Envy. Eyes fully open, and full of hatred. His features were contorted in rage that spoke louder than words.

“Oh, don't give me that look. You can't seriously expect me to believe you're doing this for the pipsqueak's sake. You only met this morning, for fuck's sake. The only reason you've hung around him so long is because he has something you want!”

Ling stared back, unflinching despite the pain.

“That's not true. I think both of us have realized that by now.”

“Whatever,” said Envy after a long pause, sounding put-out despite the fact that he clearly had the upper hand. “Humans,” he grumbled. “You make all these promises to each other, when you can't control a damn thing.”

Ling looked up at Ed in horror, fist clenched in the dirt. Ed looked back, and tried to communicate something without words, only to feel his expression lacking. In the end, all he could manage was a weak smile. Envy's jaws fell shut with a heavy click of teeth that had a horrible air of finality to it.

Then, Ed found himself in the company of several thousand captured souls. They surrounded him, grabbing and pulling him deeper into the belly of the beast.
The souls were louder now, though they weren't shouting. Ed almost would've preferred that over
the whispers, murmurs, and whimpers. The solid mass of anguished noise changed, resolved into
thousands of voices, thousands of people that lived and loved and died together in some western city
centuries ago. They were younger brothers, mothers of reckless sons, dependable best friends,
teachers, fighters, beings that had felt the world just as much as Ed ever had. They were human, and
Ed could not bring himself to try and block them out. Instead, he took a deep breath, and began to
count.

“It hurts.”

Ten.

“Make it stop.”

Nine.

“Momma?”

Eight.

“Why would she do this?”

Seven.

“Help us, please.”

Six.

“Our Father, who art in heaven…”

Five.

“I'm scared…”

Four.

“I love you.”

Three.

“I can't breathe.”

Two.

“Please!”

One.

“Thank you.”

Chapter End Notes

Good? Bad? Ugly?
The end is almost upon us, and I am finally attempting to write some straight up romance along with my action. Envy's time is especially running short these days, though I suppose that's fairly obvious.
Mercy, If Not Quite Forgiveness

Chapter Summary

Ed puts Scar's teachings into action. Both Ed and Ling receive a confession, of sorts. But it's not that easy, of course.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There was a moment of horrible silence after Envy's mouth closed. It was a silence in which the dozens of barely recognized thoughts and emotions inside Ling's mind rattled about like dice in a cup. Despair, disbelief, rage, but above all, confusion. What had that smile meant?

This train of thought was cut off by the enormous hand placing increasing pressure on his chest, forcing a pained groan from him. His ribs might've cracked, judging from the sound he'd heard, but Ling couldn't find it in him to care. Envy looked down at him, and despite his lack of traditional facial features, his smug satisfaction came through clearly.

"Well, it looks like you've failed, shining knight." Envy laughed, the sound like nails on a chalkboard made of human skin. Rage rose like bile in his throat, boiled in his veins, hotter than ever before. Even in the deadly, backstabbing atmosphere of the Xingese royal court, Ling had never held such violent hatred for another being. He had never met an individual so cruel, so disgusting.

And yet, he couldn't move, limbs pinned by a monstrous hand. Despite how much he hated the homunculus, Ling had to acknowledge that he was right about some things. Even after appointing himself Ed's partner in crime/protector, he'd been effectively useless. He didn't break into the palace, he didn't stop Envy, and he didn't save Ed. And after all of it, his anger only seemed to amuse Envy.

"Aw, don't look at me like that, lover boy. I'll put you out of your misery right away," he said, sickly sweet. Another thick-fingered hand raised from the ground, reaching for Ling. The prince could only imagine its intent. Would it crush his skull? Rip his head from his shoulders? Tear him open from shoulder to hip?

None of the above. Envy froze, halfway through the motion. His eyes, which had been gloating moments before, were wide open, staring off into space. The skin of his side was bulging, distended and bubbling grotesquely.

“What-”

That was as far as the homunculus got in his line of thinking before his side burst open, and then all he gave were screams. From the ragged wound poured viscous melted flesh. Where it puddled in the street, steam rose up into the air as the fluid boiled away. It was entirely different from how Scar’s attack affected Envy, and Ling almost didn't care at all. It suddenly became irrelevant when Ed tumbled out onto the wet and sticky pavement, breathing hard but entirely unharmed. Ling felt a great weight lift off his chest, literally and metaphorically. Envy was dragging his upper body across the ground, trying to escape the liquefaction and evaporation of the souls that powered him. Ling heaved for breath, grimacing as his bruised rib cage expanded painfully. Well, to assume that they were bruised and not broken was more than a bit optimistic, but that was beside the point. He
groaned and began the uncomfortable process of pushing to his feet, only to see a carbon fiber hand thrust in his face. Ling looked up, relieved grin still on his face. He took Ed's hand, fascinated by the movement of artificial tendons and joints against his own flesh ones.

“You had that planned out from the start, didn't you?” Ling felt a bit angry on account of how much stress Ed caused him with the stunt, but his relief canceled it out. Mostly.

“You could say I was improvising a bit. I wasn't really sure that last transmutation would work.” Despite that alarming detail, Ed was grinning broadly. His chest was heaving from a combination of adrenaline and exertion, and he was damp with mystery homunculus fluid, but in that moment, Ling wanted nothing more than to hug him. And perhaps because of adrenaline, or impulse, or simply his greedy nature, that was exactly what he did once Ed pulled him up. His arms moved on their own, crushing Ed to his chest. His body was warm in the rapidly cooling night air, despite wearing only an undershirt and shorts. But more importantly, Ling could feel Ed's heartbeat, hammering out a steady rhythm into his chest just a few inches across (and below) his own. *Still kicking*, Ling reassured himself.

“You're crazy,” he laughed, a little breathless. “And an idiot.”

“The fact that you're here at all says the same thing about you,” was the reply, amused but a little strained. In a moment, the tension in Ed's body drained away, and his arms wrapped about Ling's midsection in return. For all of a millisecond, Ed squeezed, and his grip was momentarily unbreakable. Ling's ribs protested, but he didn't even think of voicing this out loud. Then, Ed pulled away, giving Ling's chest a shove. He couldn't be certain in the dim twilight, but it looked as if Ed's face was flushed.

“The fight isn't over yet, dumbass.”

They looked towards Envy's deformed upper half, stretching away from his melting body. His shape was changing, caught in some in-between state of his true form and his disguise. He was trying to run away, but failing as Ed's array destroyed him from the inside out. Ed and Ling approached to where Envy was clawing at the dirt.

“Damnit! Damnit! Damnit!”

“Envy.” Ed's voice was solemn, firm. The homunculus twisted his torso unnaturally to glare at Ed. His waxy features were contorted in such an expression of hatred and fear that anyone else might've stepped back.

“You,” he snarled, voice raspy. “What the hell did you do to me?”

“I designed a counter circle for the one used to trap souls inside philosopher's stones.”

“You mean…”

“I found a way to set them free, without using them for alchemy.”

The words sunk in, leaving Ling dumbstruck. Ed was calm, set at ease by the knowledge his rescue was successful. Envy's face twitched.

“Are you some sort of moron, pipsqueak? What about equivalent exchange?”

“What about it?”

“You're breaking the rules you alchemists are so obsessed with! You're letting loose the massive
amounts of energy from thousands of souls, but you aren't getting anything back! You're just wasting
godlike power, you imbecile! You could turn this desert into a jungle, destroy a thousand cities, or
become immortal!"

He turned to Ling, who very nearly took a step back.

“That's what Shifty Eyes over here wants, isn't it? Why don't you give it to him, if you're so close? Is
it because you're too damn selfish, pipsqueak?”

Ling locked eyes with the homunculus, whose gaze was still predatory in spite of the desperation that
clung to him.

“I'm not like him, Shifty Eyes. I've got no problems giving up the secret to immortality to save my
skin. I'm already immortal myself, don't you know?”

Ling felt his breath catch in his throat.

“What do you say, Shifty Eyes? Let's make a deal. You help me out here, I make you Emperor. All
you need is immortality, right? We could go halfsies on my stone, or maybe I'll show you how to
cook up your own.”

“By sacrificing human lives?”

Envy shrugged, a sardonic smile on his lips, unconcerned.

“What can I say? You wanna make an omelette, you have to break a few eggs. Now, how about it?
Do we have a deal?” From his position on the ground he extended a mostly human-looking hand, the
nails and fingers just a little too long. Envy was losing control over his form and not exerting the
effort to restore it, a sure sign of desperation. Weakened as he was, Ling was sure he could transport
the homunculus across the desert, even if Envy attempted to stab him in the back. The gift of
immortality, along with a monster that couldn't die, would definitely secure his future. All he had to
do was save Envy, which would involve defeating Ed, possibly returning him to his cell. That wasn't
impossible, either. Though his alchemy was unparalleled, his body was mostly as vulnerable as
anyone else's. He wasn't even striking a defensive posture, let alone attacking. He was merely
standing, stiff as a board with a clenched jaw as he looked at Ling. He was obviously unsteady,
undecided as to where he thought Ling's loyalty lay. Ling thought that was fair. After all, his entire
mission was undertaken out of dedication and responsibility to his clan, first and foremost. And yet,
he was waiting for Ling to make the first move to betray him. For a genius, he made a lot of stupid
decisions. Ling weighed his options, and took Envy's hand.

Then he cut it off.

Offhandedly, Ling noticed that he was getting very good at dismembering the homunculus. So had
Envy, clutching his stump to his chest.

“Jesus fucking Christ! Stop doing that!”

“Stop deserving it.” A childish response, but Ling wasn't exactly emotionally detached from the
situation.

“I take it you refuse his offer then?” Ed smiled, just a little.

“Of course. Men of Xing always keep their word, and I did promise my services to you first.” Ling
couldn't help it, and smiled back. Vaguely, he registered Envy gagging in the background.
“Dammit, I've had just about all I can take. Stop ignoring me!” With that, Envy lashed out with one disproportionate hand, stretched taloned fingers towards Ed. Ling didn't pause, didn't think. He raised his sword, and Envy's head hit the ground, cleanly divorced from his body. Like the rest of him, it began to melt and boil away, but not without first warping into something that looked like a cheap rubber mask. Ling knew the look on his own face well, having seen it on his father's time and time again, from a distance and up close. Stony features, carved in an imperious glare of disdain, pitiless and unforgiving.

“Is he finally dead?”

“…I don't know. Maybe? I've never killed one of them before,” he admitted. An uneasy silence fell as they observed the scene before them. Envy's body had quit melting and started rapidly disintegrating. In moments, the severed head was completely gone, except for a mysterious snot-colored lump. Cautiously, Ling poked it with the tip of his sword.

The effect was immediate and alarming. A round purple eye snapped open, along with a vertical split mouth, ringed with tiny razor teeth. Out of this mouth came an ear splitting cry of frustration, as high and whiny as a baby's. Ling stared, at a complete loss for what to do. Was this slug really Envy? Ed looked down at it, eyes wide.

“Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! You humans are all idiots! If you morons just did what you wanted, I wouldn't have to deal with two times the stupid princes, and I wouldn't have been humiliated like this!”

They said nothing, but Envy seemed to calm in the quiet, if only a little.

“Why?” asked the monster, confused. “Why didn't you act in your own self-interest? I offered exactly what you wanted, and you fucked it all up, you stupid brat!” Envy had rocked back to sit on his tail, gesturing with stubby limbs. His voice was squeaky even in anger, a parody of his earlier rasp.

“I promised to protect Ed,” Ling said simply.

“What about your so-called clan? Isn't that what you said about them, too? Or did you forget all about them as soon as you met one little pipsqueak?”

Ling's eyes slid open in anger, an odd quirk where others would narrow them. And yet, he kept the same stance, arms crossed and feet planted as he stared down in disgust. When he spoke, his words were icy calm.

“I can protect them all. Ed, my clan, all of Xing,” he said firmly. Envy made a disgusted noise in his throat that shouldn't have been possible given his current state.

“You? Don't make me laugh. To me, you're barely out of diapers. You can't even protect yourself, let alone ten million other stupid humans.”

“I can, and I will.” Ling's tone left no room for argument.

Envy's protruding eyes narrowed, before he snorted derisively.

“Whatever. Claiming all those human lives as your responsibility is just greedy.”

In other circumstances, Ling might've smiled.

“So I've been told.”
There was beat of silence. Envy sighed heavily and scrunched his eyes shut. His tiny body was rigid, and he appeared to be holding his breath. He held this posture for five awkward seconds—Ling counted—before cracking an eye open.

“Well?” he asked, impatient and expecting tone undermined by how his words shook. “What are you waiting for? Aren't you going to kill me?”

Ling snuck a glance at Ed, who remained silent. For a young man that wore his emotions on his sleeve, his face was unreadable. Ling himself was unsure if or when he would kill Envy. He couldn’t hold it against the alchemist if he decided to enact vengeance. From what he'd personally seen and gathered from Ed, the homunculus had visited both physical and verbal abuse on the Elric brothers out of sheer boredom in the past five years, and likely didn't feel the slightest bit guilty.

“Don't tell me you want to drag this out, pipsqueak. It's not like I have a lot of juice left in me now. All it would take now is just a little more damage, and it's curtains for me,” he said, nonchalant tone strained by his impending demise. Ling wondered how it felt, for an immortal being to suddenly face death. Centuries of picturing yourself at the top of the food chain, only for it to come crashing down in a matter of minutes.

“Pipsqueak?” His voice was even shakier than before, a little smaller as well. However, when Ed didn't respond, he gathered the energy for another bout of screaming.

“Stop fucking with me and just finish it, pipsqueak! It's what you want, right? Just get it over with, you stupid brat!”

The silence that followed was broken only by Ed's laughter, low and bittersweet. Ling looked over to his partner in alarm. The blond's flesh hand was clapped over his eyes, head tilted to the sky. Mutely, Ling watched as his laughter morphed into sobs, and glittering tears dripped between his fingers. His knees buckled, and he fell on mismatched knees in the sand, his distance from Envy halved.

“It's funny, you know. Funny, and so damn frustrating. All these years, I've hated you so much. I wanted to kill you. More than that, I wanted to hurt the monster that made my life a living hell, badly.”

Ling saw his lips curve up in a rueful smile.

“And then I finally get here, get free, and it turns out that there is no monster. Just an ugly little slug that kicked me around to feel big. How could I bring myself to kill a creature that pathetic?”

He wiped at his eyes, now a little red around the edges. And yet, Ling had to admit, he looked a little lighter, a little less troubled despite his weariness. Not everyone felt that way, though.

“Shut the hell up! I never asked for your pity! I don't need it, I don't want it!”

“It's not pity, Envy. It's mercy.” Ed sunk to his knees, reached down and cupped him in his automail hand.

“Damnit! I hate you, I hate you, I hate you. I wish you were dead!” He collapsed on his side, and the two watched in horror and disbelief as he began to cry in the palm of Ed's hand. It was, without a doubt, the most pathetic sight Ling had ever born witness to, and he found himself at a loss for how to react.

“This wasn't supposed to happen,” he sobbed. “I'm a homunculus! Having a measly little pipsqueak looking down on me with that pitying expression…it's the ultimate humiliation!”
Ed's expression bore no hate or anger, just sadness, shown in the pinch of his brow and the downward curve of his lips.


“Because I'm human,” he said plainly. “If we let anger and desire for revenge grow inside us, it takes over, overshadows who we really are. In the end, the only thing you can do to save yourself is let go.”

At the corner of his vision, Ling saw Scar standing in the street, far enough to provide the semblance of privacy.

“I hate you,” mumbled Envy after a long moment of processing the words, clutching his tail protectively. All his fight was gone, replaced by resigned confusion and melancholy. Ed sighed.

“That's what I thought.” He stood up, squared his shoulders.

“Hey Scar, I think I've got someone to help you find those homunculi!”

The Ishvalan approached, having likely heard everything. He took Envy, holding him securely between strong fingers. He looked like a bug Scar was taking care not to crush, but could at any moment. He turned him this way and that, examining him.

“Are you sure you don't want to kill it?” Envy gave a quiet wail at how casually his life was put at stake. Ed shook his head.

“I would, but a long time ago, this guy I respect taught me that revenge is a dead-end road. He knew, because he traveled it himself. I'd be pretty stupid to ignore him after all that, right?” He smiled, just a little.

“Right.” Scar smiled, just a little.

And with that, he strode away to transmute a clay jar, Envy's new prison. Ling thought it was fitting, to say the least. To their left, Winry and Al were coming back from crowd control. Unfortunately, they were followed by the bravest of the crowd, murmuring as they observed the damage to the street and the barely visible shadow where Envy's body had degraded.

“The city guard is probably on its way,” informed Winry, before returning to heated counsel with Al.

“We need to leave,” said Ling. He tried to move, finally stop standing still, when Ed caught him by the sleeve. Ling turned around, only to freeze at the sight of Ed, looking seriously at him with glowing golden eyes. Twilight had come and gone, but those eyes shone like torches in the dark.

“We need to talk.”

“About?” The word almost stuck in his throat. As it was, it came out a little strangled.

“I heard you earlier. You said you were doing this for us. For me,” he corrected, very quietly, his eyes briefly averted before meeting Ling's once more. “Were you telling the truth?”

It almost felt like a trick question, where being honest would mean admitting a vulnerability, a weakness. And yet, there was no possibility of manipulation, avoidance, or obfuscation when it came to Ed.

“Yes, I was.”
Ed's expression was torn between serious thought and something much softer. Suddenly, Ed hauled him down by the lapels of his jacket, and Ling couldn't see his face anymore. Ed's lips were smooth, where Ling's were chapped from desert travel. His mouth was slightly parted, but pressed against his innocently. Chaste as it was, Ling felt his stomach flip wildly like a fish out of water. His eyes slid shut, and he tilted his head, deepening the kiss further. Something was pressed into the hand resting lightly on Ed's hip, smooth and warm with a life of its own. With an inexplicable feeling of dread, Ling realized what it was.

Ed leaned up to his ear, left hand still maintaining a death grip on his jacket. Confused and distracted, Ling saw no reason to resist, other than the rising sense of foreboding. His breath was hot on Ling's skin, in contrast to his rapidly cooling body.

“Take this home. Become emperor. Change Xing for the better.” His voice was firm, soft.

Despite the circumstances, Ling quickly realized that Ed was trying to get rid of him. But why? And especially after kissing him like that, with a meaning behind it.

“Wait,” he said, but Ed didn't listen. The next instant, he hauled back his fist and gave Ling the mother of all right hooks. And then, there was nothing but black.

Chapter End Notes

Almost a whole month. I'm ashamed of me too. In my defense, mushy feelings and all that jazz aren't really my thing. Or at least, articulating them isn't. Side note: I actually quite like kissing, but I find it hard to write about. Maybe because there's no choreography? It just sort of happens, in my experience, and if you think about the physical mechanics and spit involved too much, it's not the most appealing thing.
A Family Outing

Chapter Summary

In which Envy's display attracts attention, the kind of attention that is never more than a step behind their prey.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A roar rang out into the night. Faint as it was from the distance it had traveled, it was still chilling. Something about it set it apart from the cry of any human or beast, rendering it as some unholy mixture of both, as something separate and terrible. Even halfway across the city, people felt the hair on the backs of their necks raise, and looked anxiously over their shoulders for the distant threat, whether or not they fully registered the noise.

The two figures standing atop a red brick apartment building took notice as well. They were curious but not overly concerned, as they had never acquired much of an ability to feel fear, given their abilities.

The shorter, a creature with a hairless scalp and the proportions of an orangutan, lifted his face, soaked in gore from the bridge of his nose down. He sniffed the cooling air, out of habit.

“Thunder? No, the air doesn't smell right,” he muttered, licking a bloody thumb thoughtfully. That, and the fact that the sky was clear was another signifier, but he had always relied on scent over sight.

Simultaneously, his taller companion tore her eyes away from the remains of his meal. She uncrossed her arms, took her eyes away from his mess. That sound was familiar to her, even if she had never heard it before. Never mind that curiosity, though. She considered it through rudimentary process of elimination. If it was neither human nor animal, it must be a monster, which narrowed the field considerably. And while he may not have been the only monster in Xerxes, he was definitely the one with the highest proclivity for loud, dramatic outbursts.

“It's Envy, if I had to hazard a guess. He always did like to cause a commotion wherever he could.” Her older brother was an attention seeker, plain and simple, no matter what he said about sowing chaos among weak humans.

“What about the half-metal, Lust? He was supposed to watch it closely.” Gluttony frowned slightly, which almost made her smile. Her younger brother was significantly more docile, and sometimes inadvertently cute, despite his stupidity. But after all, that's what he had her brains for.

“He either got bored of guard dog duty and left,” unlikely, given Dante's punishment for disobedience. “Or the kid is out.” Lust grinned at her own wishful thinking. She'd predicted that the kid would eventually escape, despite the fact that he'd never made so much as an attempt at doing so. Apparently, he'd been using his five years to plan appropriately, and wait for an opening. And despite the fact it was in her best interest for Dante to have a stone, lest she become desperate and try to recycle her homunculi into pure energy, Lust found herself excited by the prospect of Edward Elric being loose in the city. The only points of interest in her life were in her late-night homicidal excursions with Gluttony, and their subsequent fights with the scarred man, after all. He was very
intriguing in how he would only ever manage to narrowly escape their encounters, almost always after sustaining heavy damage. And yet, he would always seek the pair out for the next battle. That was a kind of stupidity even Lust could respect. Despite the mystery of the scarred man, their altercations were relatively infrequent, and the homunculus was bored. A jail break was just the kind of thing she needed to liven things up.

“Can we go, Lust? Can we?”

“Dante would tear me a new one for not bringing this to her immediately…”

Gluttony visibly deflated, which made it a lot easier for Lust to decide. She definitely had a soft spot for her brother, after all. She sighed dramatically.

“Ah, fuck it. Let's go, Gluttony.”

“Really?” he asked, perking up immediately.

“Yeah, really. C'mon.” With that, she jumped off the edge of the building. Due to her strength, agility, and decades of practice being a mysterious creature of the night, she landed neatly on her feet. And if the pavement around her toes was a bit cracked, what did it matter? Gluttony soon followed, his face licked free of gore. Lust grinned and sauntered out of the alleyway. She definitely had a soft spot for her brother, after all. She sighed dramatically.

“Ah, fuck it. Let's go, Gluttony.”

“Really?” he asked, perking up immediately.

“Yeah, really. C’mon.” With that, she jumped off the edge of the building. Due to her strength, agility, and decades of practice being a mysterious creature of the night, she landed neatly on her feet. And if the pavement around her toes was a bit cracked, what did it matter? Gluttony soon followed, his face licked free of gore. Lust grinned and sauntered out of the alleyway. She could have continued running across the rooftops, but she was Lust, and she made it a point not to run for more than ten seconds at a time, lest she ruin her image. Not to mention, her fashionable sheath dress and three-inch heels weren't exactly made for that sort of thing, even if it was possible for her to outrun any human even with the handicap. So, she continued her graceful strut through the street, her brother waddling behind. Conversely, Gluttony was extremely swift and agile when moving vertically or at high speeds, but walked somewhat awkwardly without the use of his hands. They strolled along through the block of Amestrian apartments and businesses in red brick. Almost all day laborers and other workers had returned home hours ago for the evening meal, and families were retiring for the night now that the sun had set. However, the streets were not entirely abandoned. Young couples patrolled, arm in arm as they alternately gazed at the stars and each other. A fair amount gawked at Lust and Gluttony, baffled by the seemingly mismatched pair. She found that a touch annoying, for some reason.

As they ventured into areas of the city considered unsavory by most, they came upon other, less respectable characters. Homeless men and women walked about, somewhat free from judgement under the cover of darkness. A girl cried as she crouched in the recessed entryway of a closed drugstore, face pressed into her knees.

Ladies of the night lingered on street corners, chatting in between leering at men. Xerxes was a city of many cultures, and that was reflected in even its least respected professions. They were clad in dramatically slitted cheongsams, dark satin gowns, lacy sundresses, and layers of gauzy robes, artistically draped to reveal smooth skin. A few caught Lust’s eye, even having the innocence to blush at her appreciative once-overs, while others winked back or tilted painted lips up in a smile. The homunculus felt a strange sense of camaraderie with the prostitutes of the city, who used the lust of others to make their living.

But those neighborhoods came and went, and the two arrived in a small public square. In the center was a fountain whose water glittered in the lamplight. In the shadows, the decorations appeared even more vicious and animalistic. Lust took a moment to appraise the sculpture. The Amestrian lion and Xingese dragon snarled at each other on the pyramid, while the Ishvalan ibex rose above, serene and in possession of the Xerxes sun. A weirdly political set of symbols, considering it was a public fountain. The square was more crowded than the other streets, filled with people who had stumbled out of their houses to make sense of the situation nearby. Lust decided to listen, just for a moment.
“…a bomb?”

“Amestrian terrorists…”

“Rogue alchemists?”

“Stupid fucking kids in the Ishvalan quarter…”

That answered the “where” part of the question, at least. Unfortunately, it only narrowed the search down to a large surface area, and the noises had died out at least ten minutes ago. They continued deeper into the newest section of the city, where they received a few suspicious, fearful looks. While their coloring was not exclusively Amestrian, their pale skin and clothes read as upper-class westerners, who rarely ventured into the ghettos. There were more people in the street, and glassless windows were lit by yellow oil lamps. The closer to the source of the roar, the more people were worriedly discussing it, their hushed conjecture deafening on the quiet air.

“…monster…”

“…looked like he had old Xerxes blood…”

“The Fullmetal…”

“…gone now.”

Lust felt more than a bit vindicated by the realization that her vast leaps in logic had proven accurate. Wrath and Envy had always styled themselves as the brains of the operation, which was a stretch on the best of days, leaving Lust as the unacknowledged genius. Even homunculi were not immune to the preconceived notion that a pretty face never had any brains behind it.

She was interrupted from her musings when a bright yellow blur passed her. For a split-second, she was convinced that the elder prince of Xerxes had fallen right into her lap. But the color was merely a vibrant yellow, not pale gold, and it came from a loose jacket around a male form significantly larger than Edward Elric. The dull sheen of the fabric was odd as well, obviously marking it as silk and not soft, finely woven Ishvalan cotton. A Xingese man on the western outskirts? And yet, even more intriguing was the look on his handsome face. Gritted teeth, focused eyes, and a grubby countenance all had Lust immediately interested. She really was a sucker for a good story, a result of the boredom brought by too much time on her hands. After all, as an immortal, she had nothing but time. He was someone who had once been able to afford traveling clothes that had once been of a high quality, at least one major injury to his torso judging from how he moved, and somewhere very important to be, judging by his urgency.

But then the moment passed, and the young man was gone, not even noticing her gaze. Lust had no intention of following after him, though. He was interesting, but certainly not more so than the Fullmetal escapee. Luckily, Gluttony also found a lead at that moment.

“Lust! I smell him!”

“Then lead the way,” she said, her smile blood red and smooth white. She didn't run, but the click of her heels on stone was a bit more decisive, the staccato beat almost hungry in nature.

They had obviously gone the right way when they came across the crowd, a quietly whispering throng that was beginning to disperse like blood in water. Despite the tense atmosphere, Lust parted the crowd with ease.

The street was a mess. Evidence of transmutation was everywhere, in the form of spikes, chains, and
distorted pavement. The house on the end of the street, a charming wooden cottage that would be more at home by a rolling green pasture than a desert, appeared to be the only building with any new damage. The front door had been completely broken open...from the inside. Curious.

But that still didn't compare to the figures sitting on the sagging front porch. A blue-eyed blonde girl in her late teens, and the scarred man himself.

Lust could pinpoint the exact moment he saw them approach. His soul-red eyes widened in surprise and fear, an atypical expression on his taciturn face even when fighting to the death. He spun around to face his companion, a little panicked despite the authority in his voice.

"Winry, get in the house!"

"What, why?" she asked, searching the area for the obvious threat, already between sitting and standing at her full height.

"They're here," he hissed. "The homunculi."

"You say it with such contempt, scarred man. I'm wounded," she said with a sigh, having jumped to close the distance between them to a mere six feet. That was apparently too close for him, as he became tenser than piano wire.

"Leave. Now," he said through gritted teeth. Either the injuries he'd received from the two of them before weren't healing properly, or he'd collected some new ones, judging by his pained grimace.

"Why the animosity? We're simply curious about the commotion we heard earlier."

He glared back at Lust's smirk with unyielding intensity. Their impromptu staring contest was cut short by a high, squeaky voice.

"Lust, stop fooling around and kill them already!"

Childish as it was, something about that voice was intensely familiar. Lust cast her eyes about, before alighting on a glass jar in the girl's arms. Immediately, Lust's vermillion lips split in an enormous grin.

"Oh, please tell me that's who I think it is."

"Shut up and slaughter them!" Envy sat up, pounding four tiny fists against the glass. Obviously, Lust ignored him, in favor of pointing and cooing loudly.

"Aw, looks like you're not exactly my big brother anymore," she said, giggling.

"Stop making fun of me!" His voice became even higher, and the childish demand hardly lent him any authority.

"Why should I? Your true form is absolutely adorable." She wiped a stray tear from her eye and turned to the scarred man. "Did you poke air holes in the lid?"

The bewildered look on the man's face sent Lust into another fit of laughter that made her stomach hurt. Oh, this entire night had turned out to be absolutely priceless. Meanwhile, Gluttony toddled up the stairs to sniff at the blonde girl. Quick as a flash, the girl whipped out a wrench and cracked him across the temple with enough force to cause serious brain damage to a human. As it was, he fell back off the steps and onto the gritty road. He shook his head, otherwise unaffected by the blow.
“She smells of the half-metal, Lust.”

“Good job, Gluttony,” she said, patting his scalp indulgently. “Now, I suppose we should retrieve him, before Dante throws a fit.”

“What about me,” wailed Envy, forgotten.

“No way! We won’t let you take him!”

Lust tilted her head, considering the girl before her. Wide blue eyes, furrowed brow, and clenched, shaking fists. The homunculus straightened her arm, leveled her index finger with her forehead, thumb straight up to form a mockery of a pistol.

“Is that so?”

Horrified, the girl watched, frozen as that spiked fingertip extended. The spear paused, perfectly motionless, just centimeters from her face. Lust felt a thrill go through her. She could practically see the pulse pounding in her throat as she swallowed. All that delicate skin, she could just imagine the give of it under her fingers as she pierced it. The scarred man was still, instinctively knowing he wasn't faster than her hand.

“Tell me where the prince is.”

“Go to hell,” was the steady reply, though there was a tiny flicker of movement about her eyes, momentarily casting her gaze towards the largest building on the skyline. Then it was gone, and there was fear mixed with determination as she locked eyes with the homunculus in what she was certain would be her last moments. There was a pregnant pause while Lust kept her in suspense. Then she smirked, retracted her hand as she turned away.

“You're a loyal friend, Winry. But your face is just too honest.”

The blonde sunk to her knees, feeling weak after staring her own death in the face. Envy was far less subdued.

“Don't you walk away from me, you weakling one-trick-pony! Dante’s going to boil you down into glue for this! I mean it!”

“Take good care of our brother,” she added, waving a deadly hand jauntily.

“Cunt! Fuck you, you useless, wobbly-ankled bitch! You slutty, disease-ridden, two-cenz whore! I'll kill you for humiliating me like this, I swear to God!”

“…or don't. I wouldn't blame you.”

And with that, Lust and Gluttony took their leave. They leapt from rooftop to rooftop, Gluttony matching her excited pace.

“Do you think I'll get to eat anyone, Lust?”

“Hmm. Not the prince, but I'll keep my eye out for any other candidates.”

“Okay…” Gluttony slid down a lamppost into the street, and walked up to where Lust was staring down the palace walls. A thirty foot vertical slab of smooth sandstone, there were absolutely no imperfections or crevices to use as handholds. Oh, well. It wasn’t as if Lust couldn’t create her own. Her fingers, wickedly pointed and harder than steel, punched into the rock with ease. With that, Lust
pulled herself up and over the wall, even landing with a showy, completely unnecessary flip on the other side. She surveyed the garden that she had seen only once before, five years ago. It had remained the same, for the most part. A bit less well looked after, maybe. The palace, tall and resolute guardian of the city, was dark. All city business conducted on the palace grounds had halted hours before, and none of the rooms in the residential wing were lit.

“I smell him, Lust.”

“Excellent. We have no idea which route he took to get inside, so we should just go through the front entrance and try to pick up the scent from there.”

Gluttony readily agreed, as was his habit.

The massive stone doors opened easily, once Lust pried them open with her fingertips and monstrous strength. The palace was colder than the surrounding night, kept cool by the insulating stone and ambient temperature arrays. The front entrance opened into an enormous round chamber, with a high, domed ceiling. Painted on it was the symbol of Xerxes, the golden sun. On the walls, the portraits of the various royal families. In some, a bloodline was clearly evident, where the title had been passed from parent to child. Others were obviously handpicked to be successors, drastically different in appearance from their predecessors. The most recent were Van Hohenheim and Trisha Elric, a couple Lust had determined to be even blander than white bread soaked in milk. Bouncing in her lap was a toddler with a bright, unconcerned smile. The elder brother, differentiated by his stubborn cowlick, was hitched on his father's hip. It wasn't a very kingly pose, in Lust’s opinion, but what did it matter.

The staircase led to a recessed balcony that ran around the circumference of the room. Lust counted seven doors, all leading to different hallways and areas of the palace. Kind of like a tree’s branches, splitting off a main trunk. Trusting her instincts, Lust went through the central door. She briefly wondered if the human desire for symmetry extended to homunculi.

From there, the palace was the maze Lust remembered. Soaring ceilings, dizzying spiral staircases, beautiful views through numerous windows juxtaposed with pitch-black hallways and other rooms, cut off from natural light. Lust would have worried about going in circles, if it weren't for the fact that every room was completely different in almost every way, ranging from sensible to eccentric. So far, they had gone through a cozy sitting room, a storage closet larger than most apartments filled with tables and chairs, and a hallway where even the walls were upholstered with rich blue velvet. And yet, that wasn't even the tackiest, in her opinion. That title belonged to a small room, painted a sickening periwinkle. Or rather, it appeared small, but perhaps that was only because every available surface was swathed in pink gauze that floated and billowed with the breeze through the window, including the baby pink and mahogany furniture. Oddly enough, the designer’s second obsession after the color pink was swords, ranging from the decorative but sharp to the graceful but purely practical. She noticed sabers, scimitars, daos, and katanas. An odd juxtaposition, and Lust couldn’t quite parse out whether or not she hated its creator.

She didn't have to puzzle over it long, because Gluttony’s head shot straight up in the air, nose first. He'd caught the brat’s scent. Without him ever saying a word, she was by his side, following her tracker. His stumbling as he sniffed about rapidly turned into running at full tilt, his tongue out and tasting the air as well. His enthusiasm was infectious, and by the time Gluttony pushed through another door, Lust was just as rabid for a fight.

The room was immediately identified as a library, by the overwhelming smell of aging paper as much as the size. They were on the upper level, looking down over the railing at the dark room. Books were stacked on tables, not yet returned to their shelves. The library was frequently used,
apparently. Lust didn't care much, though, because Gluttony had paused, his brow furrowed in consternation.

“Gluttony?”

“The trail…the half-metal stops here,” he mumbled.

“Then he's hiding in here;” said Lust.

“No, he's not, I-”

He froze, the only moving parts of him his twitching nose and ears. Lust would have found it cute, if she weren't so keyed up at the moment.

“What?”

“Sandals…so loud.”

Chapter End Notes

Why, you might ask, are the updates slowing down as the end approaches, but the word count is lower than usual? The answer is: I don't know! At this rate, it'll take me until Halloween to post the epilogue. But I promise, I do know where this story is going.
Chapter Summary

Ling faces a test, and passes with flying colors.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The palace was a maze, but Ling was able to find his way thanks to Winry's instructions. It was almost disconcerting how easy it was to enter the palace with his training, but he supposed it was due to the sheer size of the place, as well as the fact that, according to Winry, only two people inhabited it after sunset each day. Three, if you counted the comatose.

All this information had been relayed to him in a rush, as she grabbed his arm to keep him from running off unprepared. He'd been unconscious for less than ten minutes after Ed's one-hit knockout, which was good for multiple reasons. First off, anything more than that usually implied a serious head injury, which obviously wasn't Ed's intent. It was meant as a very forceful way of telling him to butt out before he got hurt protecting the alchemist. It was almost sweet, if not for the violent execution of his concern. Lucky for Ed, Ling was nothing if not incredibly persistent and stubborn. Almost two years abroad, searching for a fairytale, proved that. The second good thing was that Ed hadn't gotten much of a head start, which meant less time without Ling's sword guarding his back.

Ling had briefly considered that Ed could avoid the homunculi on his own, but he remembered the heavy click of Envy's teeth around Ed, with only a theoretical array at his disposal, and dismissed the option of leaving him to it. Besides, he had a gut feeling that Ed would need the assistance, against at least two monsters. That feeling only intensified when he felt the qi of a monster as he ran through the streets of Xerxes towards the palace. Less than a foot away, it was similar to the energy he associated with Envy. It was a burning, roiling, noisy sort of feeling, that made every part of him want to recoil. The homunculi were on Ed's trail. The knowledge agitated his already adrenaline-driven self further, escalating his sense of urgency into borderline panic.

That was why he had to fight to open the library doors quietly, when all he wanted to do was carelessly throw them open loudly enough to convey his presence to the entire palace. He scanned the dark room, frantically repeating Winry's directions.

"Third lamp on the left, third lamp on the left…"

A quick squint into the darkness made it clear what she meant. In between the bookshelves, in addition to the ceiling lights, were wall sconces attached to lamps, shaded by green glass. Ling stared at the third lamp from the door, and almost threw his hands up in frustration. There was no door, only blank wall. He had definitely followed all of Winry's directions, so how did he end up at a wall? Had she lied to him? Why? She'd agreed that Ed couldn't do this alone, hadn't she? His mind spun with questions.

He wouldn't even be so caught up in this mess, physically and emotionally, if he hadn't fallen into that hidden cavern in the ruins that morning. It hadn't even been on purpose, he'd merely placed his hand on an unassuming stone, triggering some sort of mechanism that sent him tumbling into this bizarre story. It wasn't his fault, the switch had been so perfectly disguised…not looking out of
Ling appraised the wall once more. Then, feeling a bit hopeful but mostly stupid, he reached up and pulled on the sconce. It moved easily, well oiled from maintenance. A section of wall with the dimensions of a small doorway sunk back and swung inwards along a seam in the material so fine Ling doubted if he'd be able to find it even while knowing of its existence.

“Lucky,” he said to himself.

He didn't dwell on it for long, throwing himself up the flight of stairs that appeared to him. He took them one at a time, until he faintly heard Ed's voice. Then, he took them two at a time.

“Al, it's alright.” His voice was soothing, or attempting to be.

“No, it's not alright! It isn't worth it!”

“Of course it is.” Ling could hear his impatience clearly.

“You don't even know the price,” said Al, pleading. Ling felt icy dread in the pit of his stomach. The word “price” sounded far too familiar too him.

“It doesn't matter,” said the elder brother, full of the iron conviction Ling had come to associate him with.

After what felt like hours but was only seconds, Ling burst through the open doorway.

“Ed!”

Ed looked up, his golden hair almost silvery in the moonlight spilling through the window. On the end of one strand was Al, tugging furiously, trying to stop him from doing…something. Ed tossed aside a piece of chalk, drawing Ling's attention to the wide circle that took up most of the floor. He assumed it was for the transmutation to put Al’s soul back into the prone body that lay on a white bed in the corner. That was good, right? Then why did his stomach clench with that feeling of foreboding at the sight of those complex symbols?

Ed's eyes were wide with surprise and anger, which he'd been prepared for, and…fear. Why was he afraid of Ling? Or was it something else?

“Dammit, Ling, I told you to leave,” he said, a little desperately.

“I won't. Not until I know you're safe from them.”

Ed's jaw dropped, his lips drawn into a shocked “o”, before shaking his head a bit.

“Ling, you have to stop him from using the transmutation,” said Al, switching away from the hair-pulling strategy.

“Why? What's going on?”

“He's going to-”

Ed looked up at him, gold eyes against solid grey. He clapped, the chime ringing and echoing in Ling's ears.

“It's too late,” he said, and pressed his palms to the floor. Then, as the chalk began to glow:
“Thanks, Ling. For everything.”

Time seemed to move both too fast and too slowly for Ling. For all the sensory input in a single second, his own body was sluggish and inadequate by comparison.

He leaned forward, pushing off of the doorframe.

Lightning filled the room, smelling of danger and lighting it brighter than daytime.

His left foot hit the floor; it felt more like falling than running.

A glowing line crossed the diameter of the circle.

His right foot stepped over the chalk boundary, and he was within the circle. He felt his heart pounding in his chest, heard it in his skull, deafening him.

Then, the eye—no, The Gate—opened beneath them. How did he know that? Ed's words from before—price, deal, equivalent exchange—came back to him in a rush. He realized what Ed intended to do, why Al had been so desperate to stop him. His eyes flicked over to the kneeling alchemist, his hands pressed into the black, black iris and his wildly blowing hair obscuring his face. He was making no attempt to move, but Ling thought he saw his shoulders shake. Then the hands appeared.

Thin, black, and wriggling, it was his first instinct to recoil. But the black ribbons were too fast, wrapping around his shoulders and knees, pulling him down onto all fours. He fought against it, but the shadows only seemed to reel him in faster. The eye was expanding outwards, swallowing him, dragging him into the unknown as an awful numbness crept up his body. Gasping for air, his thought process was reduced to a handful of raw, screaming emotions and sensations. Fear. Confusion. Failure. Awe. Fear, fear, fea—

And he was standing again, as if he'd blinked and teleported somewhere else, only upright. Oddly enough, that was even more disorienting than his surroundings. The endless white space was brightly lit, somehow, despite the lack of any obvious light source. The only thing that distinguished the ground from the rest of his surroundings was the enormous black door suspended in the air before him, and the thin shadow it cast directly beneath.

Between him and that intricately carved door were three figures facing away from him. One ghostly, one unconscious, and Ed. Upon further inspection, the body on the floor and the one shifting its weight nervously before the door were identical to each other. They both had neatly cropped golden hair, the same long, gangly limbs. Their only differences, as stated before, were opacity and position. He had never seen them before, but an oddly intuitive part of him told him who it was.

Alphonse Elric, body and soul. Separated, just as he'd said.

For some reason Ling didn't call out to them. For some reason, he couldn't call out to them. His throat was choked and dry as sandpaper, his tongue felt as if it had been nailed to his lower jaw.

Then, a fourth figure moved forward, distinguishing itself from the void behind. Only its silhouette could be made out, and only with the background of black doorway. The figure was distinctly male, tall with long, graceful limbs and straight, angular shoulders. It made a broad welcoming gesture, spreading out large hands and defined arms.

“Edward Elric,” it said, grinning with oversized teeth, standing out on its otherwise featureless face. “And company,” it added, nodding at Al. If it noticed Ling, it made no indication. It turned back to Ed, tilting its head to the side.
“I’d say I’m surprised to see you back here, but that would just be a lie.”

“Claiming omnipotence, are we?” asked Ed dryly.

“Still a staunch atheist, I see,” it replied, sounding distinctly irritated by that. Ling wanted to laugh hysterically, because, first of all, they were face to face with God. Second of all, the first thing Ed had done upon seeing God was get on his nerves.

“You—you’re Truth,” said Al shakily, but with awe. Ling could definitely hear the capital “t” in his voice. Truth grinned like its head was about to split in two.

“Of course.”

“Let’s just get this over with,” said Ed, his eyes resolutely fixed ahead. He gave absolutely no indication of having heard his brother. “You know what I want.”

“Yes, yes,” it said, waving a hand flippantly. “Reassembly. It’s a tricky thing, you know. These have been apart for quite awhile, received some wear and tear. They might not fit together the same, who knows?” It shrugged, nonchalant.

“You know,” was the firm reply. Truth sighed, just a little, for dramatic purposes.

“It'll cost you.”

“Everything does. Name your price.”

“Ed, no!” Al was ignored.

“Well, let me think. You’d give just about anything for your family, wouldn't you? Especially your brother.”

Ed's back didn't move at all. Ling got the feeling his face was the same.

“Your other limbs? No, that's too obvious. Your hearing? Your sight? Your memories?”

The Truth leaned in, those grinning teeth inches from Ed's face. Al was attempting to move, but something about not being connected to a body was keeping him useless. Ling…Ling didn't know why, but he didn't move. He could only watch, a hopeless bystander.

“What about…a philosopher's stone?”

The words hung in the air, soaking in in just a second.

“Brother, don't you dare! It'll kill you!”

“Lucky me,” said Ed, continuing to ignore him. “I happen to have one with me all the time.”

“Ah,” said Truth, unsurprised. “Well, if you're sure.”

And the gate swung open, exposing that enormous apathetic eye as well as hordes of grasping hands. Only, they were now reaching for one thing, and one thing only. And Ed was just standing there, fists clenched. Agreeing to trading his life away like an object. Agreeing to die.

There was a second heartbeat, or maybe ten thousand heartbeats, pulsing against Ling’s stomach. The stone. His promise of a future for himself and his clan. Giving it up would mean giving up all certainty, all guarantees, all the power he held so closely.
Only, Ling wasn't thinking about that at all. All he thought of was chucking the damn rock as hard as he could into the gate. It went easily, winking at him one last time before disappearing into the black. Ling still didn't relax, but when the hands recoiled from Ed like they'd been burned, he finally let out a breath. The doors slammed shut, with a deafening noise and an enormous gust of air. Silence rang out, dramatically underlining the events of just a couple seconds. Truth grinned rakishly, and suddenly he was much, much closer than before. Those teeth, blunt as they were, turned out to be incredibly threatening at close range. Suddenly, it thrust forth a hand at waist height.

“Pleasure doing business with you, Ling Yao.”

It smirked, reeking of smug satisfaction. Ed was watching in awe and confusion, and he was still reeling himself from how unbelievable the situation was, and he was shaking Truth’s hand anyways, and Ling was on the floor again, face down.

He gave a shuddering gasp as he quickly took stock of all his limbs and faculties, and the cold stone floor. It was then he realized someone was yelling, with a voice that was hoarse but growing stronger. Ling began to get up to investigate the noise when it was cut off by a large white, writhing lump falling out of the sky. Well, more like it rolled off of the mattress, but Ling was still disoriented.

Though the lump was no longer yelling, it was gasping loudly as it flailed, revealing limbs from its cocoon. It bolted upright, tugging at its ears and nose to prove their existence. Its eyes were wide and stupefied as it stared down at smooth hands, their color a familiar golden hue, despite their more rounded shape.

“Al?”

That voice, soft and almost disbelieving, afraid to hope, almost made whatever the hell that was worth it. Well. No ‘almost’ about it. The absolute hell of the past fourteen hours was absolutely worth it, for the look on Ed's face. His body was an enormous bruise, he'd gotten involved in an international incident, and he was back at square one in his path to the throne, but currently, Ling didn't give a damn. He'd must've gone crazy, he knew it. The blond's insanity was contagious, and he'd caught it. Bad.

But, as mentioned before, he couldn't bring himself to care. So he sighed, leaned back against the wall, and expected a touching moment of brotherly love and happiness. To say that he was surprised when Al immediately tackled his brother with fists raised would be putting it mildly.

“Al, what the hell—”

“Brother, you absolute bastard!”

Ed was speechless, though that was probably due to the hands throttling him.

“Hurghk,” he said.

“You were going to give him your philosopher's stone? Are you an idiot? You would've died! My brother could've died just because he's a big fat idiot!” It wasn't exactly clear who Al was addressing, but it didn't seem prudent to ask at the moment.

The strangling had ceased, replaced by Al vigorously shaking him about by the shoulders. Ed wasn't bothering to resist, his head bouncing freely.

“Well, what do you have to say for yourself?”

Al looked down expectantly, loosening his grip. Ed raised a finger, opened his mouth, seemed to
think better of it, pause, and then speak.

“Your muscles don't look like they've atrophied at all,” he said, finally. Al blinked, then looked down, suddenly in awe. His body wasn't particularly defined, but definitely not as wasted away as one would expect of a five-year coma patient.

“You're right,” he whispered. “I shouldn't be able to sit up, let alone—wait a minute! Don't change the subject!”

“Truth must've also restored your body to full health,” muttered Ed. “That's disturbingly helpful.”

His musing was interrupted by Al's yelling.

“I told you not to change the subject!”

“What, do you want me to apologize or something?” he asked sarcastically.

“It'd be a good place to start,” said Al, just as sarcastically. He exhaled sharply, pressing a palm to his forehead. Ling suspected he was having his first headache in half a decade. “If Ling hadn't come after you,”

He broke off, his face crumpling inwards like he was fighting off tears. Ed sat up, tried to put his hand on Al's shoulder, and was shrugged off immediately. Ed frowned, before apparently realizing Ling's presence. He whirled around, leveling an accusatory finger at Ling.

“You!”

“Me?” Ling had the strangest feeling that Ed was not about to proclaim his everlasting gratitude.

“Yeah, you! Can't you take a hint?” That strange feeling was disappointingly accurate. “I told you to go home!”

“If I had, you wouldn't have had the stone to trade at the gate.”

“Yes, I would've had my own instead! You could've used the stone for yourself instead, to become emperor, to change Xing! What happened to all those big plans of yours?” he asked, voice growing more irate by the second.

“It was worth it,” said Ling decisively, eyes and throat burning. Ed froze, eyes wide and disbelieving in his flushed face.

“What,” he whispered.

“You were worth it,” he said, a bit stronger.

“It's not equivalent…”

Ling felt the dam holding back his fear, anger, and worry crumble to pieces.

“Like hell it isn't!” He raked his fingers through hair stiff with blood and sweat, dislodging the string that tied it back. “Your life is not a commodity to trade away without a second thought to all the people you'd be hurting, no more than your brother's is.”

Ed's face showed traces of regret, seeing the honest concern on Ling's features. When Ling spoke again, it was tired, frustration melting away.

“So…do us a favor, and just admit that it was stupid to try and sacrifice yourself.”
“And that you won't do it again,” chimed in Al.

Ed looked between the two of them for a second before huffing a small laugh and tentative smile.

“Fine. I promise.”

Al wrapped his brother in another bone crushing hug that Ed complained about with a smile before being released.

“Hey, Ling,” said the elder brother.

“Hm?”

“Thanks,” he said, with an honest smile and none of the sorrow of his earlier goodbye. Ling's heart clenched and fluttered in a truly alarming fashion that was not nearly as uncomfortable as one would expect. It was a good moment, calm and triumphant.

Until the homunculus came crashing in, in the most literal way imaginable.

Chapter End Notes

Late, I know. Tell me what you think, all the same:
Therapy, But Even More Disgusting

Chapter Summary

While Ling and the Elric brothers make contact with a higher power, other factions clash in the library.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Izumi Curtis stomped through the palace like she owned the damn place. She hardly felt guilty; Trisha and Hohenheim had repeatedly made it clear that their doors would, metaphorically, always be open to her and Sig. And if the literal doors happened to be shut for the night, it was nothing a little alchemy couldn't fix. She didn't look behind her, despite all the troublesome characters stuck to her like shit on her shoe. Thankfully, the military dog convinced Hughes to go home quite some time ago, after a mention of his wife and daughter waiting for him to return from what should've been a straightforward shopping trip.

That was a relief. Hughes was a good customer and a good man, often talking to Izumi and at Sig about his beloved child and wife at the counter. It stirred up a bit of bitter jealousy in her, seeing those photographs of Elicia, when every child she'd ever loved was either dead or worse. Still, her positive feelings that Hughes and Gracia didn't take their daughter for granted outweighed that jealousy by a considerable margin.

Now she only had her husband, the military dog and his litter of puppies, the chimaeras, and the homunculus.

Sig was a strong man, but he wasn't there to fight. Rather, Izumi knew she couldn't ask him to go home until he'd seen Ed with his own two eyes. The Amestrian entourage seemed well trained and sensible enough, not that it meant much against homunculi and an alchemist of the caliber Greed described. With the exception of Hawkeye, they had split off hours ago to broaden their search, gather information from the city guard network, and relay intel to Mustang by radio.

The employees of The Devil's Nest were much stronger in close quarters combat, unpredictable due to their abilities, and worked well as a team. Still, brute force could only go so far against regenerative abilities, as well as whatever fucked up things Dante had cooked up. If one could have an unbreakable shield, what were the others like?

The way Izumi saw it, they had three heavy hitters on their team. The dog, Mustang, carried strong offensive power when not giving himself an ulcer over the thought of causing an international incident. However, he was reliant on physical arrays and had one especially glaring weakness.

Moisture of any kind.

Izumi herself was one of the best (if not the best) combat alchemists in the entire world, but her condition was problematic to say the least. Something about the situation, be it physical exertion or emotional strain, was causing her episodes to be more frequent, no matter how she ignored them. Her face was smeared with blood fresh and dried, and she had no doubt she looked like a monster.
Greed was a monster, but at least he was in their corner. His ultimate defense made for an unstoppable offense, and combined with his regenerative abilities, his presence could definitely level the playing field with the homunculi. Unfortunately, he was absolutely insufferable.

If shit hit the fan, which Izumi had no doubt it would, that was what she had to work with. She wasn't expecting a truly violent fight from Ed (though she wouldn't put it past him), but Mustang’s surprisingly resourceful men had already revealed that two city guards had been found dead in the ruins mid-afternoon, as well as given alarming reports of a rapidly appearing and suddenly disappearing monster in the Ishvalan quarter. Undoubtedly that was Dante and the other homunculi in their own search for the missing prince. Izumi would’ve gone there first, if Greed hadn't admitted that Ed had also had his little brother’s soul with him, and was attempting to restore him. With that, Izumi realized that there was one place she knew Ed would go, if he hadn't already.

Which brought her into the center of the palace. With every furious step she took, she drew ever closer through the maze to the library and Alphonse’s room. After Ed's kidnapping, they had all been paranoid that a second attempt would be made, either to abduct the younger brother, or finish the job they’d started by sending him into a coma and assassinate him. As a result, the royal family decided to make use of a secret room installed by a more eccentric king.

Five years ago, after it became clear that Al’s breathing and other bodily functions were in complete working order and his condition was entirely stable, Hohenheim and Trisha rejected the idea of leaving him in the hospital. They devoted half of their lives to learning how to care for him, the other being dedicated to finding Ed. Tonight could very well be the night their wishes came true. However, Izumi had the sinking feeling that only one or the other would be fulfilled. After all, the only way Ed could perform soul alchemy would be by opening the gate, and paying the toll. There was no doubt in her mind that Ed would give anything for his brother, up to and including his own life.

With that thought in mind, she pressed onwards, forcing some of her acquired companions to practically jog to keep up. With each increment closer to her destination, another wave of unease and visceral wrongness dripped down her spine, to the point it was impossible to ignore.

She threw open the library doors to the ground floor, heedless of the noise as they banged against the walls. The room was shadowed by furniture and enormous shelves, creating a collection of places to hide. She wasted no time in clapping her hands and slapping one against the wall. The lights above as well as the smaller lamps around the room flickered to gentle, yellow life, revealing the space in its entirety.

Despite that, the figures on the balcony didn’t so much as flinch. One was squat and oddly proportioned, practically huddling in the other’s skirt. The taller of the two looked like a woman of indeterminate age, mid-twenties to late thirties. Her hair shined like a pool of spilled ink, flowing over creamy white shoulders. Nestled above ample breasts was a red tattoo, small enough to almost be mistaken for a pendant, but visible enough to leave no doubt in Izumi’s mind.

“Homunculus,” she hissed out. It was under her breath, but the thing smirked at her as if it had heard. The creature’s full lips were redder than blood and twice as threatening. It raised one large, spindly hand, fingers spread. The only thing that saved Izumi’s life was the last-second instinct she didn’t even know she had.

“Everybody back!”

She hit the deck, erecting a thick barrier from the stone floor. Right before her horrified eyes, she saw it cleaved into strips like wet clay. It fell apart, revealing the woman behind. She’d jumped over the railing to stand before them, closely followed by the other abomination, grinning like a jackal.
“Oh? Another alchemist? One that's performed human transmutation, no less.” She chuckled, a low, sultry noise, condescending in nature. “Judging by all that blood on your chin, you traded something important.” Izumi growled. “Tell me, was it worth it?”

“Will that attitude be worth it when I make you choke on your own teeth?”

Another infuriating smirk. Sig moved to stand by Izumi, though his strength would likely be useless against such sharp weapons.

“I like you. However, I do feel obligated to ask you a question.” She sighed, put-upon. “I don't suppose you know the whereabouts of a certain runaway brat?”

“Go to hell,” she growled.

“Such an amusing human concept,” she mused to herself before shrugging. “Well, no matter. I so rarely get to do anything interesting, so I might as well make it last.”

“In that case,” said a voice slicker than a greased pig, “Why not start with a family reunion?”

Greed stepped forward to Izumi’s right, the tattoo on the back of his hand clearly showing. His superfluous sunglasses sat on the bridge of his nose, revealing only a hint of his glittering eyes. For the first time, the female homunculus showed genuine surprise, while her companion huddled back into her side.

“Lust, who is he?” Lust, as she was known, had no answer to that.

“Greed the Avaricious, your elder brother,” he stated with a bow. Lust tilted her head, considering.

“Dante said she destroyed you, down to the last atom.” she said, a bit harshly.

“She would've told you that.” He grinned widely, betraying none of the anxiety Izumi knew he felt, having seen how hard he had fought to avoid confronting his past.

“But she didn't say much else about her previous failures.”

Greed’s smile became a little colder.

“No, I don't imagine she would’ve.”

“Truthfully, that makes me even more curious.” Lust grinned in a manner that was both coy and predatory.

“Don't suppose I could just ask you to butt out, could I?” he asked, a touch hopeful.

“Are you kidding? This is the most excitement I've had in ages.”

“Oh.” Then:

“This is why we don't have family reunions.”

Greed lunged into action, hands clawed. Those carbon fingertips were poised to gut Lust like a fish, until he was blindsided by a third party tackling him.

“Greed!” His fiercely loyal employees arrived on the scene, but a sharp look from both Izumi and Lust kept them back.
They skidded across the stone floor before slamming against a sturdy bookcase, sending a few priceless books down on their heads. Or rather, head. Gluttony disregarded the books, focused instead on the skull in his mouth. Greed's body was limp, horrifically boneless as it dangled from his jaws.

Bido ran forward, only to be shoved out of the way by Dolcetto, who did his best to block the swipe of Lust’s claws. His steel grated against her fingers, producing a piercing shriek.

Gluttony made a horrible whining, growling noise as he huffed out air and clamped his teeth down. Something crunched. Loudly.

“Owwww.”

Gluttony spat out his prize, walking away, moaning.

“Luh, ih hurr,” he wailed, unwilling to completely close his mouth to talk. One look at him almost made Izumi sympathise. His tombstone teeth were cracked and broken, and spit mixed with blood ran over his grimacing lips.

Greed sat up, rubbed at his gunmetal gray skull. When it came away soaked in slobber he made a face.

“And now?” He stood up leisurely, cracking his neck a few times for good measure before groaning theatrically. He slapped a hand to his forehead, which made a dull clunking noise. “Aw man, that was my last pair of sunglasses, too…”

Lust’s fingers shrunk down to a slightly more manageable state as she turned her attention to Greed. Her eyes lost their amusement, coldly assessing her opponent.

“The ability to turn your skin to a highly rigid and durable carbon structure at will. The ultimate defense,” she stated coldly. Greed shrugged, clearly set more at ease by the crack in his sister’s composure.

“What can I say? I get hard.”

Lust scowled, before turning her attention to her moaning sibling. She grasped his round chin in one hand, a gesture that wasn't exactly tender, but wasn't cruel either. Then, with right thumb and forefinger, she methodically ripped out each and every one of his teeth, dropping them on the floor as she went. There, they disintegrated quickly, not even leaving a trace of dust behind.

“I’ll take care of him. You can eat the rest.”

Gluttony nodded, using his tongue to poke at his quickly protruding teeth. Apparently, the broken remnants of his previous set had to be yanked out before new ones could grow in. And then Izumi had no more time to think about anything other than surviving his next attack. He was fast, mind-bogglingly so considering his physique. He threw himself towards her, jaws-first. His black eyes were rolled back into his head, like a shark’s. Izumi’s first instinct was to bring up a barrier to stall, but the homunculus hopped over it as if he weighed no more than a gust of wind. Then he was close, too close for her liking, and Izumi didn't want to put her fists anywhere near that hungry maw. She began to transmute a pole-axe to attack while achieving a bit of distance.

And then she couldn't finish it because he was even closer, far too close. Thick, fleshy fingers were wrapped about her forearm, bruising the skin and reeling her towards a gory death by crushing dentition. She could feel the bone cracking and warping in an alarming way she knew wasn’t her imagination. She tugged away despite the screaming pain it caused her, but her considerable strength...
was all but useless.

Then, a pair of warm brown hands that she knew almost better than her own wrapped about the homunculus’s and began prying up those fingers. However, Sig only began to find success after Martel slit his throat, sending up a thick arterial spray that spotted Izumi’s face. Sig pulled Izumi back while she tried to covertly cradle her broken arm away from her husband’s concerned gaze. Martel clung to the monster's back with four twisting limbs, attempting to saw away at his carotid while he choked on blood. However, even this strategy appeared to underestimate the resilience of an artificial human. His arms waved about blindly before landing on the chimaera’s shoulder and hip. From there, she was removed as if no more than a particularly stubborn tick. With swift gesture she was hurled halfway across the considerable length of the room. Her head bounced sickeningly after her skull collided with the floor, and her eyes fluttered closed.

“Martel!” Bido rushed to his friend’s side to assess her injury. It immediately struck Izumi as both a very brave and very stupid move. Gluttony took a heavy sniff of the air.

“Snake tastes good. Too many bones, though.”

He took one step in Martel’s direction before a war hammer came hurtling towards his skull with the intent to smash it to a gritty jelly. However, Roa’s enraged expression turned to one of horrified shock soon enough. He leaned into the swing, staring at where Gluttony had caught his weapon. Both of them shook with effort, Roa considerably more so.

Gluttony tilted his twitching nose into the air, almost delicately. Then, a thick trail of spit flowed over the corner of his mouth, a glazed look in his black eyes. He licked his lips, revealing a flat, wriggling tongue stamped with the ouroboros. Then he said two innocuous, triumphant words.

“Fresh beef.”

He pushed the war hammer aside and lunged forward. His eyes were fixed on Roa, and yet unfocused, unable to see beyond the base urge. He was the picture of mindless hunger, a desire that could never be sated.

Then that horrible, disgusting, unnervingly human face had a hole in it. Underneath his left eye, it was as round and perfect as a fresh hundred-cenz coin. Hawkeye didn't lower her gun, firing off three more rounds. The effect was noticeable, if inhuman. Gluttony staggered back, and Roa wasted no time hitting him with all his strength. The blow instantaneously crushed his ribcage and sent him flying into a bookcase. The antique fell backwards, throwing up a huge plume of dust.

Simultaneously, Greed's own fight began. They paced, circling each other like feral dogs.

“So you wanna test your claws against my shield? Frankly, even I don't know how that would turn out.”

Lust didn't smile, cruelly or otherwise. She was completely serious, her eyes narrowed to slits. She raised a hand, flicked her wrist. Greed rolled to the floor and out of the way, though the bookshelf behind him wasn’t so lucky. He ran closer, up past the reach of her extended claws as she belatedly retracted them. He flexed his own sharpened fingers, and tried to thrust his hand through her chest. She sidestepped at the last moment, putting him off balance with his arm outstretched. She wrapped her hand about his throat, violently shoving him to the ground on his back. He rolled to the side, eyes blown wide as he saw her fingers stab into the stone just to the left of his skull.

“Stay still,” growled Lust.
“No thanks,” said Greed, a little distracted.

Greed dashed to the other side of the room. He flipped over a massive table and pressed his back against it, breathing hard. It wasn't exactly from exertion, but rather one terrifying question. Where was Dante? The mere thought of the woman sent his lungs pumping like a blacksmith’s bellows, brought back memories of small, dark rooms, and overwhelming pressure, tons upon tons of dirt suspended above his head. He couldn't take another hundred years of that. He was starting to feel claustrophobic in his own hardened skin, if that made any sense. He'd already had to uncover his skull just so he could breathe without shakiness. He just wanted this fight to end, and felt disgusted with himself for that. Wasn't he supposed to be strong? That's why he was the leader. But Greed wasn't a long-range fighter. How could he defeat her if he couldn't get close? Well, he had an idea, but it involved taking significant risks.

The table that had been serving as his shield all but exploded in a rain of splinters. He dove forward, his hardened shoulder scraping at the stone, the stone scraping away at his unprotected cheek. He scrambled to his feet, just in time to see two things: Lust’s fingers swinging down towards him, and her bloodthirsty expression. It was feral and giddy and sadistic all at once, encapsulated by the one phrase that came to mind. Blood-lust.

Greed almost groaned at his own bad joke, but didn't have the time when he took the full force of Lust’s blow. His heart was in his throat, and he resisted the urge to squeeze his eyes shut.

A fantastic shriek, like metal on metal, tore through the air and shredded his ears. His feet slid on the floor, though his soles were flat to the ground and stance solid. He grit his teeth, flexed his clenched fingers, and leaned into where three of Lust’s fingers were caught on his forearm. Her eyes went wide at the apparent gridlock of their abilities, then her skin turned paper-white when she realized that this was anything but a draw.

His right hand shot up and grabbed those fingers with a crushing grip. They screeched and grated at each other, producing a shower of sparks. Lust jerked back, but only succeeded in pulling Greed with her. Her face was horrified, ruby-red lips parted in a shaking circle. She shook her head, eyes never leaving Greed.

“No, no, nononono-”

Her scream was bloodcurdling, resonating throughout every inch of the room. It was almost worse than the snapping noise that preceded it. Almost.

Greed threw the fingers he'd ripped from Lust to the ground. She wailed and whimpered, clutching her mutilated hand to her chest.

“Jesus fucking Christ!” With a piercing inhalation, her eyes met with his, filled with pure, unadulterated hate. She made an impulsive swipe with her left hand, seeking immediate revenge rather than implementing any real strategy. Greed caught two fingers this time. He tore them away from her, gritting his teeth at the sound of ripping flesh and snapping tendon. Greed started forward, ignoring her tortured cry, when a roughly four-hundred-pound ball of flesh tackled him to the floor.

“Don't. Hurt. My. Lust!”

Gluttony had learned not to bite off more than he could chew after his last attack on Greed. This time around his enormous palms wrapped about his throat, attempting to strangle him to death. It was working pretty damn well, too. He could feel his windpipe collapsing as the last wisps of air escaped him. Panicked, Greed did the only thing he could think of and slashed at the most obvious target: his protruding gut. Gluttony’s belly slit open easily, spilling thick blood and foul-smelling entrails. Greed
shoved the limp homunculus off him, holding the wound open to keep it from healing. He got to his feet, barely resisting the urge to puke. He was rarely so affected by gore, but something about the situation or the rancid quality of Gluttony’s blood was exceptionally stomach-turning.

Dolcetto and the lady soldier were facing down Lust, who was still deadly with only five fingers. Apparently she could not heal and use her ability at the same time, as Greed couldn't heal while using his ultimate shield. Good to know. Sig was curled protectively over his wife, who had sustained some very painful injury. Even more alarmingly, Bido and Roa were crouched by Martel as she slowly came back to consciousness.

In the middle of it was Roy Mustang, with a concerned furrow between his brows as he surveyed the scene. And what was he doing to help?

Nothing.


Rage burned in his throat, though that might've been the bile he couldn't hold back. Mostly, though, it was anger at that useless dog. They locked eyes across the room.

“Why the hell haven’t you lit these fuckers up?” demanded Greed, his voice rough from the damage he’d taken. Amazingly, Mustang managed to be indignant in the face of a blood soaked monster.

“Every single document in this room is priceless, irreplaceable, and extremely flammable. Even one stray spark, and we could lose centuries of research.” He was obviously agitated, and even had the gall to act exasperated that Greed hadn't immediately thought of it. Behind him, Izumi looked up from her mangled arm.

“He's right. He can't use his alchemy in here.”

“Are you kidding me? What the hell is wrong with your priorities?”

Izumi gave him an incredibly stern look, not unlike the ones he received from Roa on a daily basis.

“Fine,” he sighed, hooking his fingers under the sternum of a weakly struggling Gluttony. “I guess we'll,” he swung his arm back, eyes fixed on a spot on the wall. “Just have to,” he heaved the body with all his strength. “Take this outside.” He let go.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry. I definitely haven't abandoned this, but the closer I get to the end, the more I agonize over every word. Plus I have a shitload of applications and projects to get done before October. Please be patient with me, and TALK TO ME.
Chapter Summary

Teacher reunites with her first and only students. Roy mostly works to further Amestrian interests, any rescued princes are just unintended side effects. Greed is overpowered, even among homunculi.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Ed instinctively curled away from the foreign object that crashed through the wall, shielding Al with his body. Ling barely scrambled out of the way of rubble, sword drawn and ready.

The body was mutilated, slit open from groin to throat. Al's newly retrieved stomach churned, though it had more to do with the identity of the victim than the gore.

Gluttony’s enormous fingers twitched weakly as his body repaired itself, pulling in spilled entrails and knitting together jaggedly ripped flesh. Those tombstone teeth that had haunted Al’s sleepless nights for years were once again only feet away from his soft, vulnerable body. And yet, overtaking his fear was white-hot anger. He lamented his lack of suitable equipment for exacting painful revenge for every humiliation and harm he'd inflicted on the brothers. Meanwhile, Ling turned to Ed, looking mildly panicked.

“Homunculus?”

“Homunculus.”

“Run away?”

“Run away,” agreed Ed. He pulled Al to his feet, shortly after he'd removed his own feeding tube and IV. Under normal circumstances he probably shouldn't have done that, and he'd most definitely been too rough, judging by the pain in his throat and hand. But he didn't have the time or desire to regret it as Gluttony shuddered back to life. The homunculus got to his feet, blinking like a confused child waking from a nap, before his eyes widened in recognition.

“Lust! Lust, the half-metal! I found it,” he hollered over his shoulder.

“Shut the hell up!”

Ed transmuted an enormous stone hand that slammed directly into Gluttony's fat face, launching him back through the hole he'd created. They could've exited that way as well, if it weren't for Lust’s presence. That, and one other unexpected factor.

“Fullmetal?” That voice echoing up from the library was familiar to Al, giving him a sinking feeling in his freshly recovered stomach. Deep, male, and undeniably Amestrian, Al placed it after a few seconds, even without seeing his face. Ed, as usual, was slightly ahead of him, scowling at the hole in the wall, where the sounds of a struggle began anew.

“Oh, great. And now that asshole’s here, and he knows my name!”
“The guy that wants to blow us up?” Ling looked like he already knew the answer, judging by his pained expression.

Immediately, Al's thoughts turned away from the homunculi to the best possible escape route. He went to the window, peering outside. They were several stories from the ground, the room likely hidden from outside view by towers and domes. Ed was by his side, considering their options as well. Al knew that to go downward would be suicide, as the homunculi could reach the ground several times faster just by jumping. For obvious reasons, they couldn't go back the way they came. When backwards, forwards, and down were all out of the question, there was really only one option left. Ed was on the same page, already transmuting a narrow set of stairs to the roof. He looked over his shoulder, his eyes gleaming with that unknown factor, a strange amalgam of mischief and adrenaline.

“You coming?”

They dashed up the stairs, while Al tried to avoid looking down. He offhandedly noticed that he was significantly taller than his older brother, which was oddly conflicting. For five years, Ed had been a giant, carrying and protecting his tiny metal body, but not anymore. For the first time in a long time, Ed looked…small. Al's new (old?) limbs felt jittery and nervous with the hopelessness of the task ahead of them. The brothers essentially had two options. Run away from Dante, or kill her. Both were near impossible, and yet it alarmed him how easily he chose the latter.

They stepped onto the roof, while Ed destroyed the stairs behind them. Al looked around, searching for another escape route. The rooftop greenhouse? The smell might hide them from Gluttony. Still…

Al was torn from this line of thought by a crash of breaking glass and brick. He watched, transfixed, as something shoved the homunculi out the window. Well, more like through the entire wall. Their bleeding bodies arced down to earth, smashed marionette forms struggling to pull themselves together.

“Okay,” said Ling, in that lilting drawl indicating surprise. “I have a question. Who just did that?”

“And why,” added Al.

“Don't know, don't care, still running,” muttered Ed. He raced to the edge of the roof and clapped his hands to transmute a bridge.

“Hold it right there, young man!”

That stern female voice froze Ed and Al in their tracks. It was a voice the brothers immediately associated with a week under the desert sun with only a knife in their possession, grueling hours in walk in freezers that slowed the progression of blood in their veins to a funeral march, and the sharp iron scent of gore on their clothes. In short, their childhood as Izumi Curtis’s first and last students.

“Teacher,” breathed Al. It wasn't a question, but rather a fearful statement. Ling shot him a surprised look, but said nothing, likely knowing that this was not the time for demanding exposition.

“Shit,” was all his brother whispered under his breath. Both sets of golden eyes stared forward without really seeing, too terrified to turn around. And yet, they both knew there was no point making a run for it at this point.

“After all the trouble you've put me through, the least you could do is look me in the eyes.”

Slowly, as though moving on rusty clockwork mechanisms, they turned to face the music.
Izumi Curtis looked like a vengeful emissary of hell, to put it mildly. Her chin was crusted with dried blood, contrasting the paper white of her skin under the moonlight. At her sides were two unexpected but not entirely unfamiliar characters. A tense Roy Mustang, along with Greed in shredded clothing. Al felt himself shrivel up under her imperious gaze.

“That's better. Now, care to explain why you haven't so much as attempted to contact me after escaping?” She was slowly advancing on them, forcing them to resist the urge to step back.

“It's-”

“I-”

“We didn't want to get you involved,” is what Ed settled on eventually.

“Didn't want to get me involved? A bit late for that, isn't it?” She tried to put her hand on her hip, but winced in pain, drawing attention to her badly bruised forearm as she cradled it close. Both brothers noticed, and their guilt was plainly shown on their faces.

“Teacher, you're injured,” was all Al could think to say, stating the obvious. Ed was biting his bottom lip like it just might wobble if he didn't, looking just as miserable as Al felt. Teacher noticed and sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose in exasperation. When she looked up, the lines of her face were heavy with fatigue rather than twisted in rage, and her smile was as soft as they'd ever seen. Al couldn't recall her ever looking this fragile, like the slightest change in atmosphere would send her folding like a house of cards. Al supposed she'd missed them just as much as they'd missed her, if not more.

“It doesn't hurt,” she lied. “Now, won't you come over here and greet your godmother?”

She spread her good arm out wide expectantly. Some intangible force made Al step forward, all but throwing his arms around her neck. Ed was by his side. From what he could briefly see, his elder brother had his teeth buried in his lower lip hard enough to draw blood. He fairly collapsed into her shoulder, breathing noisily on the edge of sobs. Al felt the damp patches form on his teacher's shirt, signaling that he was already past the point of holding back his own tears. It almost felt safe. It was also mildly uncomfortable, hunching over to fit his forehead to the curve of her shoulder. She had always been like a giant to them, not this tired creature made of worn paper and heartache. Teacher's sigh brushed over his hair gently, while her grip was as vice like as ever.

“You two are absolutely hopeless, deciding to do this on your own for absolutely no good reason.” She shook her head a bit at their seemingly obvious stupidity.

“We have a reason,” interjected Ed. “And she won't hesitate to kill anyone in her way.”

Teacher pulled back, looking at him with just the slightest hint of a smirk in her flinty grey eyes.

“That Dante bitch?”

Ed narrowed his eyes at Greed over her shoulder.

“You told her everything, didn't you?”

The homunculus shifted uncomfortably.

“She came into the bar, started tearing things up, and wouldn't leave. What was i supposed to do?” he asked defensively.
“We have more than enough skilled alchemists with me, the dog, and your father on our side to overwhelm her,” said Izumi, brushing Greed’s words aside.

Ed went stiff at the mention of Dad, so Al took it upon himself to articulate their shared fears.

“Dante isn’t just a skilled alchemist. She’s harvested hundreds of thousands of people's souls for energy, and gathered more knowledge than we could even dream of. At this point, she's more philosopher’s stone than human.”

“A demigod,” summarized Ed, miserable but not inaccurate. Teacher stared, her skin growing pale. Her brave front was starting to falter in the face of an unknown enemy, one that could make the proud, cocky Edward Elric she knew sound so defeatist. Greed shifted uncomfortably at the mention of Dante, looking a bit sick. Suddenly his skin flashed charcoal grey, and he threw himself forward.

“Everybody down!”

There was a stifled cry of pain to Al's left, as well as the all too familiar sound of separating flesh. Both Al and Teacher caught Ed as he stumbled forward, bleeding from a deep gash on the back of his thigh. Several feet away, Lust smirked, despite being capable of infinitely more lethal damage.

With ice in his veins, he realized her strategy. The attack to Ed's thigh, while not exactly deadly, had cut through several layers of muscle, immobilizing him. Lust’s plan was to hobble Ed, preventing the most valuable target from escaping without destroying it while she picked off the rest of them. Her smile was feral, and somehow, she looked more alive than ever.

“I saw what you did to Envy, kid. I have to say, I'm impressed. For the first time in his entire life, he almost looks cute.”

“Really?” Ed tried to stand up completely on his automail leg alone, but ended up leaning against his teacher and brother like a poorly designed tripod. “Impressed enough to do me a favor and forget I ever existed?”

She laughed, sultry, dark, and musical all at once.

“I thought about doing something like that to piss the old hag off.” Her smile twisted into a scowl, and she sneered at Greed, locked in combat with Gluttony. “Unfortunately for you, my other older brother has given me so much trouble on your behalf that I have to spite him. Sorry, kid,” she said, not looking at all regretful. She rushed forward, claws sweeping downward. Al, realizing he was about to get reacquainted with extreme physical pain (at the very least), panicked and snapped his eyes shut.

But rather than searing pain or rapid exsanguination, Al’s eyes were ripped open by an unearthly shriek of metal on metal. In the dark, the sparks that showered to the ground were bright as the sun.

Ling adjusted his footing, as well as the gleaming silver curve of his sword against Lust’s fingers. He balanced his weight on the balls of his feet as he held her back, leaning in with all his strength. Despite the massive amount of effort and concentration needed, he looked behind himself, clearly distraught, and for good reason.

“Ed!”

The blond's leg was bleeding profusely all over the rooftop, fast enough to erase any chalk healing array Al could possibly use. Teacher didn't know alkahestry, and even if she did, Al could see that her arm was broken badly enough to interfere with her alchemy. But even worse than blood loss was that the muscle fibers had been cut deep, hampering Ed's ability to stand and escape. Meanwhile,
Lust watched the exchange with interest.

“What's this? You've made a friend? How cute.”

She leveraged Ling's distraction with ease, and the next bat of her claws sent him sprawling on the ground.

“Ling!” Ed screamed in a way Al had never heard from his brother, raw and terrified. He broke away from Teacher and Al, all but falling to the Xingese prince’s side. From what Al could see, Ling's face was awash in hot blood from the left ear down, the flesh more akin to raw meat than human skin. Al felt nauseous and disoriented, unable to focus on any possible route of action. His friends and family were being hurt, their blood spilled, and his limbs were frozen, shaking. Lust sauntered forward, her smile a blood red smear in his blurring vision. She wasn't even looking at Al, uninjured and paralyzed. She was entirely focused on Ed and Ling.

“Oh, poor baby. Did you get attached? I'll just put him out of his misery, then you can forget all about it,” she said, a sickly sweet and mocking version of her own voice. Ed ignored her, pulling Ling's head into his lap and attempted to staunch the flow of blood enough to perform alkahestry.

“C'mon, Ling, you crazy son of a bitch. Can you hear me? Next time you're healthy, I'm gonna kick your ass, I swear to god,” he rambled, clapping his hands and rushing to close the wound.

“Stop fussing over him and come at me already,” said Lust, annoyed. She stalked forward, a scowl on her face. However, she was almost immediately stopped by another figure, whose loyalties Al found somewhat questionable. She scoffed, unimpressed.

“What are you going to do, glare me into submission? You might be pretty, but you're not that pretty.”

Roy Mustang said nothing, merely raised one gloved hand. The fire that followed was nothing like what they’d seen that morning. Those seemed like parlor tricks by comparison, all flash and no substance. This was a burning wall of killing intent, a conflagration that reduced everything within it to dust. The detached alchemist in him marveled at the control Mustang had, feeding his flames precise amounts of oxygen to control their size and intensity. Lust’s scream petered out in a matter of seconds, though Al had the feeling it would haunt him for much longer. He wondered hopefully if that was the end of it, that every last trace of the homunculus was wiped from the earth.

But no, when the smoke cleared, there was a body, half-formed and wrapped in exposed muscle. It twitched, skin growing and bony claws extending.

“You…bastard…”

A flick of Mustang’s wrist and the screams began afresh. Simultaneously, their other opponent broke free of Greed’s grasp, teeth bared in rage.

“Lust!”

Al's heart was in his throat. That being said, the resolution was rather immediate when Mustang pulled a second gloved hand from his pocket, and the flames were doubled. Gluttony's screams, unlike his sister's, had shape and form. It was one word, a name babbled over and over. Lust, Lust, Lust. Al almost felt sympathy for him. Almost.

The heat of the flames reached them from several yards away, drying out their skin and cracking their lips. Greed, who was closer to the blast radius, had hardened his entire body and seemed mostly unaffected. The smell carried over the gusts of hot air as well. It was a foul stench, a cross between
the acrid scent of burning hair and cooking meat, but somehow completely and indescribably wrong.
It turned his stomach, but Al was too frozen to even retch.

Throughout it all, Roy Mustang’s back was straight, his silhouette betraying no trace of doubt or fear
despite the spikes reaching for him. The piercing cries rang out into the night, but each snap came
without pause, clear and sharp every time.

Gluttony's flaming body began to heave, dragging itself along the ground with a last gasp of energy.
However, it was not in an attempt to attack Mustang or escape the infern. It was only an effort born
out of desire to get closer to his family.

“Lust…it hurts…”

His eyeballs had burst from the heat and ran down his cheeks in two gelatinous rivers, a gruesome
image. Still, he reached out blindly, his grasping hand latching onto what was left of her skirt.

They died in that position, Lust on one knee with the other hand lashed out to attack, Gluttony lying
at her feet. Their corpses burnt away to bones, their bones crumbled to dust, and the dust blew away
with the wind, leaving only scorch marks.

In another life, Al might've felt sympathy or at least pity for the creatures, brought into the world as
inherently broken creations. Yet, when faced with the monsters that tormented his brother while
making him watch, unable to share even an iota of Ed's pain, he felt only relief. Echoing his feelings,
Ed sighed deeply, before turning to his patient.

“You still with us, Ling?”

“Unfortunately, yes. I imagine this would hurt considerably less if I was asleep.” He sounded like he
was trying his hardest to talk without moving his face at all. Ed laughed, a little bittersweet.

“Sorry about that.”

Ling smiled, then looked like he immediately regretted it.

“Don't worry about it. Just imagine how cool I'll look with a scar,” he said gleefully.

“I don't need to. I already know that no amount of scarring could make your ugly mug look cool.”

“So cruel,” whined Ling melodramatically.

“I'm sure you'll get over it,” said Ed flatly. Ling pouted and turned his face away, giving Ed the silent
treatment for all of five seconds.

“Your automail isn't comfortable at all.”

Surprisingly, Ed didn't just tell him to suck it up. Rather, he sighed and adjusted Ling's head to rest
above the seam where metal met flesh, pillowed on warm, scarred flesh. His touch was firm but not
rough, cradling his skull with care. Al could see Ling's eyes go wide, and that the side of his face not
covered in blood was flushed red.

“What? Disappointed it's not a feather pillow?”

“No,” said Ling, voice soft but mouth grinning despite the pull of scabbing flesh. “Disappointed is
about the last word in the world I'd use to describe myself right now.”

Greed pantomimed gagging at the tenderness. Al took that as a divine signal to look away. Though
none of their behavior was inappropriate for a man with a large head wound, it somehow seemed to
intimate of a moment to observe closely, especially considering how Ed had kissed him earlier. With
that desire to protect privacy firmly in place, he turned to their unexpected ally.

“Thank you,” he paused, searching for the proper title. “Mr. Mustang,” he decided eventually.

“You're welcome. I assume you are the previously comatose Elric.”

“More or less,” was the vague reply. Then, seeing no way to subtly work his question into
conversation, he bulldozed his way forward.

“Why did you help us?”

Roy Mustang smirked. Al mentally conceded that Ed had a point about calling him “a smug bastards”. He certainly looked the part.

“To be perfectly honest, this is partly to improve the diplomatic standing of the Amestrian
government in Xerxes. I imagine returning the lost princes safely would curry a great bit of favor
with the public, as well as your father.”

Yes, he appeared to be every inch the smug bastard Ed had sized him up as.

“Ha! And people say I'm a sleazebag. At least I'm not a greasy politician.” Greed cracked his neck
and stretched his back, while Teacher nodded approvingly at his statement. Al, somewhat taken
aback by Mustang’s honesty about his self-serving motives, tried to ignore them.

“What's the other reason?”

“Well, according to our source,” Mustang spat out the word like a mouthful of salt, like he didn't
want acknowledge that Greed was in any way credible. “Dante is an Amestrian citizen.”

“More like she was born in the civilization that predated Amestris in the same area,” interjected
Greed. Mustang scowled.

“More importantly, she was the mastermind behind the conspiracy to turn all of Amestris into a
philosopher's stone.”

Al felt his blood run cold. Ed was staring, horrified.

“She—what—how?”

“She dug a transmutation circle around the border, studded with human sacrifices, large groups of
people dying in conflicts fabricated by the government.”

“Isual,” the brothers whispered, almost simultaneously. Mustang nodded gravely.

“Yes. Luckily, the northern command at Briggs had a chance encounter with the homunculus
charged with digging the circle and dispatched him before he finished. The appearance of a nigh-
unkillable alchemic creation sparked an investigation into a secret government laboratory in Central.
Attempts to destroy the evidence failed, revealing the plan and convincing enough military officers to
stage a coup. However, we thought that the plot was King Bradley's design, as no one ever reported
taking orders from a higher authority than him. Now that we know the true mastermind, it is our
responsibility as we serve our country to bring her to trial.”

Silence fell.
“I can't let you do that.”

Mustang looked at Al with narrowed eyes.

“And why is that?”

“Because I'm going to kill her first.”

Al could feel the shocked looks on Ed and Teacher's faces, as easily as he could see the small frown on Mustang’s, as well as Greed's smirk. Even Al was somewhat surprised by his own hatred, though he didn't even consider taking it back.

“Such big words from a brat. Care to repeat that?”

Her voice was as cold and sharp as a blade of ice held to Al's throat. It spoke of thinly concealed rage and promised pain, delivered precisely and without mercy. Al looked up and saw exactly what he expected. Her delicate features were pinched and contorted by anger, granting a hint of her true form. Al felt a lump in his throat. He was afraid, of both physical pain and what would happen should she win. But he couldn't think about that now. No, he could have only one thought on his mind.

“I said,” he began, looking her in the eye. “I'm going to kill you, Dante.”

Chapter End Notes

She's here to ruin everything.
A Hostile Introduction

Chapter Summary

Dante feels a certain sense of entitlement.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Roy Mustang eyed the woman that made the Elric brothers turn so pale. His eyes had mostly become accustomed to the dark, and the vibrant moon overhead gave more light than expected, so he could see her well. She was of average height and fairly slender build, but she held herself with the confidence of someone much taller, shoulders squared back and posture straight. He immediately tried to analyze her body language and expression, a habit gained from years navigating Amestrian politics.

Her posture spoke of someone calm and collected, but her eyes…her dark eyes held nothing but anger, hate, and indignation. Aside from her expression, Roy could tell that she was an objectively beautiful woman. Her pin-straight black hair shined, pearlescent under the moonlight. Hers was a classic sort of beauty, that, combined with her marble-white skin, reminded Roy very much of a statue he had once seen in Central. Much less subtly anachronistic were her clothes. Roy imagined she was wearing the only outfit more impractical for life in a desert city than Roy's uniform. It was a dress that could only be described as a gown, in a day and age where almost no one would wear something so stifling, least of all in hundred-degree heat. It looked like something that belonged in one of the first Armstrong family portraits, not this surreal scene atop the royal palace of Xerxes. Her voluminous skirts, likely buoyed by layers upon layers of fabric, were the color of wine, dark and rich. In addition to being a heat stroke waiting to happen, it looked ill-suited for the nighttime temperature in Xerxes, which dropped sharply after sundown. The cloth fell down past her ankles, and her sleeves were full-length and constricting, but the neckline plunged, revealing far more pale skin and décolletage than Roy felt like he should be viewing. None of this was particularly off putting about her. And yet, her presence, her proximity, her very existence made his skin crawl. He had an idea of who she was, even before the boy he'd assumed to be Alphonse Elric spoke.

“I'm going to kill you, Dante.”

Her white fingers flexed against her biceps, like they'd much rather be curled around the prince’s throat. Her features hardened, now conveying only pure disdain.

“Such an ungrateful brat.”

Alphonse stood tall, not backing down or breaking eye contact in the slightest. He made quite a picture, just then. A gangly teenager dressed in blue pajamas, his collar turned up by the wind, barefoot and practically growling at her.

“Why would I ever be grateful to you?”

Her eyes were flinty, sharp as she tilted her head mockingly.

“I've been very generous with you, Alphonse Elric, especially considering your complete lack of
useful traits. Five years ago, I let you live, didn't I?"

“You trapped him in a metal doll, unable to eat, sleep, or feel. That's not anyone's definition of mercy,” said the elder brother, standing unsteadily on his feet and practically leaning against the Xingese thief. It was potentially problematic, an attraction between a prince and a common criminal, but it wasn't like Roy had the time to examine that. He was too busy digesting the many horrifying implications of the conversation.

“His only other option was death. I'd say I was plenty generous.”

“Bullshit,” growled Edward.

“I provided you with food, comfort, and safety, in exchange for a power you never had any intention of using. It was a splendid arrangement, until you decided to bite the hand that feeds.” She gazed back at them imperiously, leaving no doubt in Roy's mind. This woman honestly believed every single crazy word she said.

“Safety? What did you ever do to keep Ed safe?”

She scoffed disdainfully.

“Others would have eventually sought out your older brother's philosopher's stone regardless of protections or obstacles. Do you really think they would all be as kind as me, or that they would have any reservations about abusing its powers?”

“Like what you're doing isn't an abuse of power! Your continued existence is unnatural, a perversion of nature.” The Xingese boy's lips were set in a thin line, his sword held at the ready.

“Not to mention,” continued Dante, ignoring him entirely, “how I saved you from a life doomed to constant experimentation. After all, I highly doubt that your father would be satisfied with creating an abnormality such as yourself without studying it further.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Izumi glared, suspicious. Her fingers twitched, as if longing for one of her spears. Roy was confused as well, but he had caught the meaning of Dante's words, more or less. That made it no easier to believe, all the same. Nothing about Hohenheim had indicated to Roy that he was capable of any sort of human experimentation, let alone combining sacrificed the souls of his subjects with his own son.

“I'm merely saying that a man who studies the philosopher's stone, collects its ingredients, and invents a procedure to weave it into the genetic code of his firstborn is not the kind of man who would balk at hurting his son to further his agenda. Who knows what he would've attempted? Transmutation of living flesh, weaponization,…vivisection?”

“That's not true,” whispered Alphonse, looking distinctly green at the imagery she presented. And yet, he wasn't surprised. Perhaps he had already considered the concept before, wondered why his father had tampered with Ed's body, what he stood to gain from such an act. Roy could practically hear Izumi's teeth grinding to nubs, her body tensing to leap into action. Oddly enough, Ed seemed least affected by Dante's speech, his worry directed towards his brother and teacher and their reactions. Maybe he didn't believe in his father's innocence so naively.

“Perhaps he would've declared the entire ordeal a wash and harvested the material from you entirely. After all, he had a replacement son already lined up,” she mused with a smirk. Izumi set her face in a neutral expression, with a surprisingly controlled voice.

“I suggest you quit talking, before-”
“Before what?” she mocked, tone unbearably smug.

“Before I cut that lying tongue out of your skull!” Her voice crescendoed into an outraged yell, and she started forward. Roy saw something gleaming in her right hand. A cleaver, one he'd already seen her wield with a frightening amount of skill. It was sharp enough to cut through flesh with ease, yet heavy enough to crunch through bone. Roy panicked, just a little. He intended to take Dante alive, and no plans to stop Izumi from tearing her limb from limb. Well, no plan short of setting her on fire, which was pretty much out of the question. Roy grimaced, prepared for a gruesome display.

“Teacher, don't!”

That was all the warning Roy got before Dante displayed the power of the philosopher's stone. Before that day, Roy had never seen anyone perform alchemy without an array. This was beyond even that. She remained still, the eye of a blood red lightning storm. A square pillar erupted from the ground at her feet, belting Izumi in the solar plexus. It was almost comical how quickly she was rebuffed, if not for the the gagging and how Izumi's limp body was flung backwards, boneless as a ragdoll and seemingly just as lifeless, save for the labored rise and fall of her chest. Roy heard more than saw her spit blood as she failed to stand, before collapsing once more.

“Teacher!”

Both brothers looked torn between attacking Dante and rushing to their godmother's side, which would mean dividing their attention. Meanwhile, Roy had made an executive decision. Every head of state had their own shameful government secrets, conspiracies swept under the rug, he reasoned. Dante would be his. It didn't matter, as long as he wiped her off the face of the earth before her existence was known, and before she caused any more damage. Mind made up, he felt his face slide into the white-hot mask of a killer. At least he had reached the decision to execute her on his own terms, his own information. Not like Ishval.

Luckily, the thief was restraining Ed out of the blast radius, and Alphonse had the sense not to attack her bare-handed at close range, especially without chalk-free alchemy. Roy raised a hand and prepared himself for the stench of burning flesh, to reduce her into little more than charred meat.

This did not happen. The raging inferno Roy had been focusing on producing sputtered out into nothing, midair. Dante didn't appear to be even mildly singed, smirking lightly. Roy frantically searched for the reason why, panic rising. His gloves were bone dry, the stitching immaculate. He tried again, and once more his flames spun out of existence with a crackle of white lightning. Feeling cold dread seep into his spine, he repeated the action, over and over again, to no new effect.

Despite his senses being flooded with adrenaline for the past half hour, Roy Mustang still had some wits about him. After all, he'd been an alchemist long before being a soldier or politician. With a start, he realized how she'd managed to counteract his technique. Roy used alchemy to organize a stream of highly oxygenated air that he ignited with a spark from ignition cloth. It was the magic bullet, one Roy had relied on for the past decade and a half. Dante used her alchemy to create an invisible shield, a vacuum in which his flames could not survive. Panic, hopelessness, and oddly enough, annoyance boiled in the pit of his belly. He belatedly regretted leaving Hawkeye behind to watch after the injured in the palace and radio their comrades. Who could blame him? It had seemed like overkill to bring a sharpshooter along when they already had an unparalleled alchemist, the strongest soldier to ever come out of Amestris, and an unbreakable monster on his side.

“Shit,” he muttered, feeling the back of his neck prickle with cold sweat as his stomach dropped somewhere south of his kneecaps.

“Roy Mustang, the Flame Alchemist. Current Fuhrer President of Amestris,” she said, making no
effort to conceal her disdain, lip curling back derisively.

"You recognize me?"

"You're the one that destroyed Wrath and derailed decades of planning within half a year. I recognize you. However, I do regret not having the time to hand down a fitting punishment."

"You're awfully high and mighty for a genocidal maniac," said Roy blithely, even as a river of cold sweat ran down his back. Dante's eyes narrowed dangerously.

"That's quite enough."

"Hardly. It's barely a fraction of what you des-

Suddenly, Roy's breath caught in his throat. He inhaled, and immediately noticed that something was wrong. The air felt thin and insubstantial, unable to fill his lungs. He gasped, and touched one hand to his throat, only to find nothing obstructing it or the bellows of his lungs. He clawed at his collar, panic and frustration overriding rational understanding of the futility of his situation. Dante had used alchemy, used his own array to steal the oxygen from his lungs. It was humiliating. And terrifying. Roy wanted nothing more than to kill her, but his strength was fading fast. He couldn't feel his tongue, though he could feel his spit sliding down his chin. His fingers tingled and his vision became grey and spotted from lack of oxygen in his limbs and brain. He raised his hand, barely able to lift an arm that felt like stone. His fingers rubbed together weakly, unable to exert enough pressure to create a spark.

"Stop! You're killing him!" The younger brother, he noted. His voice seemed overwhelmingly loud in comparison to the numbness overtaking him. Strength depleted, he let his skull flop to the ground. Through deteriorating vision, he saw the flash of long gold hair and gleam of silver limbs putting themselves between Dante and his body. Odd, he noted with a sense of detachment, he'd thought the elder Elric despised him. His mind was on other, more alarming things.

In his vision, Dante was slowly dissolving into a red smudge the color of clotted blood, but not all detail was obscured yet. What he saw still managed to send a frisson of alarm through him, despite being dangerously close to passing out. He questioned himself, whether it was the product of his oxygen deprived brain, before realizing he couldn't blame it on his current state. The fabric of her skirt was rustling without so much as a breeze, and under the edge, he just barely caught sight of something blacker than shadow, curling, reaching. The tendrils spread insidiously from Dante, unobtrusive and silent. They appeared to be constructed from pure, living darkness, though the edges looked to be sharper than knives. Though lacking eyes or teeth, the writhing darkness looked… hungry. Starving.

With that terrifying thought, consciousness finally slipped from Roy's grasp, and he succumbed to the shroud slipping over his mind.

Chapter End Notes

This is one of the only times it's completely appropriate to worry about what's under someone's skirt.
A Derailment of Fatalistic Plans

Ed knew, early on, that Dante had done something to the Flame Bastard (who was apparently president of Amestris, somehow). The presidential bastard tried to ignore it at first, his throat swallowing hard around nothing while he clumsily ripped off the top button on his shirt. Ed pinpointed the exact moment he realized, truly realized he was asphyxiating. His eyes blew wide in panic, red from bursting blood vessels in the middle of his blue face.

Ed knew he wasn't exactly the nicest person in the world, a combination of his recent upbringing and abrasive personality. He also knew he wasn't exactly a fan of the bastard. The Flame Alchemist's involvement in the Ishvalan extermination was well documented, almost a thing of legend.

On his bad days, his really bad days, Scar had talked to Ed about the extermination. He talked about explosions, so numerous and unpredictable people abandoned corpses in the street, too scared to retrieve them. He talked about the pop of gunfire haunting his dreams, coming from everywhere and nowhere. And he talked about the flames, so hot the very air scorched his lungs. He whispered into his hands about charred, unidentifiable bodies. He talked about after the food had started to dwindle after a few months of being unable to farm or trade as usual. He'd smelled the stench of cooked human flesh on the breeze, and his stomach had growled.

Ed remembered the look of shame on his face all too well. Though Scar had never given in, the fact that his starving body had betrayed him for even a second was enough to haunt him.

Ed remembered thinking it wasn't right. Thinking that it wasn't right for Scar, sarcastic, tough, deadpan Scar to look so raw, so shattered. Thinking that he'd rather go back to Amestris and hurt the men that did this to Scar and his people than stay at home. But he'd listened, even as it hurt, because Scar was his friend, and he needed someone who wouldn't pass judgement.

Almost a decade later, seeing the Flame Alchemist of the Ishvalan extermination, Ed had not quite forgotten those memories. Despite that, he could not bring himself to stand still and watch.

"Stop it! You're killing him!"

Al's scream made the choice for him. Ed ran in front of the dying man, who had killed so many others without a second thought. He spread out his mismatched arms, a human shield.

The gesture wasn't entirely symbolic in nature. As near as Ed could estimate, Dante was using alchemy to control the exact chemical composition of a very small area. If his own abilities were any indication, she at least needed a clear line of sight. Sure enough, the lightning that surrounded Dante like her own personal thundercloud dissipated. Eight minutes, Ed told himself. The human brain could survive up to eight minutes without oxygen, and they'd barely passed the two minute mark. He'd be fine. Any other outcome wasn't an option. Ed locked eyes with Ling, whose hand was still outstretched slightly. Though Ed had closed the wound, the gash running up and across his cheek to above his left ear looked wet and raw. His blood looked almost black under the moonlight, shiny like obsidian.

"Take them and go," was all Ed could say, referring to Al, Teacher, and the bastard. Ling nodded shortly, but the purse of his lips made it seem like he wanted to argue. He ran behind them, and Ed wondered if he should have said something different, offered better words to remember him by. As it
was he couldn't afford to turn his back on Dante. He looked to her, and her grim pale face. Even now, he felt sick and unsteady just being around her. He suspected that Greed had already run away from Dante, not that he could blame the synthetic shithhead. Ed associated her presence entirely with pain, and hated himself for it. He felt like a dog, trained to fear the owner that beat him. But, he forced himself to remember, Dante did not own him, and he was not a dog.

“Let's finish this.”

“Don't be unreasonable, Edward.” She smiled, but it was more reminiscent of an animal baring its teeth than anything else. “You could save your friends and family from a lot of pain and suffering by putting an end to this farce now.” When she spoke, her voice practically dripped sickly sweet condescension, making the hairs on the back of his neck bristle with revulsion and indignation. He hated the way she spoke to him like a child, like she had only his best interests at heart.

“Shut up.” He transmuted the plate on the back of his arm into a wickedly sharp blade.

“I hope you've considered the consequences of this in full. After all, I've given you too many warnings to not follow through on them.”

“I said shut up!” He launched himself forward with all the explosive force his legs could muster. Dante reeled back, clearly startled by his unexpected speed. She'd never seen him at full capacity, he realized. She had no idea what he was capable of. The thought gave him confidence, even as she drew up a stone barrier between them.

The issue with performing construction alchemy on a roof is, quite simply, the conservation of matter. The spikes, walls, and clubs alchemists like them were so fond of didn't come from thin air. They were built of materials allocated from the roof, weakening the structural integrity of the rooftop. There was a distinct limit on how large, thick or tall these constructs could be, lest the building they drew resources from cave under their feet. With that limitation, as far as Ed was concerned, the odds were in his favor.

His automail reduced her makeshift fortification to rubble in an instant, affording him a glimpse of her enraged expression. Served her right for doubting Winry's craftsmanship. In the same instant, she sent up another wall of different dimensions, not as tall but too thick to break through quite so easily. He jumped, relying solely on the mechanical power of his artificial leg, and vaulted himself over the stone wall. Dante crouched on the ground, a half-formed broadsword in her hand. She looked up, eyes wide, as Ed's blade came hurtling towards her face.

Several things happened in a single instant. Ed felt his blade meet slight resistance and slice through, followed by a one hundred and eighty degree shift in viewpoint as he was yanked upwards. His vision spun, and it took him a second to realize he was oriented upside down, suspended in midair. He registered two things very quickly. Dante's face was cut across one alabaster cheek, and she was absolutely livid. The small wound was gone with a wisp of steam, though her anger was not nearly as quick to dissipate.

Looking about him, Ed had the brief, panicked thought that the gate had been reopened. Thin black hands hung in the air about Dante, spidery and identical to the ones that haunted his nightmares. One spiraled about the length of his automail leg, tightening and causing the material to creak ominously, like it was about to shatter in an instant. The limbs hovering around Ed and grazing against his skin, surprisingly sharp, all had a common beginning in Dante's shadow, curving out from under the bell of her skirt. Despite himself, Ed's mouth hung open, his mind unable to completely explain the sight before him. He swallowed heavily, feeling sick.

“What is that?”
“This?” In the face of his discomfort part of her rage transmuted to a smug satisfaction. “With the unexpected wealth of energy you've brought me, I've decided to revisit an old experiment of mine, you could say.”

Hidden within folds of shadow were terrified crimson eyes and whimpering mouths that slunk behind Dante's hip.

“It's hard to believe a creature like this ever had the audacity to call itself “Pride”, isn't it?”

Ed connected the dots in an instant, recalling the notes he'd translated in the tower. The first homunculus. The failure.

“I thought you destroyed it,” he said, dumbstruck.

“Oh, I did. Broke it down completely and integrated it back into the stone. After some reworking, though, the improved version has almost nothing left of the original personality, save for the memories that provide a healthy knowledge of its own mortality. I find it much easier to get along with now, I must say.”

Ed felt his stomach churn. Despite being mortal enemies with the homunculi for most of his adolescence, he could acknowledge that they were as damn close to humans as one could get. At the very least, they were sentient and complex beings. If Greed was any indication, they were more than capable of free will and genuine affection just as much as evil and cruelty. To see something that was, for all intents and purposes, a person, reduced to a cringing, terrified mass was nauseating.

“In fact, I'm optimistic that the same principles can be applied to a human subject in order to achieve more desirable behavior.”

Ed had a bad feeling about where this train of thought was going.

“And would you believe I already have a candidate picked out?”

“Get real,” said Ed with a scoff, mustering more confidence than he felt. “You really think you can train me into obedience?”

“Oh, Edward,” she replied, that smug expression firmly in place. “I know I can.” She leaned forward, all but physically rubbing the words in his face.

In either a brilliant or idiotic fit of impulse, Ed jerked forwards. His fantastically hard forehead solidly connected with her stupid tiny nose, complete with a ridiculously satisfying crunch. He admired his handiwork as Dante recoiled from the blow. He'd hit her nose just right, producing an absolute gusher of a nosebleed. She whipped her head back, offering a momentary view of the absolute murder in her eyes before she retaliated. A handful of tendrils shot out and grabbed his thigh, digging in and ripping open the wound Lust had inflicted on him.

He screamed, loud and prolonged as Pride tore the wound wide open. He couldn't help it. The pain was excruciating and impossible to move away from, only becoming worse when he struggled. Beyond Dante's cold gaze, he caught a glimpse of smug satisfaction. He'd lost to her completely, he realized. He'd given her what she wanted, shown his suffering, his weakness to her. All of a sudden, Pride dropped him into a heap on the ground. Though the continued damage had stopped, the pain remained, debilitating in every way. His left arm trembled, his overloaded nervous system unable to lift it. His right leg was immobile as well, with the back of his thigh a screaming mass of agony. His automail was busted, mere hours after he'd been reunited with it. The pressure of Pride’s hold had crushed it, like the coils of a massive snake.
And yet his mind raged at him to move, to clap, to crawl away. For once, he felt completely trapped in his wrecked body, and despair crashed over him like a tidal wave, drowning him.

He'd never even gotten the chance to see the ocean, he realized.

A hand, ice cold and long fingered, wrapped around his throat. Nails dug into the soft skin under his jaw painfully. He was hoisted into the air, with no apparent difficulty on Dante's end. Was he really so light? So fragile? So weak?

Disgust for himself overcame him in that moment. This was only happening because he wasn't strong enough.

The familiar feeling of Dante siphoning off his philosopher's stone began afresh. Though he had energy to spare, the process of her scraping away at his life force was painful to say the least. It was not a sensation he could ever really get used to, his mind screaming with pain while his body lacked the strength to open his mouth.

He'd been an idiot, he realized with a start. He'd been so stupid to believe he could beat Dante in a one-on-one fight. Now he was captured, he had become her property, consigned himself to a hellish existence for the next century.

Unless…

A voice whispered in his mind. Unless he died before that, killed himself. That had never been an option before, when he had to get Al back into his body. Now he was, for lack of a better word, free to die when he wished. At the very least, Al was safe now. Teacher would be okay, he hoped. And Ling…

His first kiss had happened tonight, ill-advised and burning hot with the force of his feelings. It wasn't a bad memory, not at all. Ling's hands had fluttered about in surprise, unsure of where to land, but only for a moment before both arms hooked around his waist. He'd kissed back, regardless of Ed's clumsy advances. And when Ed knocked him out in the middle of the street, he still wouldn't take the hint and butt out of the Elrics' mess. He'd followed, like a desert fox that caught the scent of something tasty and wouldn't give up until they got a bite. He'd saved Ed's life, and it was ultimately his actions that restored Al to his body. He'd sacrificed his secure future for the sakes of two teenagers he'd met that morning. It made Ed spitting mad when he thought about it, but also unspeakably happy.

For a shifty, thieving prince, Ling Yao was a good man, kind. In another life, maybe they could've… well, it didn't matter now.

After all, Edward Elric was already dead. It had already been decided. Any second now, a combination of pain, lack of oxygen, and stress would send him unconscious, as had happened so many times before. He would wake up underground, buried in some cavern beneath the sand, and he would kill himself tomorrow, on his seventeenth birthday. It could be argued that the violence currently being inflicted upon him was leading to rash decision making, but Ed found it to be the opposite. The stress was leading to a dissociative sort of clarity. He had to die. It was, without question, preferable to a lifetime in captivity. And with all the others safe, he was free to give up.

With that settled, his world was going dark as Dante stole the very essence of his being from him. He was falling, falling steadily into an endless pit.

There was a ripping noise, a pop, and then Ed was literally falling. However, a huge arm around his midsection caught and supported his limp body. The hand about his throat was wrenched away, nails
scratching the skin. It was at this moment his vision returned to him. He saw Dante, and realized her torso was looking a little…uneven. The disembodied right arm fell to the ground with a meaty thud, drawing attention to the massive amounts of blood being sprayed about, as well as the messy nature of the stump, revealing dangling sinew and exposed a stump of bone. It was fairly easy to deduce who his savior was even in his disoriented state. After all, his skull already hurt from knocking against a chest that was, quite literally, rock hard. Beyond Dante's enraged screeching, he registered Greed muttering under his breath.

“Shit, shit, shit, shit,” he hissed, even as he threw Ed over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. It was clear he was freaking out just as badly as Ed, at least. His gait was anything but steady, roughly bouncing his chin about against Greed's hardened chest. From this viewpoint, he could barely see Dante as they ran away. There was screaming and blood, yes, but she was regenerating all the same. Halfway between pissed and panicked, Ed craned his neck around to talk to Greed as best as he could.

“What the hell do you think you're doing?” Okay, it was more like yelling than talking, but whatever.

“The hell does it look like, you stupid brat? I'm trying to save you!”

Oh.

“Who the fuck asked you-”

Something dry, maneuverable, and otherwise indescribable in texture wrapped around his ankle and tugged, hard. While the reach of Dante's arms had been severely diminished, Pride was still in working order.

“Greed!” he screamed, louder and shriller than he would ever dream of admitting.

“I see it, I see it, I see it!”

Greed transferred him into one arm to crush him close as he attempted to remove Pride. Ed was certain it was impossible. Pride was sharp, durable, and incredibly strong. If Ed couldn't break its hold, then-

Greed shredded his fellow homunculi’s arm like thin cotton, and the remains fell away from his leg soon after. That answered one question. No matter how sharp or how strong Pride was, Greed was unbreakable.

However, that comforting thought soon vanished when they reached the edge of the rooftop. The drop to the hard ground below was hundreds of feet away, easily. The wall they stood on was sheer, without so much as a parapet or crack in the stone to hold on to.

“What now, genius?” Ed used the sarcasm as a makeshift shield for all his panic.

Greed spun around on his heel, giving Ed a good look at what lay behind them. Dante's face was as white as bone, contorted in a manner that didn't look remotely human. She could've screamed any number of terrifying things, but she didn't. All those violent threats, declarations, and bloody promises were conveyed wordlessly. She seemed to be losing control of Pride, which was either flailing wildly or stabbing into the stone roof, fracturing the material. Her cry was formless, bestial as any pretense of sophistication or beauty was dropped like a lead weight in favor of all-consuming rage.

“Now,” whispered Greed, “we fall.”
And those words were all the warning Ed got before they were tilting backwards, the starry sky flooding his vision. Ed felt as if his sternum was going to crack open at any second with how hard his heart was beating. Oddly enough, it wasn't entirely based in fear. He was hyper aware of the wind whipping his hair upwards, his stomach plummeting downward, his heart in his throat. Altogether, it felt like hope. Lethal, skull-shattering, sorely misplaced hope.

Chapter End Notes

I'm not dead! My passion for this story has not waned, even as my free time has.
Chapter Summary

It's fight or flight, and Greed's running out of options by the second. Time to test their immortality with a good old-fashioned knock-out-drag-out exchange of blows.

Chapter Notes

This gets violent. Incredibly so.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Greed hurtled towards the earth, his mind simultaneously racing and alarmingly blank. He was painfully aware of how fragile the parcel he held was, though he was certain Ed would throw a fit at being described as such. Air whistled in his ears, and he curled up tight, intending for his broad back to take the force of the fall and protect Ed.

Earlier, Greed had questioned why he was willing to go to such lengths for a teenager he just met. While his friends would likely claim it to be because of his bleeding heart nature, that wasn't his sole motivation. The truth was closer to the fact that Ed was the same as him. They were victims of both the circumstances of their birth and Dante herself. They'd been imprisoned, experimented on, and exploited by her, suffering humiliation at her hands. So, while it made him feel nauseous to go toe-to-toe with the creator that he had finally been free of, he couldn't stand aside.

He wasn't proud of how long he'd taken to come to that conclusion. He'd watched as Ed had charged headfirst into a battle he couldn't possibly win. And there he'd stood, shaking in his boots as a teenager little more than a boy fought in his place. The Xingese prince managed to get Alphonse away from the bloodbath, likely by insisting he was needed to carry both Izumi Curtis and the president to safety. And yet, Greed couldn't make himself follow them either. He was frozen, cowering in place.

He might've stayed that way, if it weren't for Ed's screaming. Raw and painful merely to listen to, Greed could easily recognize it as the sort of sound that didn't come about normally. That scream, that horrible noise had clawed its way up a spasming throat, forced open clenched teeth, and been dragged out into the world.

Then it was quiet. Much too quiet. It wasn't hard to see why. Ed was still, his body ragdoll limp in Dante's hold save for the twitching of his fingers. Not struggling, not yelling, not showing any signs of life besides the red energy Dante continued to pull from his body. He'd given up.

Greed was no stranger to throwing in the towel. He'd given up on escape after about five years in an airtight vault below Amestris. He'd given up on saving the country from Dante the second his prison was destroyed, instead electing to run for the hills. He'd given up on saving money to remodel the kitchen, no matter that the oven was half broken and the upper left burner ran way too hot.

But he only had to remember the foul-mouthed, argumentative kid that limped into his bar like he
owned the place to decide that giving up was not a good look on Ed.

Then one thing led to another, as most things do. One second he was running, the next he was planting a foot on Dante's torso and tearing her arm from its socket.

Now here they were, rapidly approaching ground level without so much as a hint of a plan.

Given his abilities, hitting the ground was not so much painful as it was jarring, going from moving very quickly to not at all. He felt his teeth rattle, and had to make sure his arms wouldn't reflexively clamp down and crush Ed. As the dust settled, Greed realized that he'd created a fairly sizable crater.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, but my automail's busted. I can't move for shit right now."

Greed believed him immediately. He'd seen enough important-looking metal parts flying off his limbs on the way down not to question it. He got to his feet, holding Ed to his chest. He'd learned from experience that throwing him over his shoulder made it way too easy for Dante to grab him.

"That's fine. I'm faster anyways."

"Where to now?"

"Huh?"

"This was your idea, wasn't it? You have a plan, right?"

Greed cringed, looking sheepish. Ed drew his own conclusions.

"You don't have a plan, do you."

"I do," said Greed, thinking quickly. "We'll go downtown, lose her in the crowds. Sound good?"

"Hell no," was the immediate reply.

"Why not?"

"That only works if we assume Dante doesn't want any collateral damage. Now tell me, does that look like the kind of bitch that's keeping a low profile?"

He swung around his functioning flesh arm, gesturing broadly at the creature behind them. Dante had extended Pride to its maximum volume, a writhing mass that surrounded her. Its wriggling limbs easily hooked into the stone walls despite their fluid appearance, punching in and anchoring itself as it lowered Dante to the ground. The alchemist ran her hand along the stone, destroying it in an ostentatious display of power. The wall wasn't just falling apart, it was exploding into large chunks of rubble and fire. Greed knew approximately fuck all about alchemy, but he guessed she was transmuting the material into something combustible for maximum damage. It really, really didn't matter, though.

"Well, what do you want me to do, smartass?" His language was strong, but since it was so obviously related to stress, he figured they both got a pass.

"That's what I've been trying to tell you! You can't do anything. This has nothing to do with you, and you should've run while you had the chance, you big fat idiot! She won't stop chasing me, and you can't kill her," said the teenage prince, who appeared to be caught between hyperventilating and cursing Greed out.
Despite the overwhelmingly negative nature of Ed's words, Greed found a sort of clarity, a fresh resolve. He stopped running, his heartbeat calmed. He bent over, setting Ed's body on the ground. The prince's brow furrowed, obviously confused about whether Greed had finally decided to take his advice and escape.

“Ed,” he began, voice steady. “There are two things you should know about me. The first is that when someone tells me I can't do something, it just makes me want to do it more.”

He saw Ed's confusion morph into surprise, then fear on his behalf mixed with indignant rage.

“Don't you dare-”

Greed turned around, facing his enemy of three hundred years. Her face was pale and monstrous in nature, and her arm was white as bone, where he'd ripped it out of the socket along with sleeve and the limb had regrown but the fabric had not.

“The second is that this has everything to do with me.”

His skin hardened, and a calm determination came over him. He strode forward, imagining himself as an unbreakable barrier between Dante and Ed.

Despite Dante's steady approach, Pride was in a frenzy, destroying any bit of the palace grounds within reach, regardless of rhyme or reason. It betrayed all of her manic rage, the desire for violence. Talking to her would only delay the inevitable. The only way to defeat her would be to tear the life from her warm, twitching body. He didn't second guess his ability to do so, realizing that it was far too late in the game for doubt.

As she stopped before him, her mouth twitched before opening. Greed could practically hear the rusty creak of her jaw winching open.

“Greed,” she said, her voice a passable facsimile of disdainful calm. “I had hoped you were buried under the rubble of Laboratory Five, but it seems that was too much to ask for.”

“I'm nothing if not durable,” said Greed, taking delight in Dante's reaction to his nonchalance. It had been hundreds of years, and Greed had forgotten how good it felt to mouth off at Dante, who expected slavelse-like obedience from all. Her lips pursed, thinning out into an unattractive seam.

“We'll see.”

Greed didn't let her words shake him. He was unbreakable, stronger than diamond. Nothing could take him down, least of all Dante. With that internal pep talk given, he rushed in, blood bubbling under his skin. As expected, she sent out Pride to protect her and attack him at the same time. As expected, the shadows shredded under his hands with little fuss. It felt oddly similar to pulling weeds, making his way through the thicket of shadow.

Her defense obliterated, Greed raked his fingertips across Dante's classically beautiful face.

She screamed and tore away from him, collapsing to her knees, but Greed wasn't sure if it was more because of the pain or the humiliation of being temporarily disfigured. She'd always valued her appearance so highly, seeing it as the product of her life's work.

Not feeling very merciful or virtuous at the moment, Greed took advantage of his opponent's position. He dropped into a crouch, reaching out for Dante's skull. With a swift tug, he ripped off her delicate left ear. He examined it, noting how it did not disintegrate immediately like his own lost limbs. In a moment of spontaneous mockery, he lifted the lump of cartilage and flesh up to his
“Can you hear me now?” he called into it, ironically deaf to her cries of pain. Dante looked at him from the corner of her eye, hand still pressed to the side of her head.

“No? You can’t? Well then, read my lips.”

He tossed the useless ear to the side, and forcibly turned Dante’s head to face him. His hand cruelly twisted in the silky strands of hair at the back of her head, undoubtedly tearing at her scalp. When she looked back, it was the closest thing he’d ever seen to fear on her face. Perhaps it was it was merely the deep furrows he’d dug in her skin, still taking time to stitch themselves shut. They were wet and hideous, but a part of Greed, the part Dante had raised and encouraged, took satisfaction in the pain and destruction he’d caused. The thought just made him angrier. He looked her dead in the face and spoke, crystal clear.

“I’m not letting you get what you want anymore.”

Dante’s eyes twitched to the side, and Greed followed the movement to his right. Erupting out of the ground was a pillar of stone, aimed directly at his face, and moving at high speed. Its purpose was to send him flying, and give Dante time to recover.

Greed didn’t shift an inch. His feet were squarely planted on the dusty ground, and the makeshift weapon crumbled in its attempt to move him.

He smiled at Dante, a close-lipped, condescending sort of expression. It was the kind of smile that reminded the recipient how fundamentally inferior they were, how stupid they’d been to stand against their betters. Greed knew exactly what it looked like, considering how many times Dante had given that look to him.

With a swift, violent motion, he slammed Dante’s healed face into the hard dirt with all of his strength, several times that of an average man’s. Her nose was crushed immediately, and he was pretty sure her cheekbone and the orbital (he was fairly certain that’s what Bido called it) were seriously damaged, almost caved in. He pulled her head back up by her hair, which had once been so neatly straightened. Her face was a mess of blood and her features had more in common with ground beef than a human face, utterly destroying her pride and joy, if only temporarily. As if there had been no interruption, Greed carried on conversationally.

“How did I come to this conclusion, you ask? An excellent question. You see, I’ve noticed a pattern in my three hundred years of existence. While I may be the one called Greed, you are, without a doubt, the most avaricious individual on this planet. All you do is want. And when you want something you take it. Inevitably, in getting what you want, you fuck everything up.”

Dante gurgled something unintelligible in the negative, so Greed repeated his previous attack. Couldn’t have interruptions, after all. When Dante resurfaced, thick, sticky blood fell from her lips in globs, mixing with the dust on the ground.

“You want immortality, you kill an entire population of people.”

The sound this time, when skull met dirt, was best described as a squishy crunch.

“You want biological weapons, you capture and experiment on hundreds of innocents.”

Greed swiftly rose to his feet and delivered a kick to the head that sent her sprawling on her stomach. With another forceful dig under her ribs, he turned her onto her back. His employees (he used the term loosely) had mocked Greed mercilessly for his supposedly impractical choice in footwear, but
he was grateful for his pointy-toed leather boots. With every blow, he imagined himself rupturing another one of Dante's organs.

It wasn't solely for dramatic purposes, though. Greed knew from his experiences with the other homunculi and his own existence that the best way to kill an immortal was by constantly damaging their body and inflicting enough mind-shattering pain to keep them incapacitated as the power of the philosopher's stone dwindled. Still, the practicalities of killing Dante were not at the forefront of his mind.

“And yet, you still wanted another philosopher's stone. So you kidnapped two kids that never did a damn thing to anyone, robbing them of their adolescence.”

He placed one foot atop Dante's sternum, pressing in just enough to feel the cartilage adjacent to her ribs creak ominously.

“And then, you wanted a mindless fuck puppet, so you made me,” he continued on, voice ragged and dripping with contempt.

“Oh, don't act like it was such a hardship,” she scoffed, rolling her eyes.

“You raped me, over and over again!”

He'd never actually said it out loud before. It hurt, but it was cathartic, in a way.

“Christ, now you're just being ridiculous. You make it sound like I forced myself on you.”

Her voice was dismissive, hardly fearful at all. It made him mad, livid actually, that he'd come here to kill her, and she had the audacity to act merely annoyed with him. Enraged, he leaned all of his considerable bulk on his right foot. The weight compressed Dante's ribcage, causing the bones to snap, one by one.

“That's exactly what you did,” he roared, his voice thick and rough like a handful of gravel.

Something watery dripped down his chin, tracing a wet trail down his neck. Was he actually fucking crying? He hated it, but he ignored it as best as he could. Who cared if he was weeping like a little bitch baby? Only one person was close enough to see and hear him, and she had a maximum life expectancy of ten more minutes.

“You took and took and took from me, and I never had the option to refuse. When I tried, you buried me and left me to rot,” he spit the words from his mouth, as if they tasted just as bitter as the memories associated with them. He glared directly at her face, even as he grieved over his past. He wanted to see every grimace of pain, every time the life left her eyes, every expression of despair.

He watched her face so intently that he didn't even notice a pair of feeble hands grabbing weakly onto his calf. He sure as shit noticed the alchemically produced lightning that followed, though. He staggered back, trying to put as much space between him and Dante as possible after whatever she'd done. Unfortunately, her attack was quick enough he didn't get so much as one step away. One of Pride's limbs turned around, changing from a grasping appendage to a scythe, wickedly curved and deadly sharp.

Though Greed's eyes were too slow to fully register what transpired, he felt it. His skin, his armor, his walking fortress, shattered like an eggshell under the attack. His arms windmilled wildly, a scenario he would laugh at, if only the situation wasn't so high-stakes.

Despite the disorienting nature of the past three seconds, Greed was depressingly unsurprised.
Throughout his onslaught, he'd been desperately trying to forget that Greed the Avaricious was not unbreakable. His supposedly invincible defense had an enormous, glaring flaw, one even he hadn't been aware of before that day. And he would've continued in ignorance, if it weren't for Izumi Curtis.

“Shit,” he grunted, going down like a load of bricks. He retracted his only somewhat useful shield, a prerequisite for healing. As loathe as he was to drop his guard, he could not fight while balancing on one leg. Regrowing limbs was comparatively tedious work, as opposed to sealing wounds. Rather than generating one or two types of tissue to knit shut a cut or bullet hole, his body had to build large sections of bone, muscle, and nerves from scratch. In the meantime, his powerful arms dragged him through the dirt. It had been awhile since his leg had been so completely severed, he couldn't remember how long this was even supposed to take, only that it was too long. If he was pitting his regenerative powers against Dante, the outcome couldn't be more unclear. Still, his uncertainty wouldn't be able to bar him from continuing.

He brought his left knee under him, helping him move.

His right thigh was online, good to go.

He reached out and dug clawed fingers into the dirt, got hard dirt pushed so far under his nails it hurt. The complex cartilage and tendons of the knee grew in.

He heaved for breath, but that was more anxiety induced than a reaction to the exertion.

The bones of his foot ground together as they slid into their appropriate places.

He got to his feet again. The ground was rough and borderline painful against the fresh, sensitive skin, but Greed had decidedly bigger problems to worry about. The Dante variety of problems, to be specific, which were worse than just about any other kinds of problems. As a reflexive measure, he drew the ultimate shield over his skin like a bulletproof blanket.

Then, he made the biggest mistake of the night. A blunder so contrary to all laws of common sense, only an idiot could commit it. It was the single most catastrophic course of action he could've possibly taken, and the progenitor of his downfall. And it was all because he'd violated his own rudimentary rules for living.

Greed looked back.

And, lo and behold, what awaited him? Dante's pale, eerily placid face, less than a foot away. He reeled backwards, but not until Dante had pressed a palm to the center of his chest, followed by the ominous crackle of lightning through the air. A very small part of his brain that was moving fast enough realized what this meant. He'd already been affected, and his skin had become brittle and weak.

Of course, this really only became an issue when he got impaled.

The thing about being immortal is that, while any physical damage could typically fix itself within seconds, each and every ounce of pain was felt as keenly as if he were human. Greed was forcefully reminded of this when a four-foot spike forged from pure darkness rammed its way through his sternum. Yet, that still wasn't any more painful than the smug fucking look on Dante's face.

“You were right about one thing, Greed.”

“An’ whassat?” Articulation wasn't the priority at the moment, mostly because his left lung was
skewered, and air supply was slow to replenish.

“I should never have buried you under Central,” she said smoothly.

Greed blinked twice, the biggest expression of surprise he could manage at the moment.

“After all, I was attempting to install a message about disobeying me, but it clearly didn't take. This time around, I'll rip you apart, atom by atom, right now.”

“Those are some big words for a shithead that was getting beaten to a pulp just a second ago.”

Dante’s right eyelid twitched noticeably, a sure sign of irritation. It was a relief that, at the very least, he could still piss her off, even if he had no other power in this situation. However, Dante quickly managed to cover her slip with a magnanimous smile.

“I merely decided to let you attack me. I lulled you into a false sense of security while I decoded the trick that is your ultimate shield. Considering that I created it, dismantling the shield was child's play.”

“Really? Then how could Izumi Curtis break it completely in less than half the time it took you?”

The smile on her face slid off like oil on water, replaced by a scowl. She appeared to be thoroughly unmused by the remark, and Greed was, for one very brief moment, delighted with himself. If there was anything he'd learned from his early life, it was how to piss Dante off.

Then the spear in his chest became two grasping hands pushing in opposite directions, and things became decidedly less fun.

The pain was excruciating, the tearing of soft tissue combined with bone trauma. The unprotected abdominal cavity was the first to give, if only slightly. The pain was anything but subtle. After all, he was literally being ripped in two. It wasn't a friggin' papercut.

These were the thoughts Greed tried to distract himself with as his ribs snapped and jutted out of his thoracic cavity. His soft stomach shredded open, exposing slippery entrails spilling forth. His body split down the middle of his pelvis, which was just as horrible an experience as it sounded. Even his skull wasn't safe, two clawed and shadowy hands in his mouth cracking apart his lower jaw and hard palate, muffling his screams. He wasn't thinking of much at that point, not of his anger towards Dante or his conviction to save Ed. Only the blood in his mouth and his eyes and his everywhere and the pain and the little voice that all living creatures have in their heads, screaming nononodon'ttwannadieIdon'ttwannadie.

He died, predictably. He almost wished it was permanent, so he didn't have to go through it again. Unfortunately, he could already tell that the brutal, repetitive nature of Dante's punishment was by design.

He came to less than a minute later, presumably when enough of his brain reformed to pilot his body. He was on the ground and unrestrained for the moment, not that he could move. The first thing he saw, with his head tilted to the side, was himself.

Or rather, half of himself. Up close, he could see that it had not been a perfect split. The seam along which his body had been torn was ragged and imperfect, and his skull was crushed and deformed in places. In mere moments, the body disintegrated into dust, as all pieces separated from his core did.

He entertained himself with the thought of what would happen if Dante could perfectly divide him in two, philosopher's stone and all. Would he become two full-sized Greeds that were less powerful?
Or maybe two mini-Greeds. Or baby Greeds. He'd never been a child, what would that even look like? Would they each have an empty glassy eye and deformed skulls full of shattered needle teeth?

Greed abruptly realized that he might be going into shock. He hadn't even known he was capable of that.

The first thing Greed heard after regaining consciousness (more or less) was retching. Choking, coughing, gagging. He looked a bit farther ahead, and saw Ed, sitting up with his flesh hand pressed to his mouth and a puddle of vomit in the dust before him. He'd witnessed the spectacle from the outside, which was arguably a worse view than Greed's. He wasn't where Greed had left him, meaning he'd dragged himself towards the shitshow, not that he had the tools to get there, with his alchemy out of commission. Only the wiry skeleton of his automail remained, sheared off at the wrist.

Abruptly, Greed realized that this wasn't just his punishment. Pride reached for Greed again, and Ed screamed.

“Stop!”

Ed breathed heavily into the night air. That defiant young man from this morning was gone, replaced by a terrified child.

“He doesn't have anything to do with this, so just…stop,” he pleaded quietly, broken. Watching someone get hurt on his behalf was clearly Ed's worst case scenario. This was torture for him.

“Now, now, Edward. I promised there would be consequences for disobeying me, and I can't break my promises now, can I?”

Her voice was sickly sweet and blatantly patronizing. It was like all her rage towards Greed was forgotten, or maybe buried the second she focused on hurting Ed. She seemed far more unstable than she had a hundred-odd years ago when she'd sealed Greed away. The homunculus raised his head up from the ground, despite the protesting of his newly grown abdominal muscles. He locked red eyes with wide gold ones, and did his best attempt at a reassuring smile.

“It's okay, kid. I chose to give this-”

“Silence!”

At Dante's screeched command, Pride lashed out, quick as a greased whip. In fact, the blow was dealt so cleanly Greed didn't immediately realize the extent of the damage. This lasted all of one second, when both the pain and the arterial spray of blood began in earnest. A gash running diagonally across his torso gaped open, revealing where Pride had cracked open his ribcage. Greed groaned and cursed in pain, feeling more like a gored corpse than a living creature.

“After this failure finally expires, we'll have to find someone else to make sure this lesson sticks.”

“No,” whispered Ed, though he knew it was useless.

“In fact,” she mused to herself, “I wonder where your coward of a brother is.”

There was a brief moment in which Greed gargled blood and Ed sunk to new depths of horrified despair.

“I'm right here.”
Greed knew that voice, though it had sounded far more prepubescent before. He wasn't sure of how to feel about this newcomer's arrival, only knew that out of everyone, he was the least qualified to win the fight.

"...bitch."

Chapter End Notes

Next time we meet, I will finally bring an end to this roaming tag team fight, seeing as the final challenger has arrived.
Bringing Fists to A Knife Fight

Chapter Summary

Objectively, Dante is a stronger alchemist than Al. Even so, there might be a way to swing this in his favor.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I'm right here…bitch.”

Al internally winced at how awkward that sounded, rather than the cool introductory remark he'd intended(?) it to be. To be frank, it had been a spur of the moment addition fueled by anger and false bravado, one he regretted. He had a new admiration for how Ed dropped curses left and right without skipping a beat. Al just sounded totally lame, not natural at all.

Al had a brief, childish wish that things could be as they were in the books he'd read growing up, in which the hero saves the innocent and punishes the wicked, and families live happily ever after, together. Al had foolishly thought that he and Ed were living in that kind of story. The kind of story with giant dragons and handsome foreign princes and true love and, most importantly, a badass hero. A hero that, no matter how dire the circumstances, no matter what kind of dangerous, distressing, down-to-the-wire situation arose, always, always, always saved the day.

Now, things were about as dangerous, distressing, and down-to-the-wire as they could possibly get. And with everyone else beaten halfway to death, there was no one else to take on the role of the hero. Only Al. And he didn't have a single goddamn clue what to do next.

He wasn't Ed, or Ling, or Teacher, or Greed, or any number of people stronger than him. He didn't have a weapon like Dante's shadows, or the ultimate shield, or legendary flame alchemy, or even just a cool sword on hand. But it wasn't like he could stand aside and let Dante steal his brother again. So, he stood as tall as possible in his familiarly unfamiliar body and pajamas, looking directly into the eyes of his waking nightmare.

“Alphonse,” said Dante, in a somewhat neutral tone, tinged by annoyance. Even if she tried to keep her temper, being insulted like that aggravated her massive ego, he knew.

“Dante,” he said, determined to keep participation in the dialogue equal. He'd be damned if he just stayed silent while she gave a stupid fucking speech at him.

Okay, maybe he was angry enough to curse without hesitation.

“And here I was, thinking you abandoned your brother.”

Al grit his teeth, knowing full well she was trying to get under his skin. She was just messing with his head, distracting him with a guilt trip. But didn't she have a point? Despite his grandiose declaration of war, he hadn't even paused in running from her. Once again, he'd left Ed to face Dante alone. Al had acted like a coward. Didn't he deserve this guilt?

He shook his head, and the rattling of his brain in his skull cleared things up. He'd known Ed his
entire life, and he knew the last thing he wanted was for Teacher to get caught up in the fallout of his fight with Dante while incapacitated. And while Ed would probably never admit it, Al was certain he didn't want Roy Mustang to get seriously hurt either.

“Well, I'm here now,” he stated, feeling a little bolder, a little more secure. He looked at Dante, really looked at her. Her hair was an unprecedented mess of flyaways and tangles, the likes of which he'd never seen on her. Crusted and flaky patches of blood remained on her face, despite the healed skin underneath. Her fine velvet dress was covered in dust and clotted blood, a dirty footprint on her chest. In fact, her entire right sleeve was missing. Al had never seen her so disheveled. Greed must've weakened and exhausted her during their fight, he realized. Her handicap had tilted the odds in his favor, if only infinitesimally. He gained a sliver of confidence.

 Didn't Al have all the same skills as Teacher had taught both him and Ed? And hadn't Ed always lost to him in every single match? And wasn't Al's body restored to perfectly useable condition by the power of the philosopher's stone?

But then, the atmosphere changed, and not for the better.

“I'm glad,” said Dante, serene as could be. Her smudged red lips were tilted in a smirk, and smugness practically oozed from her pores. In short, she looked absolutely evil, like she'd made up her mind to do something terrible. It immediately set him on edge, and all his confidence drained away and dissipated like air from a balloon.

“Why? Finally decide today's a good enough day to curl up and die?” His voice was high and cracked on the interrogative, betraying his loss of bravado. Dante continued, giving no indication of having heard him.

“With you here, Alphonse, I believe I have the opportunity to impress upon your brother a very important lesson.”

Twenty or twenty five yards away (the sudden change of height and perspective he'd undergone recently made it difficult to tell), Ed's expression dissolved into one of abject terror, realizing her intent. Al had known full well that Ed was watching his dramatic entrance, but avoided looking at his face. Somehow, he had the feeling his brother would try to get rid of him. Now looking his sibling in the eye, he confirmed his suspicions.

“Al, you need to run, she'll tear you apart,” called Ed, his voice plainly showing every ounce of fear.

Al gave his elder brother an unimpressed stare. Of course, he'd caught Dante's thinly veiled meaning. He was a genius as well, after all. Dante was going to kill Al, likely in an extremely violent manner, for the purposes of traumatizing Ed and shattering any remaining defiance, making him an ideal prisoner for the rest of his life. At least, that was what she wanted to do.

“Damnit Al, you need to go!”

Al’s bare feet remained firmly planted, his stance unyielding. He took a good look at Ed.

His brother looked like shit. He was lying on his stomach, unable to stand, barely propping his head and shoulders of with his flesh arm. His automail was “completely jacked”, as Winry would have put it, before she began drawing up schematics for an entirely new arm and leg. His mouth had traces of vomit around it, thin yellow liquid dried on his chin, presumably from getting an up-close view of Greed while he was pulled apart, rather than from several hundred feet away. His right thigh was bleeding sluggishly, the length of his leg awash in a wet layer of red. His entire body was littered with small cuts and scrapes from Pride’s attack as well. But worst of all was his face. His expression
was raw and desperate, with his too-pale face and his shining red-rimmed eyes.

Al had never in his life seen his brother make a face like that. Not when he gave away an arm and a leg, only smiling at his horrified family while his tiny body went into shock. Not when Envy broke his arm so badly they could see the bone poking up under the skin, and Ed had to wait three days with his teeth grit tight before Al in his prison of a body could use alkahestry to heal it. Not even when Dante came to visit them did he look so pitiful, rather, he was always watching, planning, thinking about their escape.

Al knew what was different about this situation. It didn't take being a genius or his brother for sixteen years to figure it out. It was no longer Ed that was in immediate danger, but Al. It was his life on the line, his body in the path of destruction, his fight for survival. And Ed expected him to lose. Frankly, it pissed him off, being underestimated.

“Brother, are you an idiot?”

Greed managed to wheeze out a wet, painful-sounding laugh. His immediate reward was Dante skewering him through the torso with a stone spike, forcing a blood clot up his trachea and over his lips with a sticky cough. Al made a quick executive decision that the humanoid homunculus would be fine for the time being and kept his eyes on Ed. His elder brother was dumbstruck, thrown for a loop with wide eyes and a parted mouth. Al continued on, letting all his frustration and conviction drain into his words.

“Because only an idiot would think I’d lose to a bitch like her. After all this time, if you think I'm just going to let her take you away, you must be the biggest moron alive!”

“Hey! I'm still your older brother, so when I tell you to do something, you'd better listen! If anyone's being an idiot it's you!” His brother had quickly transitioned from being speechless to being pissed, which Al could only see as a positive, even if it was certainly noisier. Anything was better than his previous despair, after all.

It didn't matter exactly what Ed said after this point, because Al had stopped listening. He turned his full attention towards his enemy, who was watching the exchange with interest and a smirk on her face. He could only imagine she was thinking something along the lines of how wonderful it would be to see Ed lose the last vestiges of hope he had left.

“I can't wait to see the look on your brother's face after I kill you, seeing the light of any remaining hope finally snuffed out.”

Close enough.

“I can't wait to put a walking corpse like you in the dirt, where you belong,” he replied. It seemed like the sort of bold comeback a fictional hero would give in the situation.

Her nostrils flared out dramatically at the insult. She truly hated it when people referenced her advanced age.

Though he'd been expecting it, mentally preparing for it, Al still panicked when she suddenly attacked. When the enormous, shadowy spears of that mysterious weapon came hurtling towards his face, alarm and paralyzing fear had seemed like a very reasonable reaction.

Luckily, his body was operating on more than conscious decisions, and completed two actions entirely on its own. The first: he hit the deck, a pebble jamming into his knee as he crouched close to the ground. The second: he clapped.
From the moment Al woke up, screaming but in his own body, he knew something had changed considerably. He finally understood what Ed had been telling him for years.

An endless expanse, filled with everything that had ever been, in this world and in others. He saw the rot and decay that followed death, cycling ever onwards to new life. He saw his parents holding himself as an infant, red faced and crying at the new and unfamiliar world he found himself in, while his elder brother watched with curiosity. He saw a green meadow with a house he instinctively knew was his, even though he'd never seen it before in his life. He saw a black-haired monster with dead eyes and a lipless mouth, reaching out with a single emaciated hand before going limp on a wooden floor. He saw arrays upon arrays, how they drew energy from the very earth shifting beneath their feet. He saw the sky on fire, dark shapes floating over a city of ash and screaming sirens. He saw the death of Old Xerxes, the four hundred slaves huddled in a circle, surrounded by the dead and dying, the souls of their previous masters dragged into the philosopher's stone by wriggling black fingers. He saw a creature, a little black floating cloud with one eye and a grinning mouth. That mouth kept laughing and smiling throughout it all, even as the creature's flask broke, and it too was dragged into the gate.

It was so much information, too much information for his brain too hold. The gate was a pool of knowledge larger than the southern seas, and Al could only take as much as he could hold in two hands. Even that amount was painful, making him feel as if his skull would split in two (in hindsight, unfortunate phrasing). And so, Al had no idea if he had retained enough of what he'd learned to match Ed's abilities, let alone Dante's.

Luckily, it appeared he could at least transmute without a circle. He sighed in relief at the stone wall he'd drawn up in front of him. Without it, he'd probably be a bloody smear in the dirt. Still his fortifications wouldn't last long, already shaking under the force of Dante's assault. The panicky sensation came back, realizing how little time he had to launch a counterattack.

What should he do? What could he do? How could he best utilize his alchemy to end this, once and for all?

Oh, he realized, with a sudden surge of clarity. *It's just alchemy.*

Alphonse Elric had lived and breathed alchemy his entire sixteen years of existence. Initially, it had been for fun and to sate his endless curiosity, before turning into something much more serious, for the sake of escaping and retrieving his body. He'd studied just about every application of the science, practical and theoretical.

After all, he may be a prince, but he would always be a scholar first and foremost.

With that in mind, his next move came as easily as one could say *azidoazide azide.*

One of the most volatile compounds known to man, azidoazide azide is an explosive agent composed entirely of nitrogen, the most abundant element in earth’s atmosphere. Not found anywhere in nature, azidoazide azide was first synthesized by a crack team of Drachman chemists and rogue Amestrian alchemists. Developed for use in a border dispute gotten wildly out of hand, the compound was several times more powerful than any known explosive. However, its weakness was painfully obvious. The compound was impossible to transport or work with safely, as it would detonate at so much as the slightest bump in the road, a firm knock, or a pebble thrown from a distance.

In this case, that was definitely a positive.

The next time Pride attacked, the explosion that followed was thunderous, and what remained of the
wall collapsed in on itself. The explosion ended up several times larger than Al had expected, nearly knocking him off his feet as he retreated. However, this ended up being a far nastier surprise for his enemy, who hadn't anticipated any sort of detonation.

Dante, the dark shape that she was, was knocked on her side, though that wasn't what Al was focused on. Instead, his horrified eyes were locked on her weapon. The shadows screamed, revealing innumerable wide-open red eyes, as well as mouths lined with bone white teeth. It recoiled from both the heat and light, crumbling away as it voiced its displeasure. It wailed, the disturbing sound of thousands of voices united in the expression of pain.

With a start, Al realized that he had never considered that Dante's weapon was alive. In retrospect, that should've been his first assumption. The homunculus whimpered and keened, retreating back into Dante's shadow.

"Shut up and look for him," she hissed, her eyes looking blindly through through the large cloud of dust the explosion had thrown up. The incredibly destructive creature whimpered like a dog with human vocal chords, and spread out to search the smoke screen for Al.

Despite the life threatening situation, Al couldn't help but compare the homunculus to the male anglerfish. An oddity discovered by Cretan fishermen and documented by Aerugan naturalists, the male anglerfish is notable because of its behavior of attaching itself to the underside of female anglerfish. Its face, brain, and other previously vital organs absorb into the host over time, and the male’s only purpose is to provide reproductive functions for the host. Minus the sperm (obviously), that seemed to be the situation here. The homunculus was a parasite that had gotten the short end of the stick, and was dependent on Dante and condemned to a small radius of freedom. Al almost felt bad for it. Almost.

As it was, the unfortunate experiment was attached to the one person between the Elric brothers and freedom.

Al ran forward on silent bare feet, recently created dao, the Xingese version of a broadsword, in hand. The dark shadow of Dante's red dress was relatively easy to see in the cloud, and he made a beeline for it. He raised the sword to the proper position, moved as quickly as he ever had. He saw her pale throat and shoulder, exposed by the wide and torn neckline of her dress. He saw her head swivel, saw her shocked and livid eyes, and he swung his sword down on her like it weighed the entire world and then some.

Al didn't close his eyes upon delivering the blow, because that would be stupid, and Teacher didn't teach them how to be stupid, especially not in a fight. So, he saw exactly when the homunculus moved over Dante's body like a dark shield. The covering didn't fully withstand his sword, cracking and disintegrating after stopping his movements. Perhaps the homunculus was losing strength?

He didn't stop to think, knew he couldn't stop, lest all his efforts be for nothing. He attempted another swing, this time aiming for the soft flesh of her side between ribcage and hip. The homunculus caught it again, with a sound like breaking ceramic. He sidestepped her counterattack by a hair, putting him dangerously off balance. In an attempt to channel Ed's style, he rolled with it. He lunged low to the ground, hacking at her legs through her dress. He felt the resistance and give of flesh and bone, indicating damage done despite the thick cloth barrier. Dante folded like a piece of paper, hands and knees in the dirt. Her head flopped forward, and Al could practically see the dotted line saying cut here.

His decapitation was foiled, however, by the homunculi gliding out of the shadows of Dante's hair. With a burst of movement, it seized his sword from his grasp. Al had only a second to watch his only weapon go spinning out of reach before he was once again on the defensive. Dante lunged upwards,
revealing a long, glinting dagger in her hand. Al assumed she had just transmuted the knife while on her knees. He danced out of the way of her dramatic slashes, hearing the blade whistle as it cut through air. He only barely sucked in his gut in to avoid being slit open from hip to sternum. As it was, his pajama shirt suddenly had a large rip of fabric that gaped slightly, along with the burning line of a shallow cut underneath.

Al felt a bit like laughing hysterically. Dante had unimaginable power at her disposal, and she was going to settle this via knife fight? And a one sided knife fight at that, which debatably wasn't a knife fight at all. And while maybe that would decide the matter fairly quickly if Al were anyone else, he wasn't. He was a pupil of Izumi Curtis. He was the younger brother of the Fullmetal Alchemist. And what's more, he had never lost a match to Ed, not even once.

Buoyed by the thought, he found the burst of speed to get close to Dante, aiming a right hook that would hopefully smash her tiny nose all the way into the back of her skull.

Or at least, that was the plan. Al saw the electric light of transmutation at their feet, too slow to react. The sandstone pillar erupted in a single instance, just as he was lunging forward. It felt like running into a brick wall, only if the wall came to him. Al felt his nose crunch, and if his tongue hadn't been clear of his teeth, it would've been clipped off by his own jaw.

Dante's surprise attack knocked Al off-balance and away, sending him staggering into the dirt. He gasped for air, feeling like he was drowning with a nose and throat full of blood. Al felt dizzy, disoriented, and possibly concussed, but mostly he felt stupid. So very, very stupid. He'd been so focused on weakening the homunculus that he didn't remember Dante was literally the most powerful alchemist on Earth.

So very, very stupid.

Al looked up, through eyes squinted in pain, and saw Dante striding towards him, her movement completely unhindered by injury. He groaned, part pain, part hopelessness. Every bit of damage he'd fought so hard to inflict was gone, erased.

Al realized he needed a new approach if he was going to win this. He needed a strategy that didn't rely on brute force. More importantly, based on how close Dante was getting, he needed to stall.

Luckily, he was already on the ground, allowing him to immediately clap his hands and get down to business.

He pressed his fingertips to the ground, and focused very intently on the desired effect. At the very least, he knew exactly what he was going for.

One moment, his eyes were locked with Dante's across the torn-up dirt. The next, a thick layer of dust shot ten, fifteen, twenty feet in the air. After just a second, Al was proud to say that visibility was even worse than at the bottom of a mud puddle.

But he had to move quickly for his smokescreen to save his life.

“Hiding again, Alphonse? We can't have that now, can we?”

There was a sound like a hundred small birds frying on a high voltage electric fence. Al watched with wide eyes as his previously impressive dust cloud changed before him. The cloud broke apart into sections, each one condensing into small masses.

Smooth pebbles rained down upon the scene and the two combatants. The rocks were of varying sizes and shapes, but none were large enough to pose a threat to Al and his already addled brains,
though they certainly stung his skin on impact. More importantly, Dante's sudden display of power and skill had cleared the air in mere seconds, effectively destroying Al's hiding spot.

One of them, at least.

Al knew exactly what his foe was looking at. Two dozen columns, more or less, arranged irregularly before her. The desert landscape hadn't exactly been generous in providing cover, so Al had created some. Hopefully, it would buy him some time.

Time to do what, he had no idea.

There was a pregnant pause, in which Al tried to minimize his presence as much as possible. In just moments, the silence was destroyed in the most chilling of ways.

Dante laughed, loud and disturbing in its smugness. She was nothing if not smug. It was the kind of laugh that said, *I know something very important you don't, and the entire situation is endlessly amusing fuel for my ego.*

“Oh, Alphonse. This is simply getting ridiculous.”

Her voice was closer now. Al couldn't help but hold his breath. His heart was throwing itself against his ribcage like it was aiming to break through and escape. The night air was freezing, his body soaked in chilled sweat.

“I could kill you in an instant, and this is the game you want to play?”

She chuckled again, though the sound had moved once again.

A heavy skirt, tattered but expensive, rasped quietly on the uneven ground with each steady step. A soft white hand, one that had never known the cracked nails or blistered skin of physical labor, splayed out on a stone pillar. There was that unmistakable crackle, that taste in the air like blood on a dry tongue.

Stone became superheated in just seconds, expanding at an exponential rate. It didn't take a genius to see what was coming. The column exploded, sending a heavy barrage of boiling hot rock away from Dante.

Al couldn't even flinch. His limbs felt as if they'd been bolted to iron weights, unable to move. Even his tongue was paralyzed, heavy and too big for his mouth. If Dante had picked the right pillar, he would've died instantly. Not only died, but had his entire body mutilated beyond recognition. And with just another touch, provided it was placed correctly, Dante could destroy him for real, a prospect that he doubted would give her any cause for hesitation.

And Al's body would not move.

Silent as the atmosphere was after the explosion, the sigh that followed could've been a scream. It was a delicate sort of sigh, a soft alto noise that was plainly manufactured for the sake of dramatics.

“Well since you've put all this effort into prolonging the inevitable, I think I'll tell you a secret, Alphonse Elric.” She paused for dramatic effect, as she seemed to have quite the penchant for theatrics at the moment.

Despite himself, Al was on tenterhooks waiting for her next words. Perhaps, in her hubris, she would reveal a weakness to her overwhelming power.
“There was no point to any of this.” Alphonse could hear the smile in her voice, like honey dripping off a knife. “Absolutely none.”

“Wh-what?” Ed was still conscious, and lucid enough to ask what Al was thinking.

“Think about it, both of you. This whole venture was doomed from the start, the second you disobeyed me. You never stood a chance, frankly.” She sighed sadly, as if the situation broke her heart. “You went to the trouble of escaping, killing my pets, dragging all these bystanders into your temper tantrum…”

Al winced, knowing that her last comment would bring on the guilt for Ed. His one rule was to not get other people involved in their highly dangerous business, and that had gone as poorly as it possibly could. Greed, impaled on the ground and too weak to free himself, could testify that.

“And what have you earned for yourself, Edward? Absolutely nothing. You are still broken, inferior, and unfit to live among others. A mere container for the power of a philosopher's stone.” She clicked her tongue disdainfully, before humming thoughtfully.

“Well, perhaps it isn't completely accurate to say you had no effect. After all, you've convinced me that Alphonse Elric needs to be slaughtered for you to learn your place.”

“Don't you dare!”

“Additionally, since you have already drawn so much attention with your antics, I might as well have a bit of fun. Those new skyscrapers in the Xingese district are such gaudy eyesores, don't you think? The city would be considerably less ugly if they were demolished, I’m sure. Or I could finish what I started in the Ishvalan quarter. I really do hate leaving a task only halfway done, you know.”

Al thought of Scar, stubborn and spread thin across Xerxes. Winry and her workshop full of prosthetic limbs, big and small. The children who'd been young enough at the time of the massacre to forget, the adults that would always remember. His blood boiled under his skin, but he knew that running in with nothing but spit and vinegar on his side was a sure fire way to screw them all over. This, of course, only lead to the unfortunate fact that the desperately needed ace up his sleeve didn't exist. And the more Alphonse attempted to force his gray matter to produce a workable plan, the more frantic and distracted his mind became. He couldn't even make a noise of frustration, knowing his own grisly demise was within spitting distance.

“Then again, who gives a damn about vagrants practicing their archaic religion in dirt huts? Now, defeating the king and queen of Xerxes, that stands out.”

Ed didn't skip a beat with his derisive laughter, even if it sounded like it was coming from between grit teeth.

“What, do you seriously think you have a chance in hell against them?” Al suspected his brother did not sincerely want an answer to this question, but was attempting to stall for time. And if there was one thing Dante loved it was the sound of her own voice. It would've been funny, if it weren't for her gleefully describing the murder of thousands of people, including his parents.

“Oh, Edward, aren't you supposed to be the smart one? I don't think I can crush them under my heel, I know I can.”

“As humble as always, I see.” Despite his snark, Ed's voice was trembling with a mix of stress and uncertainty.

“Why would I undersell my abilities? I can raise mountains, and just as easily turn them to dust. I can
create life, creatures whose abilities outstrip any human, on a whim, and destroy it in an instant. I have obtained more information than any other living creature. There is not a single being on this earth that can surpass me.”

The only thing worse than Dante's absolute certainty in her words was the prospect that she might be right. Even so, the cogs in Al's head finally began spinning with the mention of homunculi. In the meantime, Dante's monologue had reached new heights of egotistical ranting.

“I am the closest thing to a god this world has ever seen! Compared to me, animals, homunculi, and humans are little more than lumps of carbon. You are all no better than coal, fuel for my existence!”

And with that grandiose statement, Alphonse knew his time had run out at last. Whatever happened in the next five seconds would be the end of it, good or bad. Some part of his mind, miraculously detached from his actions, counted them out.

One.

Al launched himself out of his hiding spot like a bat out of hell. The scene before him was about what he expected. Cooling stone and debris jabbed into his feet and littered their battleground, at the edge of which Ed was struggling to prop himself up on one elbow, and Greed was incredibly busy being impaled. Dante was faced away from him, arms spread wide triumphantly, the gleaming dagger in her right hand.

Two.

He clapped. Loudly. Dante whipped around, not looking at all concerned or surprised by his sudden charge. That alone would've been enough to make him lose his nerve, but momentum carried him further.

Three.

Faster. He needed to move faster if this was going to work. He was close now, close enough to count the white teeth between blood red lips. Close enough to throttle the life from her body. His right hand curled into a fist, a weapon seemingly inadequate for the task ahead of him.

Four.

Lightning crackled between them, signaling a transmutation. Al ignored it focused on driving his fist forward with the force of a truck, no, a meteor. Time flowed like cold honey as his knuckles brushed velvet before pushing forward, sinking into soft stomach.

Five.

And just like that, it was over. The dress that had once been such a deep red rapidly became dark gray before flaking apart around Al's hand. It revealed that the skin had taken on a similarly ashy color, and become cracked and dry. Alphonse wasn't exactly sure if that was what it was supposed to look like, considering the array he'd used was made up on the fly.

Shakily, Dante's hands moved, not to attack, but to shakily touch her stomach. Even under her ginger exploration, her transmuted flesh crumbled to pieces. It was a disturbing sight, more than enough to churn Al's stomach. The only consolation was knowing who it was on the receiving end of the gruesome effect.

“What did you just do to me?” she whispered, eyes wide and horrified.
“You aren't a god, Dante,” he began simply. “You are made from the same substance as every other living thing on this planet.”

Dante, a genius in her own right, understood him immediately. Her dark eyes were wide, exposing shockingly white sclera. Her lips trembled, working soundlessly, before finding her voice.

“B-but, you were always so weak. So worthless. How could you possibly…?” She looked helplessly down at her body. The crystallization of human tissue into brittle carbon was quickly spreading over her torso and extremities, unstoppable. Stress fractures appeared on her bare shoulder, signifying that even the weight of her own limbs was too much for the crumbling structure to hold. They watched in horror as her slender arm finally came free. It fell to the ground, breaking apart on impact. With it, something seemed to break in Dante, something reflected in her uncomprehending eyes. She turned to Al, those eyes boring into his.

“I was supposed to be immortal,” she said, even enough to be mistaken for calm. The transmutation crept over her clavicle, as she began to rage.

“I was going to live forever! So how, how could some brat like you do this to me? Me, of all—”

Dante was interrupted by a final, terrible silence.

Al looked straight at the statue in the likeness of the evil that haunted his waking nightmare of the past five years. Everything about her was perfectly captured, from the lips that had smiled with such disgusting self-satisfaction, to the hand that had inflicted so much damage, stolen so much.

For a long, pulse-pounding moment, he stared at the eyes he'd once fantasized of gouging out, wide open and staring back blindly. He was irrationally afraid he would see something in those eyes, be it a remaining gleam of cruelty or a spark of calculating intelligence. But there was no such thing. Just the body of a monster Al had killed with his own two hands. It was over. It was finally—

“Al!”

Having only the energy to be mildly startled, Al took a look at his brother as he ran towards him. His automail was still battered into garbage, reducing him to dragging himself along with a left arm and the toes of his injured leg. Al realized Ed must hate the loss of dignity as well as mobility, and resolved to create a wheelchair or crutch, posthaste. First things first, though. There was still a look of indescribable emotion on Ed's face, one he couldn't understand.

“Brother! Are you alright?”

“Am I alright? You've got a lot of nerve asking that now, you ungrateful little shit!” It turned out that emotion could be easily described with just one word. Anger.

“What did I do?” Al asked frantically, his voice cracking at the end. Though Ed was lying flat on the ground, Al had no doubt he could break a leg if provoked, or at least a few toes.

“I told you to run! And what did you do? You stayed, like a big fat idiot!”

Al reeled for a moment, before finding his indignation.

“You would've done the same thing, and you know it! A hypocrite is way worse than an idiot, so there!” Al stuck his tongue out at Ed in childish victory, having found an airtight argument. However, his self-satisfaction didn't last long, with a warm hand wrapping about his ankle. With a swift yank his footing was pulled out from under him. He went flat on his back, abruptly putting him on even ground with Ed.
“Ow,” he said, clutching his head where it had bounced on the ground. “What was that for?”

“Teaching you to have some respect for your big brother,” snapped Ed. Irritated, Al pulled out his secret verbal weapon without so much as a thought.

“I don't have a big brother; just a runty little older one that doesn't even come up to my chin.”

The words hung in the air, still carrying his triumphant tone. After a second or two of continued silence on Ed’s part, though, he began to get concerned. His older brother’s eyes and mouth were hidden by his flesh arm, face turned to the ground. A trickle of worry traced Al's spine. Had he gone a touch too far with that last remark?

But then, quiet, restrained laughter came to his ears. It was relatively low, a beautiful sound Al hadn't heard in quite some time. Perhaps it was weird sibling telepathy, or simply because they’d been through so much together, but Al thought he understood some of the things Ed was feeling, if only because he felt them too.

It was laughter for the two of them, because how long had it been since they could squabble and bicker like little kids? It was laughter for the absurdity of it all, five years of torment ended in under half an hour with a simple carbon crystallization array. It was bittersweet joy, for all the things the two had missed out on. Five years, five years Al had privately thought might go on his entire life.

At some point, Alphonse could not remember when, he began to laugh too.

Laughter became guffawing. Shaking shoulders became wheezes for air. Aching abdominal muscles transitioned into snot filled sinuses became gasping sobs. It had been five years since Al had last felt tears sting his eyes, and about that long since Ed let himself cry. So they reveled in the sensation together. There were no words passed out loud between them, only the thought slowly sinking into their brains.

It's over now.

Al couldn't say how long they laughed and cried, but by the time their faces were blotchy and stiff with dried tears, they were sitting, leaning on each other. The desert night got cold fast, but Ed's back was warm where it pressed against him.

“The stars are beautiful tonight,” said Ed, sounding truly and wondrously sincere. He was right, of course. There was no barrier of clouds in sight, only thick, endless swathes of twinkling stars.

“Mm-hmm. I'd almost forgotten what they looked like. The closest thing I could think of was diamonds on black velvet, but that doesn't even come close to describing it.”

Ed pondered this information for a moment.

“Just yesterday, I would've traded a whole bucket of diamonds to see the stars one last time.”

“What about now?”

“I'd trade a whole bathtub of the dumb rocks to make sure I see them again tomorrow.”

Al chuckled at the immediate answer. There was a beat of comfortable silence, letting adrenaline wear off and their aches and pains making themselves known. However, one loose end caught his eye.

“What do you think they'll end up doing with her? I don't know if anyone will believe she's a
corpse.” he asked, gesturing vaguely at Dante's 'statue'.

“I dunno. Make her into a creepy fountain?”

Al snorted.

Suddenly, their conversation was interrupted by a loud crack Al was fairly certain indicated that Dante's left leg had snapped under her own weight. The two princes held their breath, watching the statue list dangerously to one side. The head was the first to hit the ground, wobbling ominously on her slender neck before toppling off. The rest of her body followed suit, larger pieces shattering before crumbling into dust.

Alphonse sucked a breath in through his teeth and grimaced at the sight before them. However, Ed had a slightly more optimistic view.

“I guess that's one way to dispose of the body.”

“Brother!”

“Sorry, sorry.”

“Though,” said the younger brother thoughtfully, “I did just technically commit murder.” Surprisingly, the thought didn't bother him too much, mostly due to extenuating circumstances. “Maybe we should leave the scene of the crime before the city guard shows up.”

“The old hag was three hundred years old; we can just say she died of old age.”

“Think anybody would believe that?”

“I think that's a problem for the Elric Brothers of the future. Right now, let's just watch the stars.”

“Sounds just fine to me.”

Chapter End Notes

Meanwhile, Greed is a few yards away with a three foot spike through his chest. Sorry for taking a whole month with this update, but it was a lot of content, with a lot of revisions. Hope this was a good fight to read!

Fun Fact: The original draft of this chapter involved Dante getting in one last hit against Al and skewering him through the gut.
Terrifying Encounters of the Romantic Kind

Chapter Summary

A couple of decades before our story takes place, a young king and an immigrant grad student meet under decidedly unglamorous conditions.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The first time he saw her was at the library. Not the private royal library covered in stacks of books organized by project and catalogs of his own notes at his disposal. It wasn't even the public royal library, open nine to six, five days a week. It was some completely unheard of creaky little wooden building along the edge of the city. Given its architecture, the weathering of the smooth black wood, and the texture of the red glass windows, the library had to have been at least a hundred years old. Xerxes was five hundred years old, so the age wasn't the most uncommon thing, but rather its appearance and distance from the city's center.

Perhaps even more intriguing was the raised symbol on the enormous front doors. An enormous tree, with different levels of branches labeled and scattered with incomprehensible letters. Normally, Hohenheim would've been fascinated by such a strange picture, but not today. Today, he had a mission already in mind, fueled by a singular purpose.

Proving Izumi Curtis wrong.

This wasn’t because of any grudge or bad blood between the two. Hohenheim held nothing but respect for the Amestrian immigrant, as an alchemist and as a person. However, to say they held different philosophies in life would be an understatement. Hohenheim considered himself a researcher, a scholar; Izumi could be described as nothing less than a force of nature. Hohenheim could not help but admire that about her, which was probably why he took her up on the offer of self defense lessons.

It had gone miserably. Even with the handicap of not using her alchemy, Izumi had run circles around him. His prepared arrays were useless, derailing his preconceived strategem. He couldn’t even begin to formulate a new plan while evading and blocking her attacks. Despite the height and weight advantage he had, Izumi manipulated his mass with ease, throwing him around like a ragdoll, in between devastating blows. She certainly hadn’t been pulling her punches. Her movements were simultaneously graceful and erratic, leaving him unable to predict her attacks. Whenever he thought she would go for the face and blocked accordingly, she immediately jabbed at his stomach. If he thought he had a chance to get past her guard and attacked, she swept low and kicked his legs out from under him. It was humiliating, how easily she beat him. Thankfully, they were in a remote enough location that nobody could see the newly appointed king fail so completely at using alchemy, his greatest asset.

At the end of it all, she stood over his prone form, collapsed from exhaustion. With a stern expression and a neutral tone neither triumphant nor disgusted, she said:

“You’re way too stiff, in your movements and your thinking. Until you learn how to loosen up and improvise, I can’t teach you a damn thing.”
Hohenheim considered himself a fairly mild man, but he knew a challenge when he heard one. And this particular challenge was one he could not ignore.

And if Izumi wanted unconventional thinking, he had known just the place for unconventional knowledge.

He slipped into that library early in the morning, before immediately throwing himself into his research with fervor. He expanded his repertoire of arrays he could easily draw from memory and implement in a fight. It was an entirely different area of study than what he usually focused on, so it was easy to be fascinated. For instance, weapons building arrays, something completely outside his expertise, functioned entirely differently from what he was used to. Instead of being defined by precisely drawn angles and layers of symbols, the objects created were shaped by the alchemist’s intent.

Hohenheim himself considered himself a specialist in construction alchemy, and spent large amounts of time drafting, re-drafting, almost finalizing, and scrapping his arrays. Before a single handful of sand could be transmuted into stone, everything had to be planned down to the millimeter. This sort of vague, loosely defined alchemy he found in the library was rare in academia, particularly when it came to the circles he ran in. It was fascinating, but undeniably took him outside his comfort zone, a place he hadn’t been since he’d been appointed king a year and a half prior. He devoured every relevant scrap of information like a man possessed.

It was while feverishly copying notes on combustible compounds found in various environments into his journal that he first saw her. He was attempting to massage the pain from his cramping palm, when he saw a flash of chestnut hair in the low light as it was tossed over a shoulder. Perhaps he wouldn’t have looked twice, if it weren’t for the fact he hadn’t seen a single patron all day. Even the sole librarian had somehow disappeared.

And so, he involuntarily studied her. That chestnut hair was as glossy as he’d initially thought, but it was pulled back into a low ponytail at the base of her neck to keep it out of her eyes. He got a good look at her face thanks to this. She was undoubtedly young, but lacked the baby fat and other vaguely childish features he associated with teenagers. Her coloring suggested Amestrian heritage, though whether she was an immigrant or desert-born was impossible to discern, and irrelevant as well. After all, he wasn’t going to strike up a conversation with her. In fact, he should look away before she saw him staring and mistook his curiosity for animosity or worse, attraction.

He averted his gaze to his work, which didn’t hold the same appeal as before. However, he regained his enthusiasm fairly quickly after coming across a section detailing the creation and uses of outward-facing arrays.

Some time later, he took another brief break, rolling his wrist about so it clicked loudly. The pain was quite noticeable and reoccurring, enough that he was considering designing some sort of brace for it. After that, he noticed a noise his joints had certainly not produced. A soft snore.

The woman across the room was unconscious, head resting heavily on her messy tornado of loose papers. Her book was squashed flat between her torso and the edge of the table, making him reflexively cringe. That kind of treatment seriously damaged the spines of books. Her snoring was difficult not to notice, occasionally ratcheting up in volume at unpredictable intervals. She was hitting almost every one of his pet peeves without even opening her eyes. He sighed, determined not to be bothered by such inane details.

Flipping the fourth volume in his search for knowledge closed, he reached for the fifth volume, and came up emptyhanded. After feeling his hand hit nothing but air, he searched his work area. He had two stacks of books, read and unread, but though the latter had gradually disappeared, while the
former grew ever taller. After a thorough search he came to the conclusion that he had left the fifth volume on the shelf. That was an easy fix, as well as an excuse to get up and stretch his legs. He gathered the other books in his arms and rested his chin on them to make sure they didn’t topple before beginning the trek across the large (and only) room in the library.

Only, there was an obstacle in his way, or, more accurately, a dragon to sneak past. A snoring, brown-haired dragon that was quite possibly drooling on a priceless first edition. He swallowed the lump in his throat, dreading the thought of unnecessary confrontation should he wake her. Yes, it was ridiculous for a king to fear incurring a stranger’s wrath, or even their attention, but it wasn’t something he could do anything about.

He continued moving, cautious and slow. He probed for loose and creaky floorboards, discovering a noiseless path. It wasn’t easy, considering the whole building was older than standardized building requirements, but he did his best. He crept closer, eyes glued to the woman for any indication of wakefulness. Perhaps it was his divided attention that was his literal downfall.

She shifted in her sleep, revealing a seam on her cheek, the imprint of the edge of the book clearly seen. His breath caught in his throat, at the same time his foot caught on the lip of an uneven floorboard, either warped by time or placed incorrectly to begin with.

He tipped forward like a dead tree, heavy and stiff. His arms wrapped around as many books as he could manage, instinctively prioritizing their safety above breaking his fall. He hurtled towards the ground, face-first and with several books already falling out of his grasp.

Impact was as loud as expected, cacophonous in the quiet room. Heavy books hit the ground first, shortly followed by his considerable mass. The sharp edges of hardcover volumes jammed painfully into his abdomen, only one of the many hurts just collected. His elbow stung where it had been rubbed raw by the floorboards. His glasses were gone somewhere, hopefully not broken.

“Ouch…”

He lay prone on the floor for just a fraction of a second, wishing he could sink right through. Sadly, his wish was not granted, so he gingerly pushed himself up and rolled onto his back.

“Mmmmm? Wh’uzz goin’ on?”

The woman was sitting upright, pushing hair out of her face and rubbing the sleep from her eyes. Finally coming around to full awareness, she got a good look at Hohenheim, and he at her.

Her eyes big and round, colored a deep, ponderous brown. Her hair was a mess, the result of her nap and subsequent rude awakening. Her bottom lip was split down the middle, but not currently bleeding. Most likely, she’d let her lips become chapped, only to crack the skin when she smiled. Those lips were absentmindedly parted in a rounded shape of surprise, matched by the curious look in her eye.

He felt his face heating up, flushing red. Being so clumsy (and getting caught at it) was already mortifying, before combining with being under her inquisitive stare, which was rapidly losing the fog of sleep.

He tried to regain his dignity. He made eye contact, kept his face straight, and in the steadiest, most nonchalant voice he could muster, he spoke.

“Good morning.”

And Trisha couldn’t help it—she laughed.
Chapter End Notes

This was essentially a filler chapter to shave a little time off the impromptu hiatus. Next chapter will also take place around the royal couple, but be significantly more relevant to the story. Sorry for the short and infrequent updates
Medical Intervention of the Occult Variety

Chapter Summary

Is there any reason good enough to justify human sacrifice?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The decision, as did all important things in their relationship, happened in a library. It was late, though how late, she couldn’t say. Her eyes burned with fatigue, but she knew she wouldn’t be able to sleep even if she wanted to. She stared down at the messy array of information before her. Hospital data configurations, charts and scans, Xingese alkahestry circles, the diaries of dozens of midwives, even a treatise on neonatal chimaera transmutation. And yet, none of it was any good. The data was irrelevant, the charts were grim, the alkahestry was inapplicable, the diaries were vague, the treatise was purely theoretical.

It was all useless.

It had been like this for three days now. Three days of frantic research, three days without bathing, sleeping, or leaving their private residence. Three days of dead ends, of reading through her tears, of ignoring her own declining health.

But she couldn’t stop, and she couldn’t give up. To give up would mean…

She didn’t want to think about it. She touched her stomach lightly, as if it would shatter at any moment. Just then, a knock came from the large wooden doors.

“May I come in?”

Hohenheim’s muffled voice brought a wan smile to her face as she turned in her chair. He was so courteous, even when she was using the king’s own library, not the other way around. She called out an assent, and her husband entered the library.

He looked like death warmed over. His hair was greasy and limp over his shoulders. His jaw was covered with a noticeable amount of stubble. His golden eyes were sunk into his skull, in the middle of his waxy-looking face. He looked…haunted.

“Trisha,” he murmured, reverent and sad all at once.

“Darling,” she replied. She felt as if she might actually cry just from the sight of him. Stupid hormones.

“Shouldn’t you be resting?” His voice was gentle.

“I can’t sleep, and I’d rather be awake down here than awake doing nothing in bed.”

He looked as if he understood the sentiment, even if he wasn’t happy about it. It made sense, considering he spent the last three days the same way she did.
“We need to talk,” he began, words stilted, reluctant to pass his lips.

“I know.”

“Our baby is dying.”

“I know. So am I.”

“I know,” he whispered.

These were two facts they had been certain of for the past three days, but had never acknowledged out loud. Trisha’s throat was tight, making it borderline painful to speak. But neither of them could cry now. Instead, she kept talking.

“I’ve been looking for solutions.”

“So have I.”

“You haven’t found any either, have you?”

He couldn’t even look at her, what she’d seen as despair mixing with shame on his face. The firm line of his mouth trembled, threatening total collapse.

“The thing is, I have.”

She couldn’t even process her surprise or speculate at the nature of this solution before Hohenheim crossed the room to her with long, rapid strides. He all but collapsed when he closed the gap between them, falling to his knees at her feet.

“I tried to look for another way,” he mumbled so helplessly, eyes cast to the ground. “I tried, Trisha, I tried…”

She pushed one hand into his golden hair, dulled by grease, while the other tilted his chin up. She forced him to look into her eyes, unwaveringly focused on him. She tried to be a gentle but grounding force, drawing him out of his distress. It was a difficult task, considering she wasn’t doing much better than him, but all that came to mind at this moment was a desire to ease his turmoil.

“Please, tell me,” she whispered, her thumb dragging across his cheekbone with every ounce of tenderness she felt for him.

Wordlessly, his hand came up between them, holding a large object that barely fit in his palm. Trisha looked at the source of her husband’s shame in temporary confusion. A first glance, it looked like a large precious stone or gem, egg shaped and heavy. But it was completely opaque, a uniform shade of red more like clotted blood than fresh. Its surface was smooth and flawless, but it didn’t reflect light, lacking any sort of luster.

None of these features were remotely conclusive evidence of anything, really, but she already had a terrible feeling that disregarded logic. Her throat felt dry, and she became more certain in her suspicions the more she looked between the stone and her husband’s torn up expression.

“Is that…”

“A philosopher’s stone,” he said miserably. One of the most prized materials in the world, rare enough that many considered it a mere legend. It could store vast amounts of alchemical energy, making it extremely useful in performing great feats of alchemy.
“How did you get this?” she whispered as gently as she could manage. While the exact process of creating a philosopher’s stone was lost to time, the horrifying main component was mentioned deep in tomes found in Xerxes libraries. Human flesh, human souls.

Hohenheim looked her in the eye suddenly, an earnest expression upon his face.

“Five hundred years ago, the king of Old Xerxes decided to create a philosopher’s stone using the souls of four hundred slaves. The plan backfired spectacularly.”

“He destroyed all of Xerxes,” said Trisha. She was somewhat familiar with the mystery of their city’s origin, and Hohenheim’s story was instantly believed, filling in gaps of human record.

“This is the result. It’s been passed down between monarchs for centuries, though none have ever touched it.”

“Until now.”

The resolve on his face began to crumble.

“Yes, until now,” he whispered.

“You want to use the harvested souls of human beings to save our unborn child?”

He winced at her bluntness, but managed to look her in the eye.

“Yes, I do. I won’t force you to go through with it, but yes, that’s what I want.”

“Oh, Hohenheim…”

“I know that what I’m saying breaks the taboo. I know that it’s immoral and selfish and greedy.” He took a shaky breath and continued, his voice rising in strength. “But Trisha, I am selfish. I want you and the child we made together by my side, for as long as I live. It may be horrible, it may be evil, but—”

She bent down and kissed him soundly, cutting off his self-deprecating, emotional speech, of which she had heard more than enough. She smiled warmly at his bewildered face.

“If you’re selfish, I’m a thousand times as greedy, my dear.”

His jaw dropped, though his eyes held a touch of relief, of hope.

“Trisha…”

“If trying to live happily is a sin, let’s commit it together.”

He kissed her so gently, with tears running down their faces. That was the night they committed the unforgivable sin, and the start of the happiest years of their lives.

Chapter End Notes

A regular posting schedule? What’s that? These two half-chapters almost make one full one at least. See you in either four months or next week with another issue of the royal couple getting put through the wringer.
Trauma isn’t a knife; it’s a fucking hand grenade.

“Mom, Dad, we want to switch rooms.”

They were seated at the table in the small kitchenette attached to their private apartments. Hohenheim paused with a jam muffin halfway to his lips, creating a rather comical expression. Trisha set down her fork quietly.

“Well, I suppose it’s natural for you two to want separate bedrooms now that you’re older,” she said.

“What?”

“No way!”

Ed and Al responded almost simultaneously, both looking aghast at the notion.

“Oh,” said Hohenheim in a neutral tone, though he was privately relieved. He’d been momentarily worried the boys had had an argument, which was never a pleasant occurrence.

“What brought this on?” Trisha was genuinely curious as to whether this was a fit of childish whimsy, which could be expected of a nine and ten year old.

“We need more room,” said Alphonse.

“For books!” shouted Ed, making an expansive gesture with his mismatched arms.

“And circles,” added the younger, a bit quieter. He probably hoped his parents wouldn’t hear him.

“For alchemy,” said Hohenheim, a soft smile on his face. He was probably a bit too indulgent of a father, but Trisha could hardly dislike him for it, with that gentle handsome expression.

“And the room attached to ours won’t do?”

The Elrics didn’t make much use of the many rooms in the eastern wing of the palace, preferring to keep their most common routines to an apartment on the second floor. It consisted of two mid-sized bedrooms, a small kitchenette, a full bathroom, and a common room.

“Nope!” Ed was practically vibrating with excitement. She sighed.

“You’d have to let me or your father know when you’ll be conducting transmutations.”

“Every time. No exceptions,” said Hohenheim pointedly. It had been over three years since the incident where Ed had traded away his own limbs. All things considered, the two of them were entitled to a little bit of hovering worry considering their eldest child’s potentially dangerous
experiments.

“And Al has to be there,” she added, another preventative measure. Worst came to worst, her youngest son would be able stop his brother from doing anything overly dangerous to himself. Alphonse nodded enthusiastically.

“Wait, does that mean yes?” Ed looked overjoyed by the concept.

She froze. Hohenheim, traitor he was, laughed quietly at the corner she’d backed herself into.

“It means we’ll think about it.”

“But, if we were to hypothetically grant your request, where would you two want your room to be?”

Hohenheim regretted the question a dozen times as he was dragged up the stairs. They were the longest stairs in the castle, leading up to the tallest tower. Additionally, he could tell that his wife was subtly trying to beat him to the top, despite her own fatigue.

Ed and Al were waiting in the room, looking no worse for wear and completely oblivious to their parents being out of breath. Trisha and Hohenheim very much fit the stereotype of unathletic bookworms. Their sons, on the other hand, were ardent students of martial arts as well as alchemy. They blamed Izumi.

“So, what do you think?”

Bemused, the two adults looked about the room. It was a single chamber, circular and completely bare, lit by large glassless windows with wooden shutters. It was fairly easy to see what the boys liked about it; the stone floor was perfectly even, ideal for drawing proper circles, and looked easy to wash. The room itself was spacious, large enough to easily contain two beds, some furniture, and still have more than half the room to dedicate to their book collection.

“It’s got a hell of a view,” was the first thing Trisha said, completely sincerely. Hohenheim shot her a look of betrayal for the cursing, though the boys have certainly picked up far fouler language on their adventures. Ed, on the other hand, was ecstatic.

“I know, right?”

“I do have a few major concerns, though.”

Al deflated ever so slightly at that, while Ed seemed to puff up like a bullfrog in preparation to protest the matter. Trisha began to explain herself, if only to cut off that impending debate.

“The first thing you need to consider is the location. Do you really want to trek all the way up those stairs half a dozen times a day? Especially since Granny Pinako mentioned the ports acting up…”

Even Al looked concerned now. The entire family and, by extension, their friends had a complex relationship with Ed’s automail. It allowed Ed to run and fight and play and do all the things he loved. But on the flip side of the coin, it had caused him so much suffering. The surgery was torture, the rehab was grueling, and even now the ports caused him twinges of pain. On a regular basis Trisha questioned their decision to let their eldest son get such a traumatic surgery so young, even if he had insisted. It had not been for purely selfless reasons, she could admit. Back then, and even now, she had felt so guilty that Ed had traded his own limbs for her life. She’d wanted things to go back to the way they were before, without the knowledge of Ed’s sacrifice hanging over their heads. And while the original pieces of her son’s body were completely unattainable, automail was the closest approximation. She and Hohenheim had never pushed the thought of surgery or even really
mentioned the idea to Ed, but they didn’t say no when perhaps they should’ve. Perhaps.

The selfishness Trisha shared with her husband had not faded over time, especially in regards to their children.

In the moment, Ed crossed his arms and stuck his chin out defiantly.

“Granny’s wrong. My ports haven’t hurt in years.”

A lie. And a boldfaced one at that. Trisha dropped it, though, electing to move forward. Luckily, her husband was on the same page.

“You’ve never slept this far away from us before. Are you sure you won’t get lonely or scared? It gets very dark up here without electricity, and the wind creates lots of strange noises.”

Trisha caught on to what her husband was getting at almost immediately. A little bit of fear would definitely change their children’s minds. Little did he know, there were few people better suited to this task than her. At her small village in rural Amestris, she was no stranger to inspiring nightmares in the hearts of young children huddled around the fire.

“That’s assuming there are no actual phantoms lurking about.” She let the sentence hang in the air, wind whistling about the tower.

“Wh-what do you mean?” Al had taken the bait, as according to plan. She felt herself smile a devilish smile. Even if she wasn’t trying to deter them from moving to this room, Trisha would still have fun teasing her sons like this.

“Many spirits roam these castle halls, Alphonse, and not all of them died peacefully. Now they hold grudges against the living. If you aren’t wary of them, they’ll torment you to the brink of madness.”

With the end of this declaration, two sets of knees were shaking were they stood and her husband had a palm pressed to his face, either out of exasperation or secondhand embarrassment from her antics. Though her boys were thoroughly spooked, Ed, the (slightly) older and (arguably) wiser sibling, questioned her motives.

“You’re just saying that to scare us!”

Trisha reared backed in mock affront, having expected this.

“Edward Elric! How dare you accuse me, your loving mother, of such a thing! I say this only because it would be highly irresponsible of me not to warn you of the dangers.”

Edward was still clearly suspicious, but seemed stumped as how to prove his suspicions correct. The second protest came from Alphonse. He was slightly more sensible than Ed, and a little younger, but he wasn’t shy or meek in any measure, even if he was shaking in his sandals.

“It doesn’t matter! I can fight ghosts and protect Ed!”

He was so sincere in his proclamation, with his serious face not even free of baby fat. Trisha’s resolve was weakening by the second.

“*You’re* going to protect me? How can you fight ghosts if just talking about it makes you sweat buckets?

“Shut up. It’s not like you could do any better,” said Al, face flushing at being called out.
“Of course I could. I’m the older brother, it’s my job to protect you.”

“Yeah, but I’m way stronger, so it should be my job.”

“Who decided that?”

“We didn’t need to. I’ve won every single one of our fights, so I’m stronger, obviously.”

Trisha couldn’t hold it anymore. Her laughter tore up from her stomach, becoming loud guffaws that made her convulse with the force of it.

“Mom?”

By the time the giggles could be forced down, her belly ached from laughter. She looked at her beautiful golden boys, and knew that every inch of her love was shown plainly on her face.

“I was worried that if something bad happened, we wouldn’t hear it all the way up here. But I guess I shouldn’t have been, since you two are so eager to take care of each other.”

She flicked her eyes to her husband’s face, and saw complete agreement with what she was about to say. She sighed, not unhappily.

“You can use this room, I suppose.”

“Really?”

“Thanks, Mom!”

“Thank you!”

Their smiles warmed her heart, and their enthusiasm was infectious among their little family of four. They were so happy to be trusted, she couldn’t bring herself to deny them because of irrational mother hen impulses. She had been so stupid.

Of course, the blame did not lie entirely on the parents’ shoulders. There was no possible way to predict what would happen scarcely two years later.

That nightmare of an unforeseen incident began with a literal nightmare. It was nothing defined, or a linear sequence of events. Only shadows, screams, the screech of shearing metal, a white, white smile. She bolted upright in her bed, a gasp just shy of a scream stuck in her throat. Hohenheim was jostled from his own restless sleep by either the movement or noise, but Trisha didn’t spare time to apologize or explain. It didn’t seem to matter much, as Hohenheim was already by her side when she walked out the bedroom. The feeling they both had was specific and terrifying, leading them to a single location.

The had abandoned their dressing gowns in the bedroom, too feverish to think of slowing to grab them. Their feet lacked slippers, but they hardly noticed as they sunk into plush carpet and slapped against stone floor alike. Their path was only occasionally moonlit, but it did little to hinder their way through the maze-like castle. They began at a somewhat panicked walk, convincing themselves that the premonition was only overprotective parenting at work, invading their dreams with worry. But as their racing thoughts (Am I paranoid? Are they hurt? Is it the automail? An experiment? A deathly sudden fever? Are Ed’s ports infected?) grew faster and faster, so did their footfalls.

They took the stairs two at a time, and yet they seemed to never end. Time seemed to dilate, slowing to a crawl. Bile rose in their throats, freezing sweat rolled down their backs, their pulses thundered
against the delicate skin of their throats. And above all, that horrible visceral sensation of wrongness grew in intensity with every grueling second.

The door banging against the adjacent wall was thunderous in the not-quite silence. Their heavy breathing, the yowling of an animal, the whistling of the wind about the tower, the soundtrack to their panic.

They took in the scene by increments, flashes of coherency. The beds were empty and the sheets were twisted about; the stacks of books their sons considered so precious were toppled. There was a cat (since when did they even have a cat?) sitting in a wet patch of red. The cat was sitting on Al’s chest. Al’s front was covered in blood. Oh god.

“Al!”

They dropped to their knees, something that would be incredibly painful in any other scenario. Now, they hardly felt it.

Trisha bent her ear to Al’s mouth and pressed her fingers to his pulse. In the meantime, Hohenheim frantically opened up the soaked shirt to examine the wound. Both of these examinations came back with odd results.

“He’s breathing fine,” she sighed, slightly relieved. His pulse was steady as well.

“And he’s not cut anywhere,” added her confused husband. The skin under Al’s pajama shirt was smooth and unbroken, without so much as a trace of injury. Additionally, he still had normal color to his cheeks, indicating the lack of blood loss.

“But where did the blood come from?”

Eyes turned back to the screaming cat. They’d basically forgotten its existence in their frantic search, but it was continuing to protest being brushed off of Al. However, its cries suggested something worse than hunger or distress. Trisha hoisted it by the extra skin at the back of the neck, and gasped at what she saw. The tail had been amputated to a neatly cropped stump, and the surrounding fur was thick with blood, fresh and clotted alike. In any other situation she would’ve been immediately determined and focused on saving it, but now she could only feel relief. Her mind pieced together a story, a best case scenario of sorts.

“Al and his kitten must’ve gotten hit when a stack of books fell over. Ed probably left to get first aid supplies.”

She wasn’t lying to herself. She wasn’t. It was only that she couldn’t entertain any other explanation. Ed was going to return, and Al would wake up any second. There was simply no other option.

Meanwhile, a dull glint of metal in the moonlight caught Hohenheim’s eye. He squinted, hindered by his lack of glasses, only to recoil as if burned. His stomach roiled, bile rising in his throat.

“Oh god,” he whispered in horror.

Carelessly thrown aside was Ed’s automail, lying haphazardly on the floor. Ed never took it off outside of maintenance, too used to staying in motion. That was telling enough. The real terror kicked in when he realized that the limbs had not been twisted from their sockets as Pinako had intended. They were brutally severed, the cut edge gleaming sharp enough to slice skin open. The abandoned limbs had been cut free of Ed, something their son would never agree to. Just like he would never leave Al alone and unconscious due to invisible injury.
It was looking at that arm and leg, too small to fit anyone but a child, that Hohenheim realized what kind of nightmare he had entered.

He called the authorities, explained the situation as clearly and unwaveringly as his voice allowed, alerted Izumi and the Rockbells and even sent a letter to the Ishvalan household Scar had previously boarded with. He cried out of fear. He made plans for the search with Trisha, cancelled other appointments left and right, talked at length with the hospital about Alphonse’s apparently perfect health. He screamed out of frustration. He called a veterinarian to treat Al’s pet cat, knowing that likely would’ve been his son’s first priority. He even slept a little, in wooden chairs and on stone floors, the only woman in the world who could possibly understand how he felt by his side. He was by Trisha’s side as she raged at the city guard, cursing them for giving up. He decayed from sadness, from the disappearance of two thirds of his entire world, leaving a gaping hole in his chest. He continued, propelled through life by the remaining third. He lived.

Yet, a part of him was waiting to wake up. He was desperately waiting for the nightmare to come to its blessed end, to return to reality.

But the nightmare never ended.

Chapter End Notes

We will be returning to your regularly scheduled Elric brothers shenanigans next time. Though, it’ll be less shenanigans and more of a highly conflicted reunion. And Ling!
An Accusation, Technically True

Chapter Summary

Even with Dante dead, there is still blame to spare.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Ling picked his way through the rubble, clumsy and frantic. His adrenaline high was fading, and he was crashing hard, despite how his mind was still in full blown panic.

Ed. Ed. Ed.

He wasn’t sure if he was screaming it or whispering, disoriented as he was. Dust scratched his throat, blood stuck to his face, clotted and syrupy.

“Greed!” Dolcetto ran forward, followed by Roa and Bido carrying Martel. They eased his impaled form off the spike, inspiring violent, wet coughing. Ling barely saw the impossible scene. His eyes were focused on two bodies laid spread-eagle in the dirt.

“Ed!”

Ling was fairly certain that in the moment between him screaming and the boys moving, his heart had stopped completely. Al sat up first, his face unfamiliar and not all at once.

“Ling!”

Ed was slower, shakily rising onto one elbow. But when he saw Ling, his golden eyes went wide.

“Ling?”

“Ed!” A horrible weight, one he couldn’t even begin to name, lifted off of his chest. He ran, limbs as light as his heart. He slid to his knees, grinding dust and dirt into his already ruined pants. His arms moved on their own, pulling Ed into a fierce embrace. He wanted, needed to feel his warmth, proof of both his and Ling’s presence.

Ling didn’t have time to second guess his impulse, because Ed immediately held him just as tightly. His one arm wrapped about his shoulders and under his arm, surprisingly strong. His body was warm in the night air, a miniature sun that warmed Ling to his core. It was exhilarating, for lack of a better word. There Ed was, his heart hammering out a steady rhythm right next to Ling’s. The Xingese prince buried his face into his shoulder, along the seam where flesh met metal.

“I really thought she had you,” he whispered.

“For a second, so did I,” Ed said with a wet laugh, forehead pressed against his bare chest.

Ling pulled back, but did not remove his hands. He looked at Ed, cataloguing his injuries. Even covered in grime and blood, his golden eyes were bright and full of life. The jut of his jaw was strong and proud, but his lips were soft and slightly parted. Abruptly, Ling remembered the feel of
those lips pressed to his own, scarcely two hours ago. He suddenly became aware of their proximity, and the way he had so desperately clutched at Ed upon seeing him again. Unbidden, heat rose to his face, and he looked away from Ed’s searching gaze. Suddenly, Ed laughed, low and rasping.

“What?”

Ed laughed some more.

“Lust got some of your hair earlier. You look like a half-plucked chicken.”

Gently, the fingers of his left hand reached out and brushed the side of his head, mindful of the gash that was quickly scabbing over. At Ed’s touch, Ling realized that yes, a significant chunk of hair had been sheared short by Lust’s claws, including half his ponytail. He smiled, unable to be upset that the hair he’d been growing for the past decade was gone.

“That explains why my head feels so light,” he joked.

“Of course. Until recently, you’ve had more hair than brains.” Ed’s teasing smile was bright, and difficult to look away from. Ling felt his own grow wider at the sight.

“Is it really so bad?” Ling’s voice was softer and lower than he initially intended, intimate even to his own ears. He tilted his head into the hand touching his scalp, like an affectionate cat. Ed’s face turned an undeniable shade of pink and averted his gaze.

“W-well, it’s not like anything could make your ugly mug that much worse.”

Ling chuckled. Ed could be surprisingly cute, when it came down to it. Ling found himself wanting to discover all the other unexpected aspects of Ed’s personality, if only to see faces like the one before him.

The moment was shattered by Alphonse clearing his throat. They sprung apart in an instant as if burned.

“Al!” If Ed was pink before, he was positively crimson now.

“Ah, sorry,” said Ling. He wasn’t sure what he was apologizing for, but he did know that he wasn’t quite capable of looking Alphonse in the eyes just then.

“Don’t be. To be honest, I was kind of expecting that.” Alphonse smiled, amused and self satisfied.

“Al,” hissed the elder brother, warning. The younger merely laughed, amused.

“Well,” said Ling, clumsily shoving past the awkward situation. “What now?”

“Common sense says to flee the scene of the crime,” said Alphonse.

“But something tells me that keeping a low profile is pretty much out of the question at this point,” finished his brother.

“There was quite a lot of collateral damage,” admitted Ling.

“And as much as I hate to admit it, I’m in no condition to run anymore.” Coming from Ed, the admission of weakness spoke to the gravity of the situation.

“You’re right, and I’m glad you’re not being so stupid to deny it…but what about them?” Al looked nervous, his brow pinched inwards. “Are you really ready to see them yet? I mean, we have no idea
what they’ll do.”

Ed looked off into the distance, and alarmed expression on his features.

“I don’t think we have much of a choice anymore.”

Two figures appeared amongst the rubble of the castle. They held a lantern between them, illuminating their faces and the ground before them.

They might’ve been tall, once. Now, their spines and limbs drooped, weariness taking its toll. Their plain but well made clothing was wrinkled, their long hair slipping free of ties. Ling could tell who they were, somehow. The evidence was there, in Alphonse’s square jaw and round eyes, in Ed’s sharp features and soft hair. Their expressions were unreadable, if only because of how many emotions were present.


The oil lamp fell to the ground, busting open and inadvertently creating a small fire. Nobody noticed. The pair advanced, their shaking hands reaching out as they ran.

“Stop!” Ed was sat up fully, despite how it obviously pained him. His fingers were spread, his palm held up as an impassable barrier between him and them. “Don’t come any closer!”

His voice was desperate, raw. Even Ling knew how difficult this was for him, despite how little he knew of Ed’s relationship with his parents. To refuse their affection, their care after five years lacking it, could not have been an easy task.

Said parents stopped, if only momentarily.

“Ed?” The woman’s voice was soft and confused. Her chestnut brows were pulled in tight, a contrast to the shaky smile she wore.

“What are you talking about?” The man took a few steps forward, arms positioned as if to draw his sons into an embrace. Both boys recoiled, scuttling backwards on damaged limbs. Ling made a split second decision. He rose onto one knee, raising his sword in a defensive stance. He froze in that position, but his muscles were bunched tight, ready to lunge forward any second.

“He said, don’t come any closer.” Ling’s voice was deadly serious to his own ears, a threat worthy of an emperor. He wondered if he was drastically overstepping his bounds by drawing a sword on Ed’s parents, as logic would dictate. However, neither Ed nor his brother objected to such drastic measures.

The woman held out her arm as a barrier between her husband and his blade, a protective gesture. Though fear was plain on her face, she spoke clearly, composed. There was a fierceness about her, one that could not be easily deterred.

“Who are you?”

“A friend of your sons,” he replied. He kept his expression perfectly neutral, even if his tone was not. “One with their best interests at heart.”

The man narrowed his eyes, drawing himself up to his full height, which was hardly insignificant. His chest was broad and his arms firm, the wasting effects of age not yet settling in. In short he cut an imposing figure, but the real danger was the way his hands rose from his sides, as if to clap. His eyes flashed with recognition.
“It’s you,” he accused. “You’re the thief from this morning.”

“Perhaps.”

Their eyes flashed with incandescent rage.

“Step away from our sons,” said the woman.

“Before we make you,” continued the king.

Ling didn’t budge. Ed was frozen. The monarchs stepped forward. All in all, it was shaping up to disastrously violent scene. That is, until Al spoke.

“All eyes turned to the prince, who steeled himself and continued.

“Is it so hard to believe?”

“Is it so hard to believe that we want nothing to do with you, after what you did to Ed? After you put him through years of torture?”

His voice was steadily rising in volume and intensity, every word landing like a physical attack. His fists were clenched, his eyes burning hot as he landed the finishing blow. He turned to his parents, back straight and tone accusatory, full of barely contained rage.

“After all, it was you two that fused his body with the philosopher’s stone.”

The only sounds were the whistle of the wind about them, the crackle of persisting fires, and two hearts shattering into millions of pieces.

Chapter End Notes

No apologies, no excuses. Posting schedules are for the weak.
Chapter Summary

Ed weighs anger and relief, and ends up somewhere in the middle.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Ed sighed and scratched his cheek, as it itched intensely while it healed. He missed his automail like hell, though he’d only managed to hold onto it for a few hours. He shifted on the stiff cot, his back propped up against the headboard. The hospital room was almost uncomfortably well lit, fluorescent lights that hid no flaws and stung his eyes. At the very least, it was private, reserved for this small group. The only movement was that of the overhead fan above them, spinning too slow to generate any sort of breeze.

Of course, none of that was particularly important. Ed looked straight ahead, into the tired and anxious faces of his parents.

“So that’s it?” he asked flatly. “That’s your explanation?”

It seemed somewhat plausible, the tale of prenatal medical intervention. It meant that Ed’s parents had never killed anyone to make a philosopher’s stone, at least.

Al had accepted it as well. His brother was in the bed beside his, giving him a front row seat to seeing Al’s earlier anger fade into confused sympathy.

“It’s the truth,” said his mother, perched in a visitor’s chair across from them.

“Whether you believe it or not,” added his father.

“I do,” said Ed. “But I don’t understand why you did it.”

“Ed?” Al looked at him like he’d suddenly started speaking in Drachman dialect.
“If I was meant to be dead on arrival, why wouldn’t you simply let nature take its course? Why not terminate the pregnancy?”

“Ed!” His mother looked stricken by the thought.

“Why not try again, or adopt? There are ten thousand children out there you could’ve taken home.”

“We didn’t want another child. We wanted you.”

Ed considered this. His parents may not have ever killed anyone, but the fact that they would take such drastic measures over him was…

“You two are so unbelievably selfish,” he spat. He looked up, forcing his parents to meet his burning gaze. “Breaking the taboo over something so unbelievably stupid.”

Every word fell from his lips like it scalded his tongue. Ed was livid, his rage vibrating inside his skull like a living thing. Even more than that, he was so confused.

“You sacrificed everything an alchemist stands for, and for what? A half-formed lump of flesh? A fetus without thought or personality? A worthless bundle of cells?”

“That’s enough.”

“What, can’t stand to hear someone speaking rationally for once?”

“I said, that’s enough, Edward.”

Ed froze, shocked by the sharp, decisive tone. He had never heard his mother speak so harshly. Not to mention the fact that she used his full name. Growing up, that had only meant one thing: that he had crossed a line.
“You can insult us all you want. Call us selfish, stupid, evil, whatever word you think suits us best. But under no circumstances are you allowed to reject or belittle your own existence.”

Ed felt himself falter at the conviction in her words.

“Your life is priceless. Given the same choice a hundred, a thousand times, we would gladly choose you over the laws of alchemy.”

“Oh.” Ed was certain the trembling of his body was just his imagination, along with the way his eyes stung.

“Your mother and I love you two more than anything, so frankly, Ed, asking us to regret anything we’ve done for you is an exercise in futility.”

Despite the eloquence and humor in his words, their father’s voice and smile was watery at best, and downright tearful at worst. It was deeply disconcerting that the king of Xerxes, the greatest scholar on the continent, their father, can cry because of something Ed said. Ed could only ever remember his father being composed and calm, his small displays of love and pride reserved and precious. Ed was on his feet without even thinking, arms out in a failure of a calming gesture.

“Come on, don’t cry.”

His father’s only response was to cover his eyes with one hand and draw in a shuddering, soggy gasp for air. Ed felt himself turn desperate. His resolve was crumbling, his rage dying like a fire starved of oxygen. His voice felt so small, so pathetic.

“Dad, please don’t cry, okay?”

That, it seemed, was the final straw. Long arms, bound with some muscle despite their age, drew him in, crushed him to his father’s chest. Ed could feel each sob as well as he heard it, jostled by the spasm of his father’s diaphragm.

“I’m just so glad you two are safe,” he whispered, pressing his face to Ed’s disgusting hair like it was the most comforting thing in the world. It had been years since Ed had been hugged so warmly, surrounded by that scent of book glue and dried black tea. Until today, it had been years since Ed had been touched without the intent to harm. He felt like a child again, warm and safe. His arm came
up on its own, before two other sets wrapped around him. Al and his mother were here, they were real, they were safe, and they loved him.

Ed couldn’t help it; he cried his eyes out.

It was another hour before their parents left, realizing that they all needed sleep. Ed felt dehydrated and emotionally drained, and Al had noticed, practically pushing their parents out the door at the end.

It was scarcely three hours when Ed woke, shaking and soaked in sweat. For ten heart-stopping seconds, he didn’t know where he was. The darkness crushed him like a weight on his chest, the uncertainty like a vice around his lungs. If all of that had been little more than a dream, he didn’t know if he’d be able to take it.

Luckily, ten seconds was all it took to realize that the sheets tangled about him were crisp and clean, free of Dante’s cloying perfume. Another five, and his eyes were adjusted enough to make out Al’s sleeping form in the bed next to his, rising and falling with each breath. He relaxed against his pillow, intensely relieved. Even so, he felt keyed-up and uncomfortably energized, and knew he wouldn’t be able to sleep anymore. He sat up in bed, slinging his lower half over the side. He noted, with some irritation, that his left pant leg was just as empty as it had been that morning. It wasn’t ideal for sneaking around, but Ed was no stranger to a crutch. He took it from where it was propped up against the wall and wedged it into his armpit. After a few seconds of fumbling, he made his way to the door.

“Ed?”

Ed stumbled and nearly fell flat on his face, barely managing to whirl around.

“Damnit Al, don’t come out of nowhere like that. You nearly gave me a heart attack.”

“First of all, I didn’t ‘come out of nowhere’, this is my room too. Second, what are you doing?”

“Nothing.”

“Riiight. So ‘nothing’ woke me up?”
Unfortunately, it appeared that returning to his original body had not cured Al of his attitude. Ed sighed.

“I couldn’t sleep. I’m going for a walk to tire myself out. Sorry for waking you,” he tacked on sheepishly.

“That’s alright. I already knew you’d want to see Ling the second you got up, anyway.”

Even in the darkness, Ed could plainly see his brother’s teasing smile. Even in the darkness, Ed was certain his brother could see exactly how red he was turning.

“Shut up! I never said I was going to see him!”

“Shhh! You’re going to wake up the whole hallway, Ed.”

His jaw immediately snapped shut with an audible click.

“Now go. You should find him before sunrise and everyone wakes up.”

“Fine, I’m leaving. But for the record, this has nothing to do with that dumbass, okay?” he hissed, while Al simply waved him out the door. Somehow, he didn’t feel as if he’d been particularly convincing.

However, as he wandered the moonlit corridors, Ed found himself wondering where the princely bastard had ended up. It was simply curiosity, of course. And, whether he liked it or not, Ed owed the boy for what he’d done. If he cared at all whether Ling was deported or locked up or hurt, it was simply out of obligation, and nothing more.

He moved as silently as he could, keeping an eye out for wayward nurses making their rounds in the dead of night. In the darkness, every hallway looked damn near identical. After a few dozen minutes, he was in no way ready to give up on not-looking for Ling, but his body was more fatigued than he thought. Just when he was seriously considering hobbling his way back to the room, he turned a corner, and saw a strange sight.
Two Amestrian soldiers stood outside a normal hospital room. Of course, they were dressed in dark plainclothes, but they held themselves with a discipline and vigilance that belied years of training. It also helped that Ed remembered their faces from that morning. One was tall and lanky, with graying hair, the other bespectacled and babyfaced. Luckily, neither noticed his appearance from afar, giving him the chance to duck out of sight and observe more stealthily. Just then, the shorter of the two stretched upwards, wincing as he did.

“Still sore from this morning?” asked his older companion, chuckling goodnaturedly.

“I feel like a rock slide landed on my spine,” complained the younger.

“I know what you mean. That alchemist packed a big punch for someone less than five feet tall.”

Ed was suddenly ready to overcome his fatigue to march down the corridor and slap the shit out of both of them. He was five foot five and a half, and he’d teach these fuckers to respect that. Somehow, though, he managed to restrain himself.

“I can’t really get mad at the kid, though. I don’t know the whole story, but it seems like the situation was a lot more complicated than we thought.”

Ed remembered that the younger man had been the one to insist on medical treatment the second they’d met, and felt a little guilty.

The elder shook his head, smiling softly.

“Sometimes, Cain, you’re way too understanding for your own good.”

“What about you? Do you think he’s a bad kid?”

“Well… I wouldn’t say that. He just seemed… on edge, like an injured wild animal, lashing out at anyone that comes close.”

“I wasn’t expecting you to say something that poetic, Vato.”
“Forget I said anything, then,” said the man called Vato, clearly embarrassed.

“No, I don’t think I will,” said Cain, smiling.

Ed slid down the wall he was leaning against. He felt a bit voyeuristic, despite the fact that he was the subject of the conversation. He analyzed their words, trying to find any hint as to what they were guarding. He was so caught up in his thoughts he almost didn’t notice the approaching footsteps.

“Evening, gentlemen.” The inflection was casual, and Ed could practically hear the grin on his face. He leaned around the corner, and caught sight of the bright red end of a burning cigarette. Attached to the cigarette was a tall, broad shouldered man with a shock of blond hair.

“Havoc.”

“What’s got you awake this late? Your shift ended two hours ago.”

“Breda’s snoring woke me up, so I thought I might as well bring you two a gift.”

“A gift?”

“Yep! Some sweet, blessed caffeine.” He thrust forward two steaming paper cups. Vato eagerly accepted, while Cain nodded politely before taking his.

“You really are a lifesaver,” sighed the eldest soldier, taking a deep sip.

“Don’t I know it. And yes, Fuery, I did put milk in yours.”

“Thanks, Havoc. How’s the president doing?”

“Still sleeping, but doing fine. The little prince apparently stepped in before the lack of oxygen started killing brain cells.”
The president? Were they talking about the Flame Alchemist? Ed was mildly confused, but glad Dante hadn’t managed to hurt the bastard too badly.

“I see. I imagine Hawkeye’s happy to hear that, seeing as she’s always said he doesn’t have many to spare.”

“‘Happy’ isn’t the word I’d use. She hasn’t left his side all night. I think she’s taking it hard that she wasn’t there to save him herself.”

“I’d like to call her overprotective, but the president really does have a knack for getting into sticky situations.”

“I hear that. At any rate, he should be here in the morning with the royals to interrogate the thief.”

“And we’ll finally be able to sleep.”

So this was where they were holding Ling, presumably because they hadn’t so much as a clue what was going on. Hopefully, the situation would be cleared up in the morning, and logically, Ed knew it made more sense for things to sort themselves out, but Ed was not a purely logical person. In fact, his rising temper was about as far from rational as it could get. Ling had saved his life on multiple occasions in just one day, sometimes from the trigger-happy flame alchemist these soldiers worked for. After all that, here they were, treating him like a common criminal.

He stood up, intending to walk right over to the chatting men and give them a piece of his mind. He hadn’t been a prince in a very long time, but he had no issue throwing his title around to make his point. Damn the ethics of the situation, Ed had already decided that fear of both his reputation and his alchemy would get him what he wanted. In this case, what he wanted was to get Ling out of his makeshift cell. Obviously though, it was a sentiment driven by obligation, and nothing else.

A door opened without so much as a noise, a hand reached out in the dark, and a door closed, just as silently.

In an empty hallway, a crutch fell to the ground, the only sign that anyone had ever been there.
I LIVE.
Honestly, the nart fanfic has been shifted to the backburner as my enthusiasm has diminished, but don’t worry, because my devotion to this fic is an eternal flame, baby.
Moonlit Shyness

Chapter Summary

It’s not love (not yet), of course, but there’s an attraction, a gravity, a shared wavelength that is as easy to identify as it is difficult to ignore.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Ling!” Ed hissed in what barely qualified as a stage whisper, a contrast to the utter silence of the empty hospital room. His thin wrist easily slipped out of Ling’s weak grip, which he’d loosened the second the door shut. He wobbled on one leg for just a fraction of a second, before finding his balance. Ling would’ve reached out to steady him, if he didn’t know for a fact Ed would bite his fingers off.

“The hell was that for?”

“You looked like you were going to do something stupid, like pick a fight with those Amestrians.”

“They’re soldiers from Amestris exercising force outside their jurisdiction on Xerxes soil by imprisoning a Xingese illegal immigrant. There’s no way that’s legal.”

“You sudden concern over the law is admirable, and while it would’ve been very entertaining to see you rip into those soldiers, it doesn’t matter. I’m perfectly capable of climbing out a third story window on my own.”

Ed closed his mouth, and Ling could practically see the wheels spinning in his head as his anger fizzled out. His hand twisted in the fabric of his shirt, likely because he couldn’t cross his arms with his automail gone.

“You could’ve given me a heads up before yanking me around like that,” he settled on, looking downright sulky. Ling briefly thought that he must be insane for thinking such a bad attitude was remotely charming, even…cute. He quickly pushed the traitorous thoughts from his mind, focusing on the situation at hand.

“Warning you defeats the purpose of leaving the hallway to talk without being heard, don’t you think?”

“Whatever. Next time you sneak up on me like that, I’ll punch you right in the mouth.”

“If you can reach,” he replied easily.

“Shut up, you freakishly tall…freak.”

Ling smiled benignly, reveling in the reaction he’d elicited. It was somewhat embarrassing how much he enjoyed it, from a logical perspective. Ling was a prince, he wasn’t supposed to engage in this kind of bickering. Maybe it was because Ed was one of the few people his age he’s met in quite some time, but he knew that wasn’t it. After all, he didn’t even think of teasing Al for his own amusement. Suddenly, Ed narrowed his eyes.
“Wait a minute. If you snuck out the window, why are you wandering around the hospital?”

“I wanted to see you.”

That stopped the conversation short. Ed’s face flushed so red Ling could see it even in the low light. Normally, he’d be delighted to garner such a reaction, if he wasn’t in a similar state. Why had he chosen now to be honest? It was almost too embarrassing to handle.

“Jeez. Are you always like this?” muttered Ed, in a voice so low Ling was fairly certain he wasn’t meant to hear. No, he wanted to say, I’ve never been like this before.

Ling looked away and rubbed a hand through his newly shorn hair. He quickly decided to turn the conversation on its head.

“Why are you haunting these hallways so late at night? Looking for me?”

Ed looked away, sheepish, and Ling felt a thrill in his chest, his face almost unbearably hot. He’d asked mostly as a joke. He certainly hadn’t expected such a reaction. Ed turned back to him, golden eyes defiant.

“So what if I was? I just felt like figuring out if you bled out on an operating table or not.”

“Seems like a bit of an overreaction for a cut on my head you already healed and a few bruised ribs. The doctors barely had anything to do besides evening out my haircut.”

“I can see that.”

“So? How’s it look?”

Ed stared a second too long to be casual, before looking away. Perhaps it was wishful thinking on Ling’s part, but he looked a bit flustered.

“…atrocious.”

“You cut deep, Edward.”

“Don’t call me that. You sound like my parents.”

“Don’t remind me of them,” groaned Ling.

“What? Why?”

“They hate me, that’s why,” Ling said, wondering exactly why that bothered him so much. Ed scoffed.

“That’s ridiculous. My parents like everybody, to a stupid extent.”

“Do they normally put people they like under armed guard? If that’s the case, they have a strange way of showing affection.”

Ed faltered.

“That’s just because they haven’t let me explain. Once they listen to me, they’ll be falling over themselves to thank you.”

“In my experience, people don’t tend to listen to new information once they’ve made up their minds
Ed fumed silently, before he decided he’d had enough of being silent.

“So what’s your genius plan? Escape in the middle of the night out a third story window, and then what? Where are you planning to go?”

“Back to Xing.” he said, his chest feeling heavy. He hadn’t expected how difficult it would be to say a simple goodbye, even with Ed involved. Ed stared back at him, mouth set in a firm line, before responding.

“Empty-handed?”

Ed had a talent for cutting right to the heart of the issue, with no respect to the feelings involved, including how desperately Ling was trying to ignore his failure.

“Well, it’s not like there’s a philosopher’s stone around here to steal anymore,” he said.

“I never asked you to sacrifice it for me and Al,” huffed Ed.

“I know,” said Ling softly. “That was my decision, and I don’t regret it.”

“Because you’re stupid,” said the blonde, exasperated, but without heat.

“Or insane,” added Ling with a smile.

“At least you understand that much.” Ed sighed deeply. “But you need to think about what you’re going to do next.”

“Admit my mission of the past eight months was a complete disaster and move to Drachma?” Ling was only half joking. Ed didn’t even dignify his response with a glare.

“You could bring Envy with you to impress the emperor.”

“Really? He’s not very…impressive at the moment.”

“He’s proof of sentient life besides humans. He’d be the focus of years of scientific inquiry. The bastard would probably enjoy it, attention whore that he is,” he said, caught up in his hypothetical musings.

“I’m trying to grovel for the emperor, not the court scientists.”

Ed seemed to scoff at the idea that politics were more important than science. Suddenly, he lit up with an idea.

“I could go with you!”

“Come again?”

“I could visit as a foreign dignitary, talk you up in front of an audience. You rescued a prince from captivity, after all. That has to mean something to an emperor.”

Ling couldn’t help it. He laughed, his chest feeling lighter. Ed glared at him, abruptly pulled away from being caught up in his plan.

“What are you laughing at, jerk?”
Immediately, Ling held up his hands placatingly. He caught his breath, but wasn’t quite able to shake the smile on his face.

“It’s just, well, you’re always trying to be such a cynic. But really, you’re quite idealistic.”

“Whatever,” muttered Ed, face flushed with embarrassment. “Stop making fun of me already.”

“I’m not,” insisted Ling. “It’s endearing.”

“You’re such a liar,” accused Ed, more annoyed than angry.

“About a lot of things, yes. But I haven’t lied to you yet.”

“Yet?” Ed’s voice was indignant, but hardly in a serious manner.

“I like to keep the mystery alive by leaving my options open.”

Ed snickered, a little half-laugh that gratified Ling greatly.

“Anyways,” he continued. “I couldn’t ask you to come to Xing with me.” Even if I want to keep being together and talking like this, he thought.

“Why not? Can’t wait to be rid of me?” It was said as a joke, despite the edge of bitter insecurity that touched it, just barely.

“Hardly. But after all the times you’ve saved my life, I can’t ask for more.”

“I only had to save your life because I dragged you into my problems. Besides, it’s not like my motivations are purely selfless.”

“Oh?” asked Ling, a bit dumbly, in his opinion. Ed looked out the window, at the darkened desert sands. He seemed both very far and very honest, all at once.

“I’m sick and tired of staying in one place all my life. I…” He struggled for concise wording. “I want to see the ocean.”

Ling felt a rush of sympathy, but he didn’t dare voice it, lest it be mistaken for pity.

“Don’t forget the forests. Or the snow.”

Ed chuckled.

“Those too.”

Ling smiled wistfully.

“I do wish I could spend more time with you,” he said.

“You do?” Ling couldn’t help but wonder why someone as remarkable as Ed would be surprised by such a sentiment.

“Yes. I’m very greedy like that, wanting things I can’t have.”

Suddenly, Ed grabbed his wrist. His thin hand was surprisingly strong, a vise pulling him close. His expression was intense, brow furrowed and golden eyes sharp.

“Who the hell says you can’t?”
Ling blinked at both the sudden outburst and its ambiguous wording. Simultaneously, Ed began backtracking, face red but still determined.

“I mean, from here on out, I’m not letting anyone else decide what I can or can’t do. Especially not some hotshot Xingese prince with a martyr complex.”

Ling chuckled, shaking his head. He twisted his hand in Ed’s loosened grip, until their fingers interlocked.

“I should’ve expected such a response from someone like you,” he breathed, his voice unconsciously lower than usual. Their faces were close, and Ling was abruptly grateful he’d taken the time to wash the taste of blood and sleep from his mouth.

“Someone like me?” he questioned.

“Someone strong. Someone who never gives in to anyone.”

Ling was amazed he was still coherent, with all his senses running haywire. He smelled the hospital soap Ed hadn’t entirely washed out of his hair, felt the soft skin on the inside of his forearm. His mouth and throat were bone dry, causing his voice to come out as a deep rasp. And there was Ed’s face, filling up his vision with his sharp golden eyes looking up through long blond lashes. His expression was softer now, a capitulation to the strange mood, just like that one moment they shared in the Ishvalan quarter.

“I do sometimes, you know. Give in.”

“Really?”

“If it’s worth it,” he murmured, halfway between shy and coy.

Ling wanted to kiss him senseless, even if he wasn’t entirely sure how to. His entire experience began with a lighthearted peck on the lips with his best friend that lacked both tension and desire, and ended with that sucker punch of a kiss Ed had given him (followed up by a literal sucker punch). But he wanted to try. He wanted to ravish Ed in all the ways that the scandalous novels ladies of the court shared described. He leaned down, and fitted his left palm along the contours of Ed’s delicate cheekbone, thumb rubbing gently over his temple. Ling’s fingers brushed against Ed’s hairline behind his ear, and his breath hitched before sighing sweetly, letting Ling know he was at least doing something right. Ed closed his eyes, and Ling’s heart fluttered. Their breaths occupied the same space, hot and damp. Ling tilted his head, edging towards ever-so-slightly parted lips.

Then there were two words, at quite possibly the worst time imaginable, from probably the worst person possible, and it all came crashing down.

“Young Lord.”

Chapter End Notes

One more chapter (or a chapter and a half) left!
Even after I’ve written about men and women doin’ it for several thousand words at a time, I still get so shy writing kissing scenes. I survive my gay loneliness by living vicariously through characters being tender with each other.
A Change Of Plans

Chapter Summary

Lan Fan comes bearing news. Ling schemes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ed was the first to react, while Ling had immediately begun to wish for the sweet embrace of death. He’d know that voice anywhere, after all. And this situation was the last place he wanted to hear it. The older prince gave a noise of surprise and jumped, sending him teetering off balance, one-legged as he was, into Ling’s arms. This would’ve been nice, if not for the third party in the room. Ling hung his head in mortification, face burning like he had molten metal under his skin. The only way this could be worse was if Fu were here. Only, the old man wouldn’t have interrupted, because he at least had some tact. Tamping down his growing frustration, Ling turned to face his oldest friend.

“Lan Fan,” he ground out, attempting to sound light and breezy but ending up dark and stormy. The girl in question tilted her head, confused by his strained attitude towards her. She was breathing heavily, and sweat shone on her brow, signaling that she had just arrived. She showed no signs of disapproval or being scandalized, keeping a neutral face.

With a start, Ling realized that she had no idea that she’d interrupted them, which was both a relief and a new source of exasperation. Lan Fan, for all her tactical genius and technical competency, could be painfully dense when it came to the intricacies of human interaction. On the one hand, Ling couldn’t fault her for the natural gap in her knowledge. On the other, Ling had come this close to kissing a beautiful boy before she decided to burst in, and now he was this close to banging his head against a wall.

She entered the room gracefully, completely unaware of how much stress she was causing Ling. As she moved, though, the light of the moon caught a metal surface. Ling froze, his frustrations forgotten.

Lan Fan’s automail couldn’t have been more different from what he’d seen of Ed’s. For starters, it was painted a dull black that melted into the darkness, whereas the Fullmetal Alchemist had eschewed stealth for shining chrome. It was bulky and wide where Winry’s craftsmanship had been sleek and efficient. It looked more like armor than a prosthetic, with a thick pauldron over the shoulder. The fingers were stiff and unmoving, but Ling guessed that dexterity was not the primary focus of the automail. No, the main function of the design was given away by the wickedly sharp blade curving out from her elbow. Ling’s embarrassment was suddenly replaced by a deep and abiding shame. Shame for the decisions he’d made that led to the amputation, and shame for never properly atoning.

“It’s good to see you again,” he choked out. In any other situation, it would be a relief to feel his mother tongue on his lips again after so long abroad, but it was hard to feel any sort of reprieve from the overwhelming guilt. Lan Fan looked at him strangely, sensing his distress but unable to discern the meaning behind it.

“Likewise,” she said, dropping formalities for just a second.
Ed, genius that he was, put it together in a second. He saw Ling’s stricken expression, the evidence of traumatic injury, and the close relationship between the two, and immediately connected the dots.

“You must be the best friend Ling mentioned.”

Lan Fan turned to the elder prince, as if just realizing his presence. Her expression conveyed suspicion, but also pleased surprise, which she was doing a terrible job of hiding without the aid of a mask.

“The young lord mentioned me?”

Ling cleared his throat.

“Lan Fan,” he said, voice stern. “Why are you here?”

“Young lord?” Her face crumpled, disappointed by his reaction. Ling was undaunted, his disapproval becoming more tangible by the second. He’d been thrown off by his best friend’s sudden appearance and atrocious timing, but the more he thought about the situation, the angrier he got.

“It hasn’t even been eight months since you got your automail. You should be recovering, not traveling the desert.”

“Eight months?” Ed was clearly flabbergasted by this, and for good reason. Automail rehab took at least a year, a borderline addictive amount of morphine, and little to no stressful activity. That’s what every book Ling read told him.

Lan Fan regained her composure and met his gaze.

“Grandfather and I agreed that I’d had plenty of rest.”

“Your grandfather clearly disregarded the doctor’s orders by sending you here.”

“He didn’t have any other choice, my lord.” She spat the words out harshly, just barely containing her anger. Ling felt the abrupt sting of remorse at having upset her, before having his world knocked out from under him with her next words.

“The emperor has named a successor.”


“Just a few days ago. I came as soon as I heard the news. The royal doctors estimate he has three months left, at the outset. I suppose he realized he couldn’t put it off any longer.”

Ling felt his knees go weak, gut churning. His first impulse was to deny it, but Lan Fan was as reliable as they came. His blood ran through his veins like ice, burning cold. All his efforts, his travels, his youth with his family, Lan Fan’s arm, it had all been given up for nothing.

“Who?” he asked weakly. “Please don’t tell me it’s the Zhou heir.” A greedy man that already taxed his own lands to starvation, the eldest prince would bleed Xing dry.

Lan Fan pursed her lips, brow furrowed.

“Her name is Mei Chang.”

“The Chang clan? The one on the brink of being dissolved?”
The tiny clan consisted of less than two hundred capable members, located in the northwestern mountains. According to all Ling’s lessons, it was a cold and rainy climate with unforgiving terrain. The clan had been driven further up the mountains every year when larger clans encroached on their territory and the fertile soil of the lowlands. Additionally, their numbers had dwindled in recent years, due to members emigrating to Xerxes in search of a better life.

“The very same,” said Lan Fan, solemn.

“The princess is only…” Ling did some quick math. “Fourteen years old,” he said, incredulous. Sixteen was also young for an emperor, but at least he was considered a full grown man by tradition.

“She’ll be fifteen in two months,” said Lan Fan gravely. It was clear she also thought the princess was too young.

“If she lives that long.” It was dark, but Ling had to be honest.

“The emperor really is trying to create chaos for his own entertainment,” said Ed darkly, clearly disapproving of the entire affair.

Ling scowled at his bare feet, arms crossed over his bandaged chest. Once again, Ed had hit the nail right on the head.

“What do we know about Mei Chang?”

“Nothing, except that she has singlehandedly avoided every attempt to assassinate her since being brought to the capital.”

“I see.” The Chang family, if nothing else, was known for its mastery of both alkahestry and martial arts, seamlessly melding the two disciplines.

“Young lord, how do you decide to address this?”

Ling caught her meaning instantly. The Yao clan was large and influential, while the Chang heiress would likely have few allies. If nothing else, they could overthrow the empress to put the throne up for grabs again. However, such an endeavor would plunge Xing into years of internal conflict. With that in mind, the answer was clear.

“The Yao clan will throw our support behind Mei Chang, future empress of Xing.”

The first empress to be crowned by inheritance rather than marriage, the young heiress would cause an unprecedented change in Xingese politics. The princess would not be of marriageable age for years, and could choose to postpone nuptials for long after, if she so wished. Xingese tradition expected women to hold one husband until death or extenuating circumstances, a cruel double standard that contradicted a male ruler’s duty to impregnate all the princesses of the major clans. Even if she chose to have multiple husbands, the empress would be limited by her own biology to a fewer number of heirs. It was a rather distasteful thing to consider, but the prospect suited Ling’s desires perfectly. Whoever the empress chose to marry, the line of succession would be far clearer, providing Xing’s future with stability for at least a few decades, provided the new empress survived. Additionally, the situation satisfied Ling’s far more selfish desires. With the title of ruler foisted upon another, Ling could avoid the trappings of tradition that came with direct power, such as the obligation to be tied to the capital’s throne, as well as the practice of holding a minimum of fifty princesses as concubines. Therefore, there was only one possible response.

Lan Fan smiled, a conniving grin that almost matched Ling’s own.
“We anticipated that you would react like this. Fu and a team of highly trained Yao clansmen have been protecting Mei Chang ever since the news reached us.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Ling caught Ed smiling, proud. He felt a bloom of warmth in his chest, a relief that soothed the churning of his stomach. He wasn’t certain why Ed’s approval meant so much to him in that moment. All he knew was that to see Ed disgusted by his plotting would be devastating.

“Excellent. All that’s left to do is charm the princess into an alliance.”

“Easier said than done,” warned Ed. Ling looked at him, eyes sparkling with mischief.

“Well, I happen to have an ace or two up my sleeve.”

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter should be under a thousand words and the final one!
Ling once again took inventory of everything loaded into his saddle bag, desperately trying to hide the fact that he was stalling. Their provisions were meager, the bare minimum required to cross the Xerxes desert. Though it was little more than food and water, Ling still recounted every item that he had already memorized.

“Young lord,” said Lan Fan, her expression looking dangerously close to pity, “it’s time to go. We’ve stayed too long already.”

She was referring to more than the twenty minutes they had spent dawdling at the city limits. It had already been a week and a half since his best friend and advisor had arrived in Xerxes with news of the emperor’s failing health. They had very nearly left for Xing that night, if it weren’t for Ed’s insistence he meet with the doctor first, revealing three cracked ribs. Taking a bit of a gamble with the emperor’s lifespan, they’d decided to postpone the desert crossing as long as they dared. To delay any longer would be foolishness in the world of Xingese politics, where the entire situation could flip on its head in the space of twenty four hours.

And yet, if Ling was being honest with himself, a part of him dreaded a return to Xing. It meant returning to a world where almost everyone at court could be a potential enemy. In his journeys abroad, Ling had at least had the option to mostly be himself, even if he had to keep his guard up. In the opulent and dangerous web of Xingese royalty, he wouldn’t have even that luxury.

If Ling was being suicidally honest, he could recognize who exactly was the source of his hesitation when it came to leaving Xerxes.

“Young lord,” warned Lan Fan one last time. Ling got the feeling if he delayed any longer, his bodyguard would drag him back to Xing unconscious and hogtied.

“I know,” he replied, a little testy despite himself. With practiced ease, he drew himself up into the saddle, taking the reigns of his horse. He urged the animal into a slow circle, taking one last look at the city behind them.

On the eastern side of Xerxes, the cityscape was dominated by towering Xingese architecture and low-rise tenements teeming with immigrants. It was a testament to the sheer numbers of people alienated and driven from Xing by the intensely competitive clan system. That thought was what forced Ling to turn around to face the desert. It was the way to his homeland, and the only way towards the opportunities that lay in wait for him. Even so, in that moment, all it looked like was an endless expanse of burning sand and bottomless sky. He took a deep breath, steeling his spine.

Suddenly, he was compelled to look behind himself, to be greeted by the sight that at once could not be more surprising, and yet felt so familiar.

Ed was before him, sitting side-saddle on a white horse, perfectly relaxed. He wore the traditional costume of Xerxes, his sleeveless outer robe dyed a brilliant crimson and decorated with a plain black sash. Upon his lips was a roguish grin as he drank in Ling’s surprise. After a moment, Ling remembered to shut his mouth, and swallowed hard.

“Here to say goodbye?” he asked, reigning in his expectations.
“Don’t play stupid,” he replied, smiling even wider. Ling’s mouth fell open again, dumbstruck as he was.

“Why? How?”

“I’ve spent a quarter of my life buried under this city. You think I’m going to miss an opportunity to get out in the world and raise some hell?”

Ling felt a giddy smile begin to grow on his lips, even if all his questions weren’t answered yet.

“And your family is really okay with this?”

“Well, they did have a few conditions.”

“Conditions?”

Another horse walked down the narrow alleyway, carrying another familiar rider.

“I’ll be Brother’s bodyguard,” said Alphonse, his eyes shining with pride despite how stiff and uneasily he sat in the saddle.

“Bodyguard?” said Ed incredulously. “Nobody said anything about my little brother protecting me.”

“Well I am, and that’s that.”

“Says who?”

“Says me!”

“No way! I’ll end up taking care of you like always.”

“Liar. You’re the idiot older brother that’s always getting into trouble.”

A short staring contest ensued, in which Ed was the first to look away. He turned to Ling, determination written all over his face.

“Anyway, we’re coming with you, and like Al said, that’s that.”

Ling could no sooner have stopped himself from smiling like an idiot than stop his heart from beating in his chest. But still, he had to ask.

“Are you sure?”

Ed looked at Ling, his hair and skin like gold in the morning light. His smile was gleaming and playful, a combination of joyful and determined that swept Ling’s doubts away. All Ling could think of was the future, bright and glorious and stretched out before them as far as the eye could see.

“Shut up already, and show me the world.”

Chapter End Notes

Not sure if I’m 100% satisfied, but it’ll do for now. Thanks so much for sticking with me over this past year and some change, and I hope you enjoyed reading this as much as I
enjoyed writing it.

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