A Wicked Game

by Tierfal

Summary

Roy has lucked into the all-expenses-paid vacation of his *dreams* – all he has to do is convince a bunch of happy couples that he's head-over-heels in love with Ed Elric. What could possibly go wrong?

[Modern!AU.]

Notes

Once upon a time, a Tumblr post turned into most of my NaNo count by way of FMA Big Bang, because I have no impulse control. :'D It had two incredibly wonderful beta-readers – my bro Phin, who was also my artist, for all of which and for whose simple existence I am so grateful there are no words; and Richelle2972, my bb 5ever and whose commentary was invaluable. ♥♥

If you're on board: please note that this is a modern AU wherein Ed is probably 22 or 23, Roy is a few years older, and they're both grad students working in an interdisciplinary biosomething lab. And please, please be aware that this fic comes with a warning for frank discussion of mental illness: I don't want anybody to dive in unprepared. It gets pretty grim in a couple of places, and pretty zany in others, and I know that kind of emotional ricochet is not everybody's cup of tea. If it's yours – bottoms up; enjoy! ♥

As a last note: I really didn't set out to write a story about depression; it just sort of *happened*, and I went with it. I drew on a combination of personal experience and things that many, many friends have told me over the years; and I know it won't ring true to
everyone; and I am, quite honestly, terrified I've fucked it up. Please know, if nothing else, that it was written with the best of intentions, from a place of tremendous love, in the hopes of speaking into an enormous silence. It was never, ever meant to be gimmicky or disparaging, and if it is hurtful to anyone, I can't apologize enough.
“Nice to meetcha,” Ed says to the tall young man with the square jaw. “I’m Ed Elric. This is Roy—my boyfriend. We’ve been together for ages, which is great, because we’re really, really ga—”

“Glad to be here,” Roy says loudly, wrapping an arm rather heavily around Ed’s shoulders.

Ed looks at Roy like he’s an alien. Roy fires back a big, schmoopy smile and nudges a knuckle against Ed’s cheek.

“It’s just so nice to get a break,” he says. “Isn’t it, baby?”

Ed looks at him like he’s a golem made of crudely-animated dogshit.

This could be going better.

“I’m so glad you could come,” says the lovely blonde girl who is making the tall young man with square jaw—Trevor? Travis?—drool so avidly that Roy worries he’ll get dehydrated. “You always work too hard, dummy. You really do deserve a little vacation.” She beams at Roy. “And it’s wonderful that you finally found somebody.”

Roy and Ed share a slightly strained smile.

“I’ve always worried about him, you know,” Lovely Blonde says faux-confidentially to Trevor-Travis. “He has an incredible talent for being obnoxious and alienating people—”

“Fuck you, Win,” Ed says, characteristically delicately.

“—and then he gets so engrossed in what he’s doing that they can never get close enough to realize he’s actually amazing.”

Roy would like to object to that. As far as he can tell from almost a year of grudging coexistence in a fairly confined laboratory space, Edward Elric’s talent for being obnoxious and alienating people is matched only by his preternatural ability to grow progressively more obnoxious and alienating the longer one puts up with him. He seems to take it for granted that people will indulge all of his downright horrifying antisocial tendencies on the basis that he’s an absolute genius—which is, unfortunately, true—and appears to be genuinely uninterested in other human beings’ thoughts, feelings, emotions, opinions, and survival. Roy has a weird fantasy where the whole lab burns down around them, and Ed is still glued to the microscope, ever-so-slowly turning the fine adjustment dial.

There is a distinct possibility that Roy is overdue for a spot of therapy himself.

In the meantime, an all-expenses-paid vacation on a gorgeous lake can’t possibly hurt, can it? So why is it that he has such a feeling of vague foreboding?

“I’m not amazing,” Ed says.

“Yes, you are!” Lovely Blonde Girl Whose Name Is Winry or Wendy or Perhaps Bandeau-Bikini-of-Doom says, looking almost offended. Trevor-Travis pats her arm a little. “You’re the best big brother of anyone I’ve ever seen, and you’ve gone through so much crap but never let it get to you, and you’re brilliant, Ed. That’s why I wanted you to come. I want you to have a chance to feel… I don’t know. Celebrated. You should be celebrated sometimes.”
In mystifying and impressive unison, Winry and Trevisor turn expectantly to Roy.

“That’s… right,” Roy says. He still has his arm draped around Ed’s shoulders, so he squeezes a little. “It’s funny, about you—I think you’ve normalized your own experience so much that you really don’t see yourself as extraordinary, but… you are. You have an incredible mind.” This sounds like Amateur Psychology Hour. He would know; he went to that once; it was terrible; there was nowhere near enough beer. “And… an incredible heart.”

Winry and Trevisor look touched. Ed looks like he just found a nest of spiders in a box of cereal.

Well, fuck Ed anyway; he’s not helping at all.

“Boop,” Roy says, and taps him on the nose.

Judging by the unadulterated murder in Ed’s eyes, he’s probably going to pay for that later, but it was worth it.

It’s Ed’s own damn fault, anyway. He was the one sitting on his lab stool looking baffled and frustrated and, if you squinted, ever so slightly wistful. Roy had long since gotten into the habit of asking him what he was working on when he started looking like that, if only to keep abreast of the future of science in medicine by hearing firsthand about the revolutionary interdisciplinary breakthrough of the day.

So Roy paused on his way in towards his bench, set today’s plastic bag of crappy takeout Chinese on a space that looked bereft of any toxic chemicals, watched Ed kick his feet aimlessly a few times, and then cleared his throat. “What’s up?”

“There’s this thing,” Ed said without even glancing over.

“That doesn’t narrow it down much,” Roy said.

Earning Ed’s glare was actually a compliment, as it indicated that he had acknowledged your existence.

Roy leaned back against the benchtop and put his hands in his pockets. “What’s the thing?”

“My best friend is going on this trip,” Ed said. “Her new boyfriend is, like, stupid-rich, and stuff, and I guess his family has this giant private mansion-cabin-thing on a lake, and apparently they’re just allowing him and his friends to invite people to stay there for a week.”

“So go,” Roy said. “Izumi’d let you take the time. She’d beg you to take the time. You practically never leave the lab.”

This is an established fact, supported by a great deal of scientific evidence and thorough observation. Roy knows it as such because he practically never leaves the lab. Up until Ed installed himself, Roy was alone in his pathetically overzealous dedication, long-term Vitamin D deprivation, and mumbled excuses about having experiments to run over various holidays. The closest Ed had come to taking a day off in the eleven months since he hopped aboard the good ship Curtis Lab was going home for a grand total of forty hours (including transit) over Christmas.
Roy counted. There wasn’t much else to do, other than listen to shitty Christmas carols on the radio and struggle not to cry.

“I want to,” Ed said, slowly, making a pair of chopsticks appear from nowhere amongst his pipettes, then opening one of Roy’s takeout containers so calmly that it seemed perfectly natural to let him. “Especially ’cause it seems like Win really likes the guy, but she’s not sure she, y’know, week-alone-in-the-wilderness-with-his-dumbass-friends-likes him.”

He started in on the kung pao chicken. Because it’s Roy’s favorite. Of course.

“Then you should definitely go,” Roy said, and then— “What’s stopping you?”, because you couldn’t expect Ed to bat an eyelash if you started bleeding from the eyeballs and writhing on the floor, but there was always a logic behind it all.

Ed took the whole container and, when Roy awoke from the usual Ed-daze and attempted to retrieve it, put a trifold brochure into the reaching hand.

Sometimes—usually—almost invariably—it was easier just to give up with Ed.

“This looks nice,” Roy said, which was understating matters considerably given that his heart and a few other organs had leapt into his throat at the mere abstract thought of collapsing on the sand and lazing in the sun listening to the placid little waves lapping at the picturesque little shore. Flipping to photos of the mansion-cabin-thing’s interior very nearly made him weak in the knees.

“Yeah,” Ed said absently around a mouthful of Roy’s kung pao chicken. “But the thing is, it’s, like… couples only. And fuck if I’m gonna go find somebody to be a couple with just for that.”

Roy stared at him.

Ed stared back.

Roy stared a little longer.

Ed chewed, chewed a bit more, and swallowed.

Roy stared down at the brochure, rather than at Ed’s throat.

The bedroom in the picture looked so outlandishly luxurious, and the sunshine looked so bright, and the people looked so fucking happy that every ounce of blood in his body was beating with longing.

“You know,” Roy said. “You know…”

So. Ed’s fault. Roy’s idea. And now they’re pretty much equally fucked.

“Hey, come on,” Winry says. “Let me show you guys out to the dock. You’re gonna love it.”

It’s been a long time—a long, long, sad, empty time—since Roy had a place like this to explore. It’s been a long time since he could swim until his body was one big, satisfied ache of burning muscles and vague pondweed-smell. It’s been a long time since he and Riza used to hike and camp and eat questionable berries and draw in the wet sand with sticks until the water stole their lines.
It’s been a long time since he felt like his lungs were full.

“Do you have to keep touching me?” Ed mutters.

“Yes, darling,” Roy mutters back.

“You are such a fucking shit,” Ed hisses. “I should’ve brought a fucking blow-up doll.”

Roy laughs so hard he chokes on his own spit.

“I’m glad someone’s enjoying this.” Ed is—Ed is grousing. There is no other word for it. Roy never dreamed he’d get the chance to dredge that bad boy out of the depths of his vocabulary.

“I’m just trying to make it convincing,” Roy says under his breath, keeping a bright smile on for Winry, Treavisor, and the various happily paired-up people their age scattered across the (private! clean! beautiful!) beach. “Come on, you’re not even trying. Haven’t you ever had a girlfriend before?”

Ed’s glare deepens into a scowl, and the scowl deepens into a sulk, and Roy forgets to pretend to be soppy and hormonal for a second.

“Wait,” he says. “Really?”

“I haven’t had fucking time, and I don’t care, and people play stupid fucking games, and shut up,” Ed snarls.

Quite suddenly, Roy feels kind of sick to his stomach, because that’s—different. To be miming affection and affecting romance is one thing, but to do it when one of the parties has never had a real relationship for comparison—

That’s not—right—somehow.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Ed says.

“I didn’t know,” Roy says.

Ed’s eyes put California wildfires to shame. “If you fucking pity me, Roy Mustang, I swear I will fucking end you.”

“This feels really cruel now,” Roy says helplessly. They’re stumbling down the dock, trailing Winry and Treavisor like a couple of disoriented ducklings; Roy gets a glimpse of the way the sun sparkles off of the water, and the warm wood of the boards creaks softly under his sneakers, and God, it’s so beautiful—but somehow he can’t quite stop staring at Ed. “You should’ve told me; I didn’t know—”

“Lovers’ spat, already?” Winry asks. “I think you boys need to cool down.”

Next thing Roy knows, two solid hands make contact with the small of his back. Next thing after that, open air is rushing past his ears at an alarming rate, and then he’s getting a face full of lake water.

Yes, he’s had better ideas.

The water is freezing. Somehow, Roy always forgets that the lakes here are sun-dappled and shining, like bronze mirrors under a sweltering sun, tree-lined and limpid, gleaming with tiny flecks of gold—but the liquid itself is literally melted snow.
He comes up gasping, with his hair dripping in his face, every square millimeter of skin *scalded* by the cold, and starts treading water, sputtering, wishing he hadn’t worn his nice jeans to make a good impression.

Ed comes up *thrashing* and starts grasping at Roy’s shirt; his right foot’s scraping at Roy’s shin; what the hell is he trying to—?

“Roy—” Ed coughs, tries to shake the cascade of wet hair out of his face; his eyes are *huge*—

“Roy, I can’t—swim—”

Roy doesn’t really *think*, per se, which is a bit shameful for someone who bills himself as a rigorously scientific intellectual. He just coils his arm tight around Ed’s waist and kicks to push them back towards the dock, and then he grabs onto the nearest support beam (motherfucking *splinters*) and slings his squirming cargo upward and puts his shoulder underneath Ed’s ass. The boost gives Ed enough leverage to latch on to the edge of the pier—at which point he lifts his own body weight with startling ease and contorts himself over like he’s made entirely of rubber bands. While Roy is still blinking, one of Ed’s dripping hands extends back down towards him, and he instinctively takes it.

Ed is either extraordinarily strong, underneath today’s permutation of the ubiquitous hoodie and jeans, or extraordinarily good at using his weight—which Roy now knows for a fact is not especially substantial. Following just a bit of scrabbling, some remarkable force, and an admittedly rather rough landing, Roy’s sprawled out next to Ed on the boards of the dock, staring up at the sky.

The clouds are mocking him. He can tell.

“Well,” he says. “I *did* forget what we were arguing about.”

Ed punches his arm, but not very hard.

“Welcome to Fyler Lake,” Winry says brightly.

“Fuck you, Win,” Ed says again, wearily this time. Roy should start a tally of how many times those words get uttered inside of a week.

“Hey,” Roy says, sitting up and offering Ed a hand. “Babe, let’s go get you dried off.”

Ed gives him a dark look, takes his hand, and then vaults up onto his feet before Roy can try to be a gentleman about helping—which, of course, leaves Roy sitting there holding Ed’s hand, so he gets up of his own power, and then they’re just standing there looking at each other awkwardly with their fingers intertwined.

“We should’ve asked for the money this is costing,” Ed says, “and fucked off to Hawaii.”

“Then she would have pushed us into a volcano,” Roy says.

Ed’s hair is trailing in his face, a puddle is forming under him on the dock, and he doesn’t seem to have caught his breath yet. All the same, he cracks a grin, and that’s kind of… nice.
“Treasure this,” Ed says as he stomps up the stairs, flinging water as he goes, “’cause I say it about once in a lunar eclipse of a blue moon under Mars.” He takes a deep breath. “You were right.”

“Hang on a second,” Roy says, edging around in front of Ed’s sopping frame using the power of his stride advantage. “I’m trying to carve this moment into a stone tablet in my memory. Edward Elric told me I was right.”

Ed snorts. Roy holds the door, which has a four-inch-by-four-inch chalkboard hung up on it with a ribbon. Said chalkboard reads Roy + Ed, enclosed by a heart. It might be cute if there was any actual sentiment behind it.

“Okay,” Roy says after a suitable interval of reveling in Ed’s concession. “What was I right about?”

“Ditching our phones when we got here,” Ed says, gesturing to the nearest nightstand with his elbow. “I figured you meant we should pretend we’re inaccessible for lab emergencies, but it turns out you just saved them from death by drowning.”

“Are you kidding?” Roy says. “You have a Nokia. Water damage would only make it stronger.”

“Yo,” Ed says, hunkering down over his suitcase on the floor instead of lifting it onto the bed. “Can’t risk it. Can’t afford a new one.”

“You’re preaching to the choir,” Roy says. “If you don’t mind my asking—”

“I do,” Ed says.

“You don’t even know what I’m going to say,” Roy says.

“Any question that starts with a caveat is gonna be a pain in the ass,” Ed says.

“All right,” Roy says. “Even if you do mind my asking—how come you never learned to swim?”

“I did,” Ed says. “I just didn’t re-learn.”

Roy really should have stuck to talking to Ed about massive leaps of scientific faith and extremely high-level molecular theory; it makes much more sense. “What?”

“Never fucking mind,” Ed says. He keeps pushing back his wet bangs, and gravity keeps sending them straggling down into his eyes again. “Fuck my life; I forgot to bring another sweatshirt.”

“Borrow one of mine,” Roy says, going for his suitcase. “It’ll be big on you. Everyone’ll probably puke rainbows.” He packed his free swag hoodie from the last big departmental party right on the top, so that it would protect his toiletries from getting squished and splattering all over each other. “Here.”

“Thanks,” Ed says, snatching it without touching Roy’s fingers. He slogs off into the bathroom trailing the sweater from one hand and a dry pair of black jeans from the other. “So today I learned that vacations kind of suck.”

“This is only the first hour,” Roy says. “It could turn around from here.”

Ed kicks the bathroom door most of the way shut; rustling and a very loud slap of wet fabric on tile follows. “Like that’s ever, ever happened. Ever. In human history. S’called ‘entropy’. Shit goes sour. It’s the natural order of things.”
“You’re confusing ‘entropy’ with ‘outrageous pessimism’,” Roy says.

“You must live a charmed fuckin’ life, Mustang.”

Funny thought.

“Nobody got hurt, not even our phones,” Roy says. “I think that’s a pretty fortuitous start to a vacation, all things considered.”

Ed reemerges attempting to fight with the hoodie zipper and to towel at his hair simultaneously, apparently not intimidated by the prospect that he’s short a hand or two. “So you’re enjoying the fact that we have to convince a bunch of preppy spring-breakers with overflowing wallets that we’re gay lovers who happen to be experts on brunch and yachts and fucking equestrianism or whatever these people like.”

Roy starts moving towards him, and he flinches away.

That’s—well, it’s fucked up, is what it is, but Roy can’t exactly say that, so he just slows his approach down to a cautious, hands-out, harmless sort of crawl. Ed eyes him like he’s dangerous but doesn’t back away, and he manages to get close enough to take the two halves of the zipper end out of Ed’s hand.
“I honestly don’t give a shit about any of that,” he says. “I’m here to relax.” The zipper catches, obediently enough, and he draws it halfway up Ed’s chest. “You should try relaxation sometime. You might like it.”

Something—something terrible—compels him to pat Ed’s cheek before he steps away.

Ed’s face disappears under the towel, and he says nothing for a long, long moment.

“You think there’s food yet?” he asks.

“There had better be,” Roy says.
What in the hell was he thinking? Did he really dare to dream that they could pull this off?

A better question—precisely what happens when they get caught as a pair of pilfering phonies trying to swindle their benefactors for something so lowly as free room and board?

“So how did you two meet?” a cute brunette wearing pigtails asks right as Roy has his mouth full of French fries.

Ed stares at the girl and then turns a deer-in-the-headlights look on Roy. Roy tries to convey a Make something up! that Ed will understand and that everyone else will interpret as a variation on Large bite of delicious food, mmm, very appreciative of this opportunity, my sincerest thanks to everyone involved.

“Oh,” Ed says. “In lab.”

The girl’s smile does not dim a watt.

Ed blinks and picks at the edge of his paper plate.

“No kidding?” the girl says, expectantly.

Roy thinks he can see a bead of sweat at Ed’s hairline, although it could be residual lake water. He’s chewing as fast as he can.

“Yeah,” Ed says uncertainly. “Just… we… work… in the same… lab. So… yeah.”

Winry ghosts up behind Ed and tugs on his ponytail. “So you had chemistry from the start?”

Ed stares at her in absolute incomprehension. The kid has the single most ferociously capable brain of anyone Roy has ever met; how is it that simple conversation seems to short-circuit him almost instantly?

Roy swallows, almost chokes, swallows again, and clears his throat. He smiles suavely at the girl in the pigtails and then more softly at Ed.

“I think we’re both a little too married to science for our own good,” he says.

“Speak for yourself,” Ed mutters.

“But that’s really how it came about,” Roy says. He’s always been a natural bullshitter; he has a gift for striking a balance of plausibility and invention. “We were so often the only people there at all hours of the day—and night—that I just kind of… started to pay attention to him. And I love his laser focus—I really do, even if I think it’s going to make him blow a blood vessel in his brain one of these days, just concentrating so hard. Anyway, I started to notice he ate almost nothing but Flamin’ Hot Cheetos—”

“With Lime,” Ed mutters.

“And coffee, and I thought, ‘Okay, maybe an ulcer before an aneurysm,’ and I thought, ‘He probably just forgets,’ so I started getting a little bit of extra food every time I went out, and then bringing it back to the lab and conspicuously leaving some near his desk.” He winks at the small cluster of rich kids listening politely. “You know what they say about the way to a man’s heart, right?”
“It’s in the center, protected by the sternum, so stop holding your hand over your left lung when you salute shit?” Ed mutters.

“He started eating,” Roy says, crossing his legs, “and then we started talking. It was just about projects at first—you know, ‘How’s this going’, ‘What do you think about this article’, ‘How are you going to solve that problem’, ‘Aren’t you going to put that fire on your coat sleeve out’—”

Scattered laughter; they’re more or less tuned in.

Roy softens his voice a little more and directs a shy, fond smile at his plate. “But then we started talking about… everything, really. And I kept finding excuses to be near him; I brought ice cream; I’d refill his coffee; I’d deliberately ask stupid questions just to get him worked up and ranting at me about how I was going to be the ruin of the discipline. And eventually, I just… grew a pair and asked him out to dinner. And he said…”

Everyone starts to Awww, and Roy turns a plaintive gaze on Ed. *Just fill in the blank; I did all of the hard work, you little shit; surely you can do that much…?*

Ed frowns at him. “I… forget what I said.”

“You don’t have a romantic bone in your body,” Roy says, lovingly, instead of saying *You absolute deadbeat; I hope you fall down the stairs.*

Ed ducks over his burger a little, and then—he’s—blushing. Holy hell; it’s perfect.

“I said—” He bites his lip and pushes a crumb around with his fingertip. “I said, ‘Sure, the cafeteria blows, do you wanna go dutch?’ and he said, y’know, ‘No, I meant take you out to dinner’, and I said… ‘Why would anybody wanna do that?’”

Winry tightens her grip on Ed into a strangle-hug and kisses his cheek. “Well, it’s a good damn thing you finally found someone who loves you for everything you are.”

“Let go,” Ed says, wriggling, but there’s a bitter shadow to his smile.

Funny. Roy’s not hungry anymore.

“I hate this game,” Ed mutters. Ed is doing a positively *record-setting* quantity of muttering today. “It’s the worst icebreaker ever. It’s always just stupid and embarrassing, and all I get is confused about people’s *actual* names.”

“There, there, snookums,” Roy says, rubbing at his back.

If looks could kill… well, Ed would be the Grim Reaper, and the planet Earth would be due for a rousing Apocalypse.

“I don’t think you understand the gravity of this situation,” Ed says. “Winry’s hand-picking the stupid celebrities we’re secretly supposed to be. The woman is an evil witch.”

“That’s not very nice,” Roy says. He’d been wondering if Ed’s determination to chaperone Winry and shelter her from the menacing advances of the completely harmless Treavor were rooted in jealousy, but the overprotective tendencies consistently ring fraternal.
“It’s pretty charitable, actually,” Ed says. “Just you wait.”

“Edward, my dear!” Winry calls, beaming. “Your turn!”

Ed crosses the room like a man condemned. “Oh, joy.”

“Close your eyes,” Winry orders, and when he cringes and obeys, she jams a plastic tiara with a piece of index card taped to the front onto his head. “I dub thee… mystery celebrity. Go forth and mingle, mystery celebrity!”

“Gee, thanks,” Ed says. Roy is vaguely surprised that the sarcasm dripping from his every pore hasn’t eaten away a hole in the floor—which Ed might welcome, really, since he looks like he’d be delighted at the opportunity to disappear into it. He storms back over, hunching his shoulders, and glares his gratitude (somehow) as he takes back the root beer Roy was holding for him. “What’s the damage? Fuckin’ evil witch curse, I’m telling you.”

Roy manages not to spit Pepsi all over Ed’s hair. The tiara reads Marilyn Monroe.

“Ah,” he says, swallowing a laugh that sticks all the way down. “Just… stay away from Kennedy.”

Ed scowls. “Who the fuck am I, Lee Harvey Oswald?”

“Not quite,” Roy says.

Ed scowls a little more and shoves his free hand into one of the pockets of Roy’s borrowed sweatshirt. “Didn’t figure. Too fuckin’ morbid for Winry’s tastes.”

Roy looks at him—really looks, taking in the I refuse to have any fun whatsoever pout and the scuffed black jeans and the ancient black Doc Martens and the adorable way that Roy’s sweater dwarfs his frame. The tiara is a wonderful, slightly surreal cherry on top of the whole picture.

Roy’s thinking this vacation might just shape up to be worth all of the trouble when a voice trills out a sentence that sends a shiver down his spine:

“You next, Roy!” Winry says.

Roy, his secret pop culture fetish, and his superior deductive reasoning are having a field day. He told the girl who’s Kate Middleton that the tiara suits her, she’s magnificent at wearing silly hats, and she shouldn’t worry too much about male-pattern baldness being hereditary. The guy who got Oprah Winfrey was duly begged for a car, and the poor bewildered surfer-aesthetic kid whose tiara said Picasso received some wonderful compliments on his facial features while Roy was staring just to the side of his ear. Additionally, based on the queries about what he’ll wear next, the remark about how he’d probably look good in hot pink lipstick, and Winry’s insistent urgings that he dance (“You’re going to have to get me really drunk for that,” he said, and she just smiled sort of diabolically, so maybe Ed’s not too far off), he’s narrowed his own identity down to Lady Gaga or Nicki Minaj.

He lines up the final test by approaching Ed, who frowns up at the card. As far as Roy can tell, Ed lives a remarkably cloistered existence, but no amount of social isolation could preserve a human
being from at least an awareness of Mama Monster. Nicki, on the other hand, is a newer comer and far less controversial; Roy’s money is that Ed’s never heard of her.

Ed wrinkles his nose and waves his hand dismissively at Roy’s tiara. “I don’t even know who that is. I hate this stupid game. Some guy just told me I should stand over a subway vent. What the fuck?”

“Gentlemen prefer blonds,” Roy says. “Then again, some like it hot. Well, what can I say? Maybe we’re the misfits.”

Ed stares blankly up at him. He really is sort of disarming, with his huge honey-colored eyes and his hair still matted from the lake water, mussed further by the glinting tiara.

What are they putting in Pepsi these days?

“Okay,” Ed says slowly. “So I guess whoever that is on your card is… a crazy person. That’s cool.”

“No,” Roy says, “I’m afraid the crazy is all mine.” He bats the vibrant yellow bangs out of the way and kisses Ed’s forehead. “Hang tight; I’m going to go win this thing. Winry, I think I know who I am…!”

His prize is a giant basket full of multicolored bath salts.

He deposits it on the floor of their bedroom, and he and Ed sit down on either side to examine it.

“But what do they do?” Ed asks.

“I’m not sure,” Roy says.

“Baths don’t need salt,” Ed says. “You don’t drink the bath. Or if you do, you’ve got bigger problems than what it tastes like.”

Roy picks up a tube full of green crystals, shakes it, and then raises it above his head to look for a label on the bottom. “Sodium sesquicarbonate.”


“It is,” Roy says. “I was much more interested in the drinking-the-bath idea.”

“You could get bath salts and bath pepper,” Ed says. “Maybe some bath sugar.”

“Bath ketchup,” Roy says, “if you were feeling especially saucy.”

“Barf,” Ed says. “Of course you like puns. Who the fuck is Nicki Minaj, anyway? You should’ve been the Chief from One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest. Legit fuckin’ crazy.”

Sometimes it stings a little.

“I wonder if any of these are bath salts-bath salts,” Roy says, sorting through the basket, “as in bath salts the extremely potent drug.”
Ed raises one too-big sleeve to cover a yawn. “Isn’t that the one that made the dude eat the other dude’s face?”

“You have such a way with words,” Roy says.

“Fuck you,” Ed says. “You just said ‘bath salts-bath salts’. You don’t have shit on my verbiage.”

Roy opens the container and sniffs it. Ed goes quiet.

Roy puts the container down on the floor beside the basket and looks at it for a long, long moment, waiting.


“I’m hungry,” Roy says in his flattest, coldest monotone. He turns slowly to look at Ed and gives a leering grin, reveling in the flash of horror across Ed’s face. He shifts, and Ed starts to scramble a little as though he’s going to crawl away, and Roy seizes the golden opportunity to **lunge** at him. “…for your **face**!”

The ensuing tacklefight is extremely juvenile, extremely up-close-and-personal, and extremely… **fun**. For about ninety-eight seconds of Ed screeching, Roy tickling, and enough general back-and-forth roughhousing to make the floorboards creak, Roy dares to think they both feel like… kids. Just this once. Ninety-eight seconds of freedom.

Then somebody bangs on the wall.

Ed shoves harder this time, and Roy doesn’t fight it; he rolls off and sprawls on the carpet, panting. Ed couldn’t stop laughing, but now he’s too damn quiet. The giddy euphoria is fast wearing off, and now the embarrassment is setting in. What the fuck was Roy thinking, anyway?

“Hey,” he says, fighting the tingling heat spreading under his skin. “I’m sorry.”

“No, you’re not,” Ed says. He rolls over, clammers upright, and brushes at the front of his borrowed sweatshirt. “Apologies should mean something. People use ’em like a get-out-of-jail-free card every time they change their mind about something. Fuck that. It’s not even ten o’clock at night, it’s a free fuckin’ country, and we came here to get a chance to be stupid for once in our pathetic lives. We can make some fucking noise if we want to. I’m not sorry for that.” He flips his suitcase open and starts digging. “And now I’m gonna take a shower.”

“Why not enjoy a salty bath?” Roy asks, hefting the giant tube of pink salt and holding it out in both hands. “For a limited time only, we’ll throw in the soothing effects of psychedelic psychosis **absolutely free**!”

“You’re sick,” Ed says, but he’s doing a very poor job of hiding his grin.

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Roy snags the shower immediately after Ed finishes—he’s all in favor of nurturing lake bacteria and seeing what happens, but he’d prefer to conduct those adventures in microbiology in some agar, rather than his own hair. None too surprisingly, showering after Edward Elric is something
of an expedition in and of itself, given the thickly humid rainforest of shed hair that Roy has to navigate just to get to the faucet.

Ed is already sitting up in the bed by the time Roy returns—he’s chosen the left side, he’s curled up with the latest Stephen Hawking, and he’s wearing pale blue flannel pajamas with a pattern of test tubes.

“Shut up,” Ed says without even glancing up from the page. “Al got ’em for me for Christmas.”

“Aren’t you too warm?” Roy asks.

Ed manages to tear his eyes away from the page, the better to stare at Roy’s T-shirt and boxers just long enough for Roy to feel completely naked. Then Ed’s gaze swoops back down to the book again. “No.”

Roy attempts to shrug off the feeling that his skin is prickling everywhere with little flares of yellow and goldenrod and caramel-brown leached from Ed’s eyes.

He starts to climb into the bed, and Ed says, “Wait.”

He pauses with his knee on the mattress, looking for the mutant arachnid crawling out of his pillow in the hopes of bequeathing him with superhero powers. “What?”

“Do you have any weird sleep habits?” Ed asks.

Roy blinks at him.


“Sleep cuddling?” Roy says slowly.

Ed’s cheeks go pink. “Well—fucked if I know. The sleeping brain is batshit. I once had a dream I was making movies in Germany in the twenties.”

“To the best of my knowledge,” Roy says, climbing the rest of the way up and giving the pillow a good shake, “I have never cuddled anyone in my sleep.”

Ed eyes him. “Okay, but how much empirical evidence are we basing this on? How many opportunities have you had to cuddle people in your sleep?”

“A statistically significant amount,” Roy says. He settles and pulls the blankets halfway up his chest. “What were you going to do if I said ‘yes’? Make me sleep on the couch?”

“Nah,” Ed says. “In the bathtub.”

“The bathtub,” Roy says.

“You could snuggle with the bath salts,” Ed says.

“They don’t really love me,” Roy says. “They only want me for my body.”

“Bath salts are douchebags,” Ed says. “Why are we talking about this? Yo, if you want to go to sleep, I can turn the light out.”

“Only if you don’t mind,” Roy says.
“It’s cool,” Ed says, setting the book on the nightstand. “I’ve read it a couple times. It’s just that my sleeping habits are so fucked from lab.”

“My, too, usually,” Roy says.

Ed fiddles with the little switch on the bedside lamp, which apparently was not designed for actual use, judging by its refusal to cooperate. “I once took an Ambien when I got home,” Ed says when at last it yields, and the room goes dark. Sheets rustle, and Roy tightens his grip on the covers preemptively. “It didn’t kick in until one in the morning, at which point I started wandering the apartment singing shit from ‘Aida’. I’ve never even seen ‘Aida’; I just had it described to me once, and I thought it was a good time to start making up an adaptation. Then I tried to climb the cat tree, and Al tied me to a chair so I wouldn’t hurt myself and then went back to sleep.”

“Who’s Al?” Roy asks. “You talk about him all the time.”

“Who’s Al?” The horrified incredulity in Ed’s voice is more than a bit hilarious. “What do you mean, ‘Who’s Al’? Don’t tell me you haven’t heard the name Alphonse Elric getting thrown around. Do you live under a rock?”

“You’re the one who hasn’t heard of Nicki Minaj,” Roy says. “She had seven singles simultaneously on the Billboard Hot—”

“Well, fuck that,” Ed says. “Al’s going to win the Nobel. Guarantee it. He’s the best person on the planet Earth. Fight me.”

“I’ll pass,” Roy says.

“He should’ve been the one who came to this,” Ed says. “He’s really good with people and all that shit. And he could’ve just walked out into the quad and said ‘Hey, I need a girlfriend!’ and gotten mobbed by girls, so. Y’know. Only this big pharma company that’s based in France was visiting last year and saw what he was working on and begged him to let them give him a fellowship, so he’s at the École Polytechnique this semester doing all that shit. He’s brilliant. And he goes out every weekend and finds the tackiest souvenir he can and takes a picture and posts it to my Facebook wall and then sends me an email letting me know how it’s going and stuff.”

“Wow,” Roy says. “I always assumed you’d gotten all of the brains in the family.” Judiciously, he does not add So I figured that any siblings you had would have inherited all of the social graces meant for you.

“I can’t believe you’ve never heard of Al” is all Ed says.

“Is he your only sibling?” Roy asks.

“Yeah,” Ed says. “Unless you count Winry. Which I sort of do. We pretty much grew up with her, so…” He pauses, and then there’s a different tenor in his voice—suspicion. “Why the sudden interest in an Elric family tree project, Mustang?”

“I don’t know anything about you,” Roy says. “If we’re going to get through this week without totally blowing our cover and… I don’t know, getting sent home, or getting arrested, or getting thrown off a yacht—whatever it is these people do to liars—we’re going to have to convince them that we’re more than just two guys who practically live in the same lab.” He shifts onto his side and tries to parse the dark to find Ed’s face. “No offense—”

“That’s the most bullshit phrase in the English language,” Ed says.
“Fine,” Roy says. “Take all the offense you want. You’re not very forthcoming, all right? That’s fine; I don’t care; you’re—well, shit, Ed, you’re a genius, and you work like you expect the universe to implode tomorrow. That’s what the lab needs, is people like that. But what we need right now is to be able to fool that pack of yuppies into believing that we’re in a long-term relationship. If one of them had asked me earlier where you’re from, I wouldn’t even have known what to say.”

The ensuing silence is so profound that he can hear Ed breathing softly. It endures, and then it endures a little longer, and then Roy fidgets a bit with his pillow and swallows, which sounds remarkably loud.

“Huh,” Ed says.

Roy is not sure what ‘Huh’ means.

“You ever driven north?” Ed asks. “Not, like, San Francisco north; like, out past all that shit around Sacramento north. Shasta area. Only less posh.”

“Once or twice,” Roy says.

“We’re from around there,” Ed says. “There’s sheep. And cows.”

“How did you end up here?” Roy asks.


“I’m not tired,” Roy says.

Ed takes a deep breath, lets it out, and takes another. “I don’t… Jesus. It’s just… it’s not… what, you want my life story? Now?”

Roy is not too stupid to recognize a nose-dive in progress. “If you’d rather, we can just agree on something. As long as our stories match up, no one will notice.”


Bewilderment is one of Roy’s many emotions. “It is?”

“No,” Ed says. “It’s not. All right. So… my dad walked out when I was four. Al was three. I guess that’s sort of how it started, because everything… I mean, none of the rest of it might’ve happened if he’d just been there. I dunno. Al thinks he must’ve had a good reason, but fuck that. There isn’t a reason good enough. Anyway, I—we just sort of… y’know, made it. It was fine. My mom had this shitty waitressing job at this diner place, but sometimes she got to take pie home, and stuff, and she did a lot of freelance shit, too—like editing newspaper articles. On Saturdays, she’d make waffles—we had this waffle iron that was a Mickey Mouse face, and Al’n I used to get real creative with the strawberry syrup, because we were little shits—and then once we were all stuffed, she’d spread all these article drafts all over the kitchen table, and she’d start going through them, and Al and I would try to help. Mostly I think we got in the way, but… I mean, sometimes we did the dishes, or the laundry or whatever, and I think that probably made it a little easier for her, y’know.”

Roy thinks he should say something, but interrupting feels like burping during Mass. “Yeah.”

Ed sighs. “Anyway… fuck. When I was eleven, I got this… I came down with this really nasty
case of pneumonia, and... Al'n my mom both caught it from me. And they got it worse. It was like a fucking plague house in there; it was so—and—I don’t know, there were complications or something, and Mom... died. We were there. In the room. She just stopped breathing, and she wouldn’t start again, and Al and I were standing there coughing into our sleeves. And she was gone. She wasn’t Mom anymore; she was a corpse. It wasn’t even until we called Granny—I mean, she’s Winry’s granny, but she’s basically ours too—that we started crying, because it wasn’t... real. She wasn’t really dead. That didn’t make any sense. Not to a couple of kids. Anyway, Granny stuck us in the spare room over at her house and went over and just started arranging stuff, I guess. There was a funeral. It was nice; she would’ve liked it. Lots of flowers.”

Roy wants to touch him, but he doesn’t think they’re there yet. He doesn’t know if Ed even does there.

“But then a couple days after that,” Ed is saying, “Al was still sick, and he was getting worse, and there was this night where Granny and Winry went to do a house call—Granny’s, like, number one in the world for biorobotics; I think I forgot to mention that; she got ’em started at MIT and all that shit, and she runs a little medical center out of her house. Anyway, they were out, and Al kept coughing, and then I pried his hand away from his face, and it had all these flecks of blood on it, and I was like, Fuck this, and I bundled him up in a blanket and put him in the front seat of Mom’s old car and got in and... learned how to drive. Sort of. We’d been to the hospital a couple times with Granny over the years, so I knew where it was, and I just sort of figured it out as I went.”

“You were eleven,” Roy says.

“Yeah,” Ed says. “I couldn’t reach the pedals very well. That was the biggest problem, actually. We made it most of the way, though; I was driving pretty slow. I wasn’t a total fucking idiot. But about half a mile from the E.R., some lady pulled out of her driveway real fast, and I freaked out and swerved and hit this giant old tree.” The sheets whisper again as he moves. “It... my side of the car kind of... accordioned. I guess. I saw pictures later. It was sort of surreal; the whole hood on the driver’s side just... crumpled. Sort of dented the tree. I don’t remember that much about when it actually happened—I sort of came to after a couple seconds, I guess, and Al was screaming at me to wake up, and all I could really tell was that there was blood everywhere, and there was a bone sticking out of my arm, and we weren’t at the hospital, obviously. And I kept asking Al if he was okay, and he just started crying, and I thought maybe I’d hurt him, and then I saw he had a phone in his hand, and... I mean, on the upside, it took the ambulance about ninety seconds to show up. But by then the pain had sort of filtered in, and I couldn’t even see straight; it was all little blinky lights, and the edges kept blacking out like it was cutting to the credits of an old movie. And then the firefighters were jacking up the door of the car, and people were trying to get me out, and I was screaming at them to take Al first, you know? I thought he was dying; I was fucking terrified. But then as they were packing me into the stretcher, I thought—maybe this wasn’t really the inside of an ambulance, right? Maybe this was like the waiting room to the afterlife. And I’d just told them to take Al first. And I lost my shit; I just—I was screaming and howling and clawing at them and totally fucking up my arm, and I remember this... this, just, spray of blood across one of the EMT’s shirts, and I kept saying Don’t take him, let me see him, bring him back, bring him back, bring him back.”

Roy can hear his heart pounding—or is it Ed’s?

It’s Ed that huffs out a breath. “And then... I guess they stuck me with a sedative. ’Cause I woke up in the hospital. And the nurse they had—she was a pro; she must’ve heard about me. The first thing she said when I opened my eyes, before I could even start screaming—she said, ‘Your brother is stable, and he’s going to be fine. He’s in the PICU. You can see him soon, but you’ll have to wait just a little while.’ I think her name was Sandy. I should’ve sent her a letter later, to
thank her, but I was just a stupid kid. Anyway, that was when I noticed that there was this space in
the bed that was just flat where most of my left leg should’ve been.”

It must be Ed’s heart, because Roy’s not sure his is functional anymore. How—?

“Apparently it got so crushed by the car that they just had to amputate it, so… yeah. And my right
arm was broken in three places, and they did a couple surgeries and jammed it full of rods and pins
and shit, and now I can’t go through metal detectors.”


“But how—”

“Jesus,” Ed says, and the mattress creaks slightly as he shifts, and then there’s a clicking noise.
“Anybody ever tell you you’re a pain in the ass?”

“Several people,” Roy says.

The light comes on, and Roy cowers away from it on instinct, burying his face in the pillow.
“Aaaaaah.”

“Man up. Here, take a look—unless you’re too chickenshit, like most people.”

Roy rubs at his assaulted eyes and sits upright. He’s starting to realize just how much of Ed’s
brashness is bravado—every assertion is too loud; every challenge comes on too strong; the flaring
overconfidence is a smokescreen. It’s a defensive mechanism employed like a raging offense, to
scare people off before they can tear him down.

So he keeps his face completely neutral as Ed kicks the bedclothes aside and then pulls up the
fabric of his pajama pants.

At first, Ed’s ankle and foot just look sort of… off. They’re not angled quite right against each
other, and the toes are too even, too regular, and too round. Then it occurs to Roy that there’s no
hair on Ed’s leg anywhere; and then he starts to notice that the light just doesn’t reach it the right
way. The skin on Ed’s fingers where they’re curled in the (hemmed-up) cuff of his pants isn’t the
same color, or the same consistency; it reflects, a little, and absorbs, and has contours and color
variation, and…

And as Ed draws the fabric back further, the false skin and muscle feeds into an artificial joint with
open—steel? Titanium?

“It’s a customized version of Ottobock’s C-leg, mostly,” Ed says. “Expanded distance range, and I
can actually run on it. This one’s pretty new—Granny and Winry were working on it a long time
and then gave it to me for my birthday last year, which is crazy, because I know sort of how much
this shit costs, and… Anyway.” He extends it out flat on the mattress, and the knee unbends
beautifully. “Pretty fucked up, huh?”

“It’s amazing,” Roy says.

Ed eyes him. “And… fucked up. Here, touch it. Come on.”

Roy spreads his fingers on Ed’s shin. The fake skin has a rubbery, plasticky sort of texture to it,
and no give at all, and the fact that it isn’t warm when his brain knows he’s making physical
contact with a human being is startling.

“They wanted to make it look pretty real,” Ed says, still monitoring his reactions. “I guess Winry thought I’d go around wearing flip-flops if she gave me toes, or some shit. Maybe she would, if it was her.”

With such abrupt speed and efficiency that Roy barely has time to withdraw his hand, Ed is yanking the cuff of his pants back into place and jerking the blankets up over himself again.

“Whatever,” he says. “Where the hell are you from, then, if anybody asks?”


He should tell the whole truth. It would only be fair, after all the old scars Ed has put on display, but…

But with the lights on, looking into Ed’s eyes, he doesn’t think he can bring himself to say it all.

Most of it. He’ll start with most of it, and the worst of it can still just… hibernate.

“I was actually born in San Francisco,” he says. So far, so good. “We were pretty close to the zoo. One of the only things I really remember is going there and seeing the flamingos and just… I mean, in four-year-old terms, thinking Those are incredibly weird; how is it that nature can create me and also that?… and I think that’s when I knew I was destined for science. But it wasn’t…”

There’s a reason he doesn’t talk about it; he can never figure out how.

“My parents passed away pretty soon after that,” he says to the nearest fold in the comforter, because Ed’s eyes are too damned intense. “My mother first, and my father a few weeks later. I barely remember them. I have a couple pictures, but when I think back, they never… they don’t really have faces. I guess my mother does—sometimes. When I think about… My father smoked; I remember that. He wasn’t supposed to do it in the house, but he would, and he had a car—this black Infiniti—and the thing reeked. I’d try to hold my breath when we were driving to the grocery store. My mother had this… scarf. It was pink with these tiny white flowers. I always thought it was silk, but it was… strong. I like to think my father must’ve given it to her, but that’s probably just my inner hopeless romantic talking, really. She wore it all the time. I take after her side of the family, I guess.”

Ed does not say I don’t have an inner romantic, or an outer romantic, or any romantic.

Ed does not say All the good-looking must’ve been on your dad’s side, then.

Ed does not say I don’t give a fuck about your dead mom’s scarf.

Ed doesn’t say anything.

“Anyway,” Roy says to the comforter, which is, unfortunately, not especially comforting at this point in time, “my father’s sister came up and took care of everything and sold everything and signed all the papers to adopt me, so then I went back home with her to L.A. I cried the entire first week—nonstop, apparently. She loves to tell that story; she always says ‘I kept trying to get him to drink water so he wouldn’t pass out.’ And then the landlord served her with an eviction notice for it, and she always says—’Sure, we left. But I made sure he’d be crying for a whole lot longer than a week.’ I still have no idea what she did, but there’s no doubt whatsoever in my mind that she was serious, which tells you pretty much everything you need to know about my aunt Chris.”
He clears his throat. He picks at the comforter a little. He doesn’t look over. Ed says nothing.

“We lived in Mount Washington,” he says. “My aunt runs a bar in Lincoln Heights. I learned how to read from the menu; I can still list everything she sells. After a couple years I started to bike down to Little Tokyo and buy Pocky and sit on a sidewalk somewhere and try to spot people who looked like me. Sometimes I’d go do it at USC instead, and one time when I was twelve, this girl my age came and sat down next to me and asked what I was eating. She said her father didn’t let her have sweets, so I tried to give her the whole box of Pocky, and she said she’d never finish it by herself before he got out of the lecture he was giving, so we’d have to eat it all together. By the end of the week, she was my best friend, and we were spending entire weekends getting lost in the woods behind her dad’s house. She flies helicopters in Michigan now.”

What else is left to tell? His is a life of mundane tragedies—of an ebb and flow of fortune he’s never quite been able to appreciate. What else is there to describe except the streak of sickness in him?

Ah. Well.

“My college best friend left, too,” he says. “Right after he and his wife got married, her grandmother died and bequeathed them this huge house in Ashland, so they moved up to Oregon to live in it. He’s a sheriff. And a theater buff now, without even trying. They’re talking about having kids.” He runs a hand through his hair. “Meanwhile, biochemistry is delighted that I’m no longer cheating on it with my social life.”

He sneaks a glance. Ed is smirking.

“I hear the humanities are a little more accepting of open relationships,” he says. “Science is real possessive.”

“Must be the strength of the bonds,” Roy says.

“How ionic,” Ed says.

They share a severely dorky grin, and Roy dares to hope that he’ll get some sleep tonight after all.
His eyes pop open ten minutes to six. They staunchly refuse to be shut again, even after some very vigorous mental coaxing and a few attempted bribes.

Morning it is, then.

Ed is snoring quietly; Roy will have to heckle him about it later. By the light of his phone screen he picks out some clothes for today—his sweatshirt is missing, presumed abandoned in the bathroom because Ed is a paragon of class and considerateness.

What’s the agenda for today? Is there an agenda, or are they all just going to descend into a lawless wasteland of mid-twenties laziness without consequences? Should he be dressing for boating, hiking, or lying around on the beach getting sand in his shorts? Are there any other things to do? He should have brought a book. He should have brought several books. He should have bought more clothes, nice clothes, the kind of clothes that rich kids’ eyes will gloss over because they’re acceptable—not a couple pairs of jeans and some slightly threadbare khakis and the terrible powder blue polo shirt Riza sent because it has a tiny horse embroidered on the chest instead of an alligator. He should have found a way to afford nice clothes. He should have held up a J. Crew. He should have gone into engineering. He should have spent that windfall award money on a pile of lottery tickets instead of his medication. He should have stayed in the lab where he belongs.

Speaking of his medication, where the fuck is it?

Holding his phone aloft like the Phial of Galadriel, he paws through his supremely inadequate raiment, but the sinking feeling in him already knows. He left it. He probably left it on the bathroom sink in his hurry to be early to the meeting spot, not that Sara and her green BMW were there until fifteen minutes after the agreed-upon time—

He left it. Shit.

It’s all right. It’s all right; he’ll be okay. This surge of panic is temporary; the rattling of his heart against his ribs is purely psychosomatic; his body chemistry can’t have adjusted yet. He’s forgotten far longer than this before, on busy mornings; there have been nights he didn’t sleep, and his whole composition was out of whack. It’s all right. He’ll be fine. It’s just five days. Five measly little days. He’s stubborner than his stupid, stupid brain. He’ll beat it. He’ll wait it out. Five days is barely a blip in the course of a lifetime.

Oh, God. He’ll never be able to do this. There’s just no way. He left it; how could he be so fucking dumb—?

He puts his phone down on the floor, curls his hands around the zippered edge of the suitcase, closes his eyes, and breathes. One breath at a time. Just get to the next one. That’s not so hard.

He sidles into the bathroom, quietly closes the door, splashes some cold water on his face, and looks up at himself in the mirror.

Just the next breath. That’s all. It’s not so bad.
There’s a guy in the kitchen who isn’t one of the guests. He looks like a ‘Hell’s Kitchen’ contestant, down to the white chef’s attire and the expression of inexorable world-weariness.

“Hey, man,” he says as Roy pauses in the doorway. “I’m Chad.”

“Hi,” Roy says slowly.


Roy thinks of the way that pastries which get separated from the herd near Ed’s lab bench disappear without a trace. “I’ll take a couple upstairs. Do you mind if I make coffee?”

“Not at all, not at all,” Chad says, opening the refrigerator. “Make yourself at home. Coffee’s in that cabinet above the machine. Any food allergies?”

“Don’t think so,” Roy says. “Thank you for asking.” There’s a light roast and a dark roast. Does Ed have a preference? Ed’s only criterion for coffee drinkability seems to be existence. Well, hell, Roy likes light, and Ed will just have to deal with it; he’d have to be an ingrate to complain about room service.

Jesus, it’s whole bean, and it smells like caffeinated heaven. Roy savors the scent for a moment and then starts casting about for a grinder.

“You been here long?” Chad asks.

“Since yesterday afternoon,” Roy says. “It’s really… nice.”

His vocabulary doesn’t activate until a critical threshold of coffee consumption has been reached. Usually it’s two cups.


“I think he’d like chocolate,” Roy says, finding the grinder tucked behind the toaster oven. “Thank you.”

The quality of the silence has changed. He looks over and finds Chad staring at him.

“What’s wrong?” he manages as his heart takes up pounding itself against his breastbone to the old, familiar rhythm—Don’t look at me; don’t see me; don’t find the sickness; don’t figure out the shame—


The one upside is that the vise-grip of terror around his heart disintegrates to make room for the rage.

“Is that so,” Roy says. “Tell me, then, Chad—how am I supposed to look?”

Chad swallows. “I don’t know. Like… you… I guess. I don’t know. I’ll just… chocolate chips, right?”

“Yes,” Roy says. “Thank you.” He pours in a small flood of coffee beans, jams the lid on the grinder, and slams his hand down on the button.

It’s not the most dramatic comeback one could make in a kitchen, but it’ll have to do.
Clearly, Roy missed his calling: he should have been a waiter. He manages to balance the unevenly-weighted tray on one hand in order to flail around to grasp the doorknob, and then he backs in without spilling a drop of coffee or syrup.

“Rise and shine, beautiful!” he says.

Ed’s head lifts from the pillow. From within the massive corona of frizzy hair, a pair of puffy eyes blink owlishly; if Roy’s not mistaken, there is a trail of drool on Ed’s chin.

“…beautiful on the inside!” he amends.

“F’k’you,” Ed mumbles. He drags his sleeve across his mouth and then starts scrubbing at his eyes with the heels of both hands. “…time s’it?”

Oops. “Uh… six-forty-five.”

Ed collapses back onto the bed. “Think you missed the point of a fuckin’ vacation. Fuckin’ Roy.”

A part of Roy thinks he should probably be proud that his given name has been elevated to the status of an insult. “I brought you pancakes. And coffee.”

One of Ed’s eyes cracks open and fixes on him. “Why?”

Roy sets the tray down on Ed’s nightstand. “Because… it’s a nice thing to do?”

The second eye opens a fraction. “You make ’em?”

“The homophobic resident chef did,” Roy says. “I did make the coffee. I brought sugar; I know you have some conspiracy theory about how milk is somehow out to get you or something.”

Both eyes narrow until they’re almost closed again. “Can’t believe you remember that.”

“You ranted for a quarter of an hour,” Roy says. “It made an impression.”

“Can’t believe you brought me breakfast,” Ed mumbles. “S’for show, though, right? So everyone’d see you bein’ all romantic and shit.”

Roy pauses. “Oh,” he says. “I should have thought of that.”

Ed stares at him.

“It’s a nice thing to do,” Roy says. “That’s all.”

“You’re fuckin’ weird,” Ed says.

“For being nice?” Roy asks.

Ed nods about as sagely as one can while one’s head is still mostly on the pillow, and one’s hair is an uproariously hilarious disaster.
Half an hour later—of which about six minutes were spent eating, and twenty-four were reserved for detangling—Ed’s hair is trailing down over the arm of the downstairs couch on which he’s draped himself like a swooning maiden in a Renaissance painting. “What do people even do this early in the morning when they don’t have lab?”

Roy happens to think that lazing around in someone else’s beautiful sitting room in one of the day’s first sunbeams, skimming through a newspaper with no intention of accomplishment whatsoever is the best thing one could possibly be persuaded to do on a lab-less morning, but he doesn’t imagine Ed will be impressed by some vague gesturing to the room at large.

“You could see if there’s anything on TV,” he says.

“At seven on a Tuesday morning?” Ed asks. “Gee, pretty sure my two choices are Botox-faced douchepickles with ugly ties talking seriously about all the terrible shit happening in the world, or Dora the Explorer.”

“We could learn Spanish,” Roy says. “That wouldn’t be so bad.”

“No one learns Spanish at seven in the morning on Tuesday on vacation.”

“We might start a trend.”

Ed starts laughing. It’s the high, helpless laugh that makes his eyes crinkle up at the corners. “You are so damn weird, you know that?”

“I’ve been told,” Roy says.

Ed yawns cavernously. “What else are you supposed to do with mornings? We did sleeping. We did breakfast. We did coffee. We did brushing teeth and shit. At what point does it stop being the morning and just start being the day?”

“I’m afraid my schedule didn’t leave time for a double-major in philosophy,” Roy says.

“Why are you reading that crap, anyway?” Ed says, waving his whole arm at the newspaper. “It’s all so fucking depressing. I usually let Al filter my news. He just sends me the stories about animals at the zoo making unlikely friends and shit. And cat videos. It’s a hell of a lot better that way.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Roy says. “It gives me some perspective.” He turns a page. “And there are comics at the end.”

“Perspective is overrated,” Ed says. “Most things are. Anything good going on?”

“No really,” Roy says.

“Does your phone get internet?” Ed asks. “Maybe there’s some Al Channel news.”

Roy fishes it from his pocket and tosses it towards the couch, which is perhaps the most trusting thing he has done in the past year. There’s something about the way Ed can be simultaneously naïvely hopeful and utterly misanthropic that he identifies with strongly, and it just makes him feel… safe.

Strange thought, but it can’t be retracted now.
“You left yourself logged in,” Ed says. “Don’t be surprised if you have a status about how fucking awesome I am next time you go on. Yo, who the hell is this chick in your pictures? Are you cheating on me? I’m your fake boyfriend, for fuck’s sake; have some respect.”

“That’s Riza,” Roy says.

“I really like this one of you both totally deadpan with noodles hanging out of your mouths. Holy shit, is this you and her at prom? You look, like, twelve.”

“I thought you were checking the Al Channel,” Roy says.

“C’mon,” Ed says. “If I was actually your boyfriend, I would’ve stalked the fuck out of your Facebook. It’s research. Is this that other friend you were talking about? With the wedding? Oh, wow, she’s… real pretty. She looks nice.”

“Gracia?” Roy says. “She is. She’s lovely. She used to bake cookies for me during finals, in part because she knew I’d forget to eat otherwise.”

“I gotta get somebody like that,” Ed mutters, gazing at the screen of Roy’s phone. “Somebody who cooks. Well, somebody who cooks who’s not in France. Al cooks.”

“Al is apparently perfect,” Roy says. “Pity the two of you are related.”

He deserves the middle finger he receives.

“Whoa!” Winry’s voice says from the doorway. “Not okay, Edward Elric!”

“It’s all right,” Roy says. “It’s how he shows affection.”

“Well, yeah,” Winry says, coming over to lean against the back of the couch Ed’s claimed. She’s wearing pink plaid pajama pants, a matching tank top, bedhead, and the smudges of yesterday’s eyeliner, and she is, quite frankly, heartbreakingly cute. “But that doesn’t make it okay.”

“Fuck off, Win,” Ed says.

“She’s just trying to help, baby,” Roy says.

“He’s just cranky because he didn’t get enough beauty sleep,” Winry says. “I mean, gosh, Ed, I’ve never seen you up and presentable this early. Are you feeling okay?”

She puts a hand on his forehead, which Ed promptly swats away. “Fuck off, Win!”

She folds her arms on the back of the couch and frowns at him. “Really, though.”

“It’s not my fault,” Ed says, scowling at her. “Somebody brought breakfast at the crack of fucking dawn. And it’s not like you can not drink coffee when it’s in front of you, and then I was sort of awake, and what are you smiling about?”

“I couldn’t sleep,” Roy cuts in. “I felt I shouldn’t have to suffer alone, and you looked far too peaceful. It was the only solution.”

“You are a shit,” Ed says.

“I love you, too, baby,” Roy says.

Ed looks startled and almost betrayed for a split-second before his face closes off completely.
Guilt seethes like forked lightning through the center of Roy’s chest, but there’s no time to say anything before Winry is sighing contentedly.

“You two are so married,” she says.

Ed’s face returns to absolute normalcy in an instant, and then he drags his hand down over it. “Jesus, Winry.”

“Just ‘Winry’ is fine,” she says.

Ed gives Roy a Do you see what I put up with look. Roy sends back Oh, you poor thing; let me play you a lament on the world’s tiniest cello, since you’ve worn out the violin.

“Oh, Lord,” Winry says. “You don’t even have to talk anymore? You guys are disgusting.”

“I resent that,” Roy says.

“Since when are guys disgusting?” a voice mumbles from the hall. Treavisor comes stumbling in, and Winry’s face brightens.

“Hi, you,” she says, crossing the room again to put an arm around him.

“Your pajamas match,” Roy says, pointing. “Exactly how are we the disgusting couple?”

“Because I said so,” Winry says, hugging Treavisor happily.

“She’s always right,” Treavisor says.

“Dude,” Ed says. “She’s going to walk all over you if you keep treating her like that.”

“Just ’cause she’d rather get covered in motor oil than have a tea party doesn’t mean she’s not a princess,” Treavisor says, gazing down into Winry’s eyes.

“Sweetie,” Winry says, voice quavering.

Surreptitiously Roy darts a glance at Ed, who looks about as awkward as he feels. Ed catches his eye and gives him an unmistakable For the love of God, fucking do something!

“Ah,” Roy says, “will you excuse us? We’re going to take a hike. Literally. We’ll see you later, then? All right. Come on, Ed; the trails won’t blaze themselves.”

“You’re such a fucking nerd,” Ed says, hastening over and latching on to the hand Roy holds out.

“Mea culpa,” Roy says.

“You bet your ass it’s your culpa,” Ed says.

Fortunately, escaping out of the living room onto the deck leads directly onto one of the trails. Unfortunately, Roy is starting to worry that he will have to be pried off of this property at the end of the week, because he never wants to leave.

“What the hell are you so happy about?” Ed asks as they crest the first hill, and greenery spills out before them—a whole valley of evergreen; the air is crisp and biting, magnificently infused with the pines.

“This,” Roy says.
Ed looks it over, fidgeting with the too-long ends of the sleeves of Roy’s borrowed sweatshirt, which was recently recovered from wherever he left it. “I guess that is pretty nice.”

“Do you still have my phone?” Roy asks. “I want to send Riza a picture.”

“Nah,” Ed says. “Threw it behind me with the Grenade App open to distract Winry and her boytoy while we made a run for it.” He hands it over, and Roy closes his life story à la Facebook and taps over to the camera. “That thing have GPS?”

“Yes,” Roy says, capturing the moment to the best of his meager artistic ability. “Why? You think we’re going to get lost?”

“I think it’s highly plausible,” Ed says.

“We’re on a trail,” Roy says. “If we turn around, we eventually end up where we started.”

“You clearly don’t believe in randomly-generating wormholes,” Ed says.

“Neither do you,” Roy says, tucking his phone back into his pocket and starting down.

“You clearly haven’t figured out yet that I’m a shitty luck charm,” Ed says.

“You don’t believe in luck, either,” Roy says.

Ed growls. “You clearly don’t realize I’m a shit-getting-fucked-up magnet.”

“You don’t understand magnetism,” Roy says. “Boy, I could do this all day.”

“Hike?” Ed asks. “Or be a dick?”

“I do so love to multitask,” Roy says.

“This is stupid,” Ed says after another mile or so.

“Playing casino games without a basic understanding of probability is stupid,” Roy says. “This is fun.”

“I can’t believe you,” Ed says. “I always assumed you were allergic to sunlight or some shit. You never go outside.”

“This isn’t outside,” Roy says. “This is Nature.”

“Well, nature is too fucking warm, and I think I’ve got a hole in my sock.”

“It’s not nature; it’s Nature.”

“…the fuck, Roy.”

“You have to capitalize the N.”

“…I repeat: the fuck, Roy.”
“Such language.” He manages to stop reveling in the majesty of the wilderness for long enough to glance at Ed. “You know, you might not be too warm if you took off the sweatshirt. Which is, for the record, my sweatshirt. Which you’ve probably made more sweat than shirt by now.”


Roy does not look like a dumbass. Roy looks like a perfectly reasonable, intelligent individual who, upon exercising enough to raise his body temperature, removed the Oxford shirt he was wearing over a T-shirt and tied the former around his waist.

“It’s just because—” Ed’s mouth stays open another moment, and then it snaps shut.

Roy despises that the same curiosity which makes him a fine, upstanding young scientist compels him to play ball every time Ed gets coy. “Because what?”

“It’s like I said.” Ed cradles his right arm to his chest with the left. “A lot of surgeries. Two at the time, and then another one a couple years later, and then another one last year. It’s a lot of scar tissue. It grosses people out.”

“It won’t gross me out,” Roy says. “I begged my high school biology teachers for extra dissections.”

Ed’s smile is shaky but genuine. “You’re twisted up on the inside somewhere, Mustang.”

Roy wishes that was funny.

Ed draws a deep breath, sighs it out, sets his jaw, and unzips Roy’s hoodie. It comes off, although not without a fight; Ed pulls both sleeves all the way inside-out. But then he’s just standing there, with it balled up in his hands, in a faded black T-shirt and his faded black jeans, and his right forearm is riddled with thick white scars.

“Guess that’s fair,” Ed says. “Since I’m all torn up on the outside.”

“It’s not so bad,” Roy says. “Let me see.”

“Nah,” Ed says, half-shrugging; he drapes the sweatshirt over the scarred arm to carry it and starts off on the path again. “How much further do we have to go before you get your Nature fix?”

“Hard to say,” Roy says. “I’m a junkie.”

“Stranded in the woods with the likes of you,” Ed says. “Jesus, this is like a horror movie. Are there wolves?”

“The total number of wolves in the state of California is zero,” Roy says.

“What about zoos?” Ed asks.

“The total number of wolves outside of captivity in the state of California is zero,” Roy says.

“That’s real comforting,” Ed says. “Here, why don’t you take the lead, Nature Freak?”

“That’s Mr. Nature Freak to you,” Roy says, stepping past him.

“There must be something carnivorous and angry,” Ed says. “Winry’d never take us somewhere safe.”
“There’s a minute possibility of mountain lions,” Roy says. “But they’re mostly nocturnal, and they’re not especially aggressive, and they don’t normally perceive humans as prey.” The crunching footsteps beside him stop, and he stumbles and then turns. “What?”

“You’re horrible,” Ed says faintly.

“I’m honest,” Roy says. “Is that horrible?”

“Sometimes,” Ed says. “You could’ve just said there were coyotes or some shit.”

“There are probably some of those, too,” Roy says, starting uphill again. Riza was *incalculably* better to hike with. She didn’t say much, didn’t ask much, didn’t slow him down.

That’s unfair. Ed’s wearing a prosthesis. Roy really shouldn’t be setting the pace; he should subtly let Ed do it and *try* to appreciate his company.

But he’s just so *tired*—tired of faking excitement for Winry, faking normalcy for Ed, faking completeness for the entire world. There’s a voice in him that’s always gasping for air to scream with, which no amount of smothering will quell; there’s a streak of undying panic in him that’s always rising towards the surface; but nobody wants to *look* or *listen*—and why should they? What entitles him to even a moment of their brief little lives or a fragment of their half-assed sympathy?

He’s on his own. He’s always on his own; he should be used to it by now; he should be picking himself the fuck up and getting the fuck over it.

And if Ed says *one* more thing about how stupid Nature is—his solitary joy in the present universe —

The heavy-booted footsteps are catching up to him again, and then, as he attempts to glare holes into the trail in front of him, they’re scuffling close.

“Wait—Roy—Roy—”

Roy whirls on him. “*What?* Look, Ed, I’m *trying*, okay? I am *trying* to enjoy this so much that I don’t think about all the wasted lab time, or all the things I should have said, and I keep *trying* to bail you out every time you put your stupid foot in your stupid mouth just because you’re playing some overblown defensive game—and the least you could do is treat me like a human *being* instead of telling me every five minutes that I’m fucked up, which I *know*, by the way, so it’s not news to anyb—”

“*Roy,*” Ed says—and good heavens, his eyes are so wide they could probably hold galaxies, and his face is ashen, and he’s pointing over Roy’s right shoulder.

The remaining pieces of that rant—and they were legion—wither and die in Roy’s mouth. Slowly, slowly, he turns around.

There is a cougar on the path, ten, *maybe* twelve feet from where they stand.

Roy’s first thought is that it may be the most beautiful animal he’s ever seen. It’s sleek and powerful, built low and strong like a sports car, with startling blue eyes and a touch of gray-brown in the face to temper the smooth pale beige fur everywhere—like a Siamese cat, just a *hint* of delicacy. But there’s nothing delicate about the coiled muscles underneath; nothing delicate about the way the long tail sways back and forth, the better to mark this specimen a full eight feet from nosetip to the end of that tail; nothing delicate about the fierce intelligence and the unwavering
attention to the two foolish little people tromping through its territory.

Roy’s second thought is *Oh, shit.*

“Okay,” he says, without much help from his suddenly arid esophagus. “Okay, just… stay calm. I’m going to back away towards you, and then we’re going to do that thing where we make a lot of noise, and it decides we’re not worth eating.”

“No fucking way,” Ed says. “We’re getting the fuck out of here.”

“No,” Roy says, maintaining eye contact with the massive creature that might enjoy killing him as he takes one cautious step backward, then two. His knees appear to have transformed themselves into chocolate pudding while he was speaking. “If we run, we’re acting like prey, and its chase instincts might kick in. That’s how a lot of mountain lion attacks happen.”

“You don’t know shit!” Ed says. “You said they were nocturnal!”

“They *are* nocturnal!”

“Tell it to that guy!”

“*Fine, I will!*” Roy glares at the mountain lion. “Go back to sleep; you’re defying your instincts!”

The cougar’s ears swivel back and then swing forward again. Roy has no idea what that means, but he’s willing to bet it’s not *My stars, good sir, you’re quite correct! I’ll just slink back to my proper breed characteristics now, cheerio, terribly sorry to interrupt.*

“Oh, my God,” Ed says through what can only be described as hysterical laughter. It’s sort of bubbling and dribbling out of him against his will, by the sound of it; Roy thinks involuntarily of vomit. “Oh, my *God,* you’re fucking crazy. I’m fucking crazy. The cat is fucking crazy. We’re all gonna die. What a way to go.”

“We’re not going to die!” Roy says. “And I’m not *crazy!*”

The mountain lion looks distinctly unamused now. Or perhaps that’s the crazy talking.

“Roy,” Ed says. His voice trembles, and the pine needles whisper, and then there’s a faint fingertip’s pressure against Roy’s arm. “I’m not going without you, but Jesus *fuck,* we should *run,* okay?”

“That’s a really bad idea,” Roy says.

“So is standing here making conversation with an apex predator,” Ed says. “It doesn’t even count as conversation, ’cause he’s not answering.”

“Maybe he’ll leave,” Roy says.

“Maybe he won’t,” Ed says. The fingers curl into the back of Roy’s T-shirt. “Come on, Roy. I’d sure as hell rather die running. On the count of three.”

“No,” Roy says.

“One.”

“Nooooooo.”
“Two.”

“Ed—”

“Three-come-on-you-fucker—”

As with pulling him back up onto the dock, Roy discovers that Ed is staggeringly strong for his size, and it’s only some expert stumbling and a bit of blind luck that prevents him from getting a faceful of pine needles and a back full of cougar claws—and then they’re careening down the hill, veering almost immediately off of the trail—

“Where are you going?” Roy howls.

“Away!” Ed howls back.

“We’re going to get lost!”

“At least we’re not getting devoured!”

“Ed!”

“What?”

Roy has expended the last of his extra breath, and the rest has to be dedicated to sprinting, or he might add “Before we die, I just wanted to tell you that your hair is stunning” or something. He really needs to prepare some brilliantly poetic last words, whether or not anyone will be around to record them for posterity. It’s the principle of the thing.

He doesn’t think he can hear mountain lion paws pounding the ground behind them, thundering ever closer, poising to pounce and sink its fearsome teeth into the juncture of his shoulder and his neck in order to snap his spine, but it’s difficult to hear much of anything over the racket that he and Ed are making, so it’s perfectly possible that he’s about to die.

There’s an odd moment of clarity in his head: I really did give it everything I had. It wasn’t bad. I could have done better, and I could have been more, and I would have liked to know what it’s like to wake up and feel right, but it wasn’t bad, all things considered. I did okay.

Then there’s another odd moment, this time of disbelief: Holy crap, Ed is faster than me on a mechanical knee.

But all of the recreational jogging around campus while he waits for gel to set, or for simulations to load, or for data to process, or for his whizzing-screaming-sobbing-spinning brain to quiet down has paid off. His lungs are burning, and his heart is a mad drummer with no rhythm bound poorly to his flaming veins, but he’s holding steady, and it’s almost… great. The adrenaline and the incredulity and the panic and the long, wordless wail of his better judgment in his head—it’s invigorating. And, hell—running for your life is pretty damn good cardio.

But then he has a third odd moment, as Ed drops to the ground—no, he doesn’t drop; he flings both arms out and plants his hands on the thick, dark, mossy fallen tree splayed out across their sad excuse for an escape route. And he vaults off of it and spirals in the air like a fucking pinwheel and soars several feet ahead and then lands like a goddamn butterfly and keeps running. Roy’s sweatshirt goes fluttering away and snags on a tree branch.

So this time the clarity is: Oh, sweet holy fuck!, and the result is that Roy trips over the log and slams into the ground at what feels like a thousand miles an hour, the better to fill his open mouth
with molding pine needles and bury his face in a small but ambitious bramble.

This is it. Next will be the low, resonant growl; then the soft sounds of a huge, lean animal’s paws in the underbrush. Then the moist breath on the back of his neck, then the claws in his bare arm, then the agony as the canines pierce his skin, his jugular, his windpipe—and then the rest is silence. Some creep from lab will hit on Riza at his closed-casket funeral, and there will be nothing he can do about it. She’ll go to jail for murder. Aunt Chris will console Maes and Gracia as the cops lead her away, and everyone will forget they’re at a funeral in the first place, and the news story will go from *Promising Young Scientist Mauled by Mountain Lion* to *Attractive Young Helicopter Pilot Imprisoned for Homicide*, and someone will ask in a very loud voice if there’s food. It’ll probably be Ed.

“Oh, my God, you suck,” Ed says from close to Roy’s ear. An insistent finger prods his shoulder several times. “Get up, asshole. If you’re unconscious, there’s no way I’m carrying your fat ass back to civilization.”

“All not fat,” Roy says. It comes out more like *Mm nff ffft*, due to the mouthful of dead foliage.

“Yeah, well, you’re fatheaded. I think we lost the giant cat from hell. Get up already. Did you hurt yourself?”

Roy finds his arms about where he left them and pushes himself upright. He spits out a disturbing quantity of leaves, which is an experience that he hopes he will never have to repeat.

“Only my dignity,” he says.

“Your what?” Ed asks, smirking a little. He sits back and takes his left shin in both hands, carefully laying his leg out flat. “So… million-dollar question. How do we get back?”

Roy looks back the way he thinks they came. He looks the way they were headed. He looks left. He looks right. Everything appears to be more or less completely identical. “I have no idea.”

Ed grimaces. “We’re lost.”

Roy rubs at his stinging cheek and draws his palm back with little speckles of blood all over it. “I told you we’d get turned around if we left the trail.”

“Fuck you,” Ed says. “I told you so first.”

At least that distracts Roy from the fact that he’s bleeding from the face and probably contracting at least four viral infections even as he blinks. “What?”

“When you were taking that picture to show your girlfriend, a—”

“She’s not my girlfriend.”

“—nd you said we wouldn’t.”

“If we stayed on the trail,” Roy says.

Ed rolls his eyes. “What-the-fuck-ever. Get out your phone; we can Google Map our way back to civilization.”

By some miracle, it stayed in Roy’s pocket the whole way, and he somehow didn’t land hard enough to shatter the screen.
But miracles only go so far.

“No service,” he says.

“Motherfucking son of a bitch,” Ed says through clenched teeth. “Who’s your service provider? If we make it out of here alive, I’m firebombing one of their stores.”

“No, you’re not,” Roy says, getting to his feet, brushing himself off, and going to collect his dramatically-abandoned hoodie. “It’s not quite ten in the morning, so that way—” He points in the general direction at which the sun is angled. “—must be east.”

Ed clambers up slowly, eyeing him the whole way. “What about the moss on the trees thing?”

“Debunked.”

“Doesn’t your stupid phone have a compass, or something?”

“It only works when you have 3G,” Roy says.

Ed stares at him. Roy stares back.

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard,” Ed says.

“It’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever had to say,” Roy says.

Ed pushes his hair back off of his forehead. “Fuck. Okay. Well. That’s east. Which way do we need to go?”

Roy taps hopelessly at the phone, well aware that he can’t summon a signal by force of will. “I… think we were staying on the north side of the lake.”

“You ‘think’,” Ed says slowly. “Like you ‘thought’ mountain lions were nocturnal.”

“They are!” Roy says. “They’re crepuscular, actually; they come out at dawn and at dusk, and I don’t see you doing anything except bitching at me when I try to give us something to work with, and for all I care, you can die of exposure.”

“Or starvation,” Ed says, shoving his hands into his pockets and gazing skyward. “Maybe both at once.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Roy says. He starts storming off in a northerly direction; at least he’ll die closer to the cabin. “I’m not sharing my Altoids with you anyway.”

“You’re the worst fake boyfriend ever,” Ed says, running a few steps to catch up.

“How dare you,” Roy says, but he can’t muster up much venom.

“I’m starving,” Ed says.

“You’re starving?” Roy asks. “You inhaled three pancakes. I watched you. Although I almost blinked and missed it.”

“That was a long time ago,” Ed says.

Roy holds a springy branch out of the way for him and disdains himself for it. “Well, the faster we go, the sooner we get back to food.”
“Thanks,” Ed says of the branch. Roy disdains himself slightly less. “Hey, you know what I really, really want?”


“No,” Ed says. “Cake.”

“I want a girl with a short skirt and a long jacket,” Roy says.

“…what?”

“It’s a Cake song.”

“…what?”

“This is terrible,” Roy says. “Pop culture references are my superpower, and you’re immune to them.”

“The only pop I’m interested in is the kind you can drink,” Ed says, “because I’m starving.”

“Me, too,” Roy says.

They crunch through the needles in silence for a while.

“Chocolate cake,” Ed says.

“Chocolate fondue,” Roy says.


“Chocolate-chip cookie dough in chocolate fondue,” Roy says.


“It does.”

“It does not.”

“I’ll take you there,” Roy says. “If we survive.”

“Fuck this,” Ed says. “I’m surviving if it kills me.”

“Good idea,” Roy says.

______________________________________________________________

“Oh, God,” Ed says. “I’m dying. It’s over. Go on without me. Remember me. Leave cupcakes on my grave. Tell Al I love him. Tell Winry I love her most of the time. If my fucking dad comes to my funeral, punch his fucking lights out.”

“Okay,” Roy says.

“I’m serious,” Ed says. “The least you could do is sound depressed.”
“Do I not sound depressed?” Roy asks.

“If you die first, I’m resorting to cannibalism,” Ed says. “Your sacrifice will not be in vain.”

“What’s that?” Roy asks, pointing to a smudge of grayish something at the bottom of the hill.

“Hunger hallucinations,” Ed says.

“No,” Roy says, “that’s—a parking lot, come on—”

“It’s made of cement; it’s not going anywh—”

“There’s a taxi!”

Apparently, Roy’s tortured, unfed body has a bit of running left in it—just enough to race down the last of the hill waving both arms and skid to a stop a few feet from the cab idling at the lot entrance. There’s a road, and it’s paved, and it’s a taxi, and they’re going to live.

Very, very slowly, the cab driver rolls the window down. Roy’s a little offended until he catches a glimpse of his bloody, dirt-smudged face in the side mirror and remembers that he just ran over here at top speed, flailing the whole way.

“Hi,” he says, trying not to sound any worse than he looks. “Do you take debit cards?”

The driver is a blond guy with an unlit cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth. Wordlessly, he shakes his head.

“Shitfuck,” Roy says.

“Nice,” Ed says, coming up behind him.

Roy grinds his teeth. “I mean—um—how far could you take us for…” He pulls out his wallet and opens the cash pocket. “…five dollars?”

“And twenty cents?” Ed says.

The taxi driver stares at them for another moment. Then he points to the curve in the road about a quarter-mile down.

“I think that’s worthy of a ‘fuckshit’,” Ed says.

“Shut up,” Roy says. He looks at his sad, lonely little five-dollar bill and then at the cabbie. “Hey, for five bucks, could we use your GPS for a minute?”

“Don’t be a dumbass!” Ed says, elbowing him. “Five bucks could get us, like, sixteen packs of ramen! See if your phone’s working first.”

Roy takes it out. He has two bars of signal. His heart leaps, and he thumbs the Google Maps icon, and then…

The battery dies.

“I hate my life,” he says.

“I hate your life, too,” Ed says. He turns to the taxi driver. “Yo, my friend’ll totally pay you when we get there. You can hold this asshole hostage while I go in and get her, if you want.”
“We’re trying to get to 421 Blue Springs Road,” Roy says. “I promise we’re not creepy woods dwellers who kill people.”

Ed elbows him harder this time. “That’s exactly what creepy woods dwellers who kill people would say!”

The taxi guy’s eyes narrow a little, and then he taps at his Garmin for a few very long seconds. The cigarette bobs up and down.

“Pretty posh part of town,” he says at last.

“Yes,” Roy says desperately. “Yes, it is. Reputable.”

The cabbie eyes them for another moment, and then he jerks a thumb at the backseat. “Get in.”

Ed grabs the front of Roy’s shirt, lays a wet, smacking kiss on his cheek, grabs his sweatshirt away from him, and opens the car door. “I’m never going anywhere with you again,” he says.

Roy rubs the saliva off of his skin and goes around to the other side. “Fair enough,” he says.

“What happened to you?” Winry gasps as Roy steps in and closes the door.

“Extreme hiking,” Roy says. “It’s the next big thing.”

Winry does not seem to appreciate his classy and refined sense of humor.

Ed positions himself partway in front of Roy, which is… interesting. “Look, I’ll pay you back for the taxi, Win.”

“That’s not what I mean!”

“Chill out,” Ed says. “We didn’t have to go all Donner Party. Not even a little bit. Hey, is there food?”

Winry turns her horror full-force on Roy. “What happened to your face?”

“That’s not nice,” Ed cuts in. “It’s not his fault; he was just born ugly.”

Roy loops an arm around Ed’s neck and wordlessly ruffles his hair until it is an absolute rat’s nest, ignoring the screaming, the writhing, and the pounding on his chest. It’s only when Ed tries to bite him that he lets go.

Winry’s horror has become unmitigated mortification.

“We’re just hungry,” Ed says.

Treavisor puts a hand on Winry’s shoulder. He seems to be attempting to draw her away from the madmen. “Maybe you should, uh…” He gestures to Roy’s cheek. “…some… hydrogen peroxide or… something.”

“Food first,” Roy says.
“Now you’re makin’ sense,” Ed says.

“This is boring,” Ed says.

They tore through several Chad-made sandwiches with a celerity that Roy is beginning to regret, after which Ed followed Roy aimlessly while he cleaned himself up and plugged his phone in to charge. Ed continued to follow aimlessly as Roy selected one of the eighteen indistinguishable Tom Clancy books from the shelves in the living room and stationed himself in a deck chair under an umbrella on the beach.

“So go ride a jet-ski,” Roy says. It’s what everyone else is doing, but, despite all of the giddy laughter wafting back over the waves, Roy thinks he can be satisfied with vicarious thrills for a while.

“Can’t swim,” Ed says in a low voice. “Remember?”


“You are not.”

“I am.” He looks around for something to mark the book with; he can’t bear to dog-ear pages. “Do you want me to get a deck of cards?”

“What is this,” Ed says, “1925?”

“I don’t think they’d be nearly as accepting of a homosexual couple if this was 19—”

“There’s an Xbox inside.”

“I didn’t come all this way to sit inside and play Xbox.”

“Of course not,” Ed says. “You came all this way to be wrong about mountain lions and then read one of those books people buy at airports because they don’t have a choice.”

“That’s right,” Roy says. “Why do I have to go with you? You can play Xbox by yourself if you want.”

“Isn’t that the point of being in a relationship?” Ed asks. He’s still wearing his Docs, and he’s recovered his red sweatshirt, which some household service wraith washed, dried, and left folded on their bed. “Always having somebody to do stuff with?”

“Yes and no,” Roy says.

“I’d forgotten how fucking helpful you can be.”

Roy gives up and puts the book down. He hasn’t been able to retain anything he’s read for about three pages anyway. “So are you a gymnast, or what?”

Ed blinks at him.

Ed scowls. “What, so it’s my fault you took a bite out of a briar patch?”

“That’s not what I meant,” Roy says. To say that Ed is exasperating is tantamount to mentioning offhandedly that the Pacific is damp. “I was contextualizing.”

Ed frowns a little deeper and nudges a toe at the sand. “Well… yeah. Used to be. Sort of.” He folds his arms on the arm of Roy’s chair and sets his chin on them. This puts his face about two inches from Roy’s chest, which is more than a bit discomfiting, but Ed doesn’t even seem to notice. “I was into it as a kid, and then after the car and the leg and stuff, I thought… well, everyone kept encouraging me to try to pick it up again. So I did, y’know, after the bulk of the PT and stuff, and I was pretty good.”

“You’ve got to be Olympic quality,” Roy says.

“Paralympics,” Ed says, disinterestedly. “Except they don’t offer any of my stuff. It would’ve been too expensive anyway. I don’t care. I don’t have time. And I’m not jonesing for glory or whatever, so what difference does it make?”

“Recognition makes a huge difference,” Roy says.

Ed looks up at him.

Roy looks back.

Roy reaches out and taps his nose.

“Boop,” Roy says.

“I fucking hate you,” Ed says.

“Movie night!” Winry crows.

“Not evil witch,” Roy murmurs to Ed. “Ringleader of a demon circus.”

Ed’s eyes light up—it’s curious; Roy’s seen the effect on other people, but no one’s expression simply illuminates quite like Ed’s does. “That’s pretty good.”

“There’s pizza!” Winry says. “And popcorn! And candy! And soda! And if everyone’s not sugar-high and stupid by midnight, we’re doing it wrong!”

“That sounds like it has virtually no potential for disaster,” Roy says—quietly, because he doesn’t want to get a fatal can of soda thrown at his head so soon after escaping his demise in the wilderness.

Ed snickers.

“Stop colluding, you two,” Winry says, glaring over at the loveseat Roy cleverly staked out as soon as she started rounding up the group. “I swear, you guys make my teeth hurt. Ed, this whole pizza is for you, but you should probably share with Roy.”

“Aw, jeez, Win,” Ed says, looking touched and delighted as he scampers over and takes the box
from her. “You got the Ed Special!”

Roy opens his mouth to ask and then remembers in the nick of time that a boyfriend ought to know. “Let me grab a slice before you eat it all, baby,” he says.

“I guess I can probably spare one,” Ed says, returning to their couch with a spring in his step. He cracks open the box, and Roy squares his shoulders, reaches in, catches up a piece of pizza, and refuses to hesitate before taking a bite.

Turns out the Ed Special is pineapple, sausage, and heaps of jalapeño.

“I’ll be fine,” he wheezes for the third time. Ed continues to attempt to pry his way through the lock on the bathroom door. “Ed—it’s fine; I just don’t have tastebuds of steel like you apparently do.”

“It’s my fault,” Ed says. “Open the door.”

“It is not. And no.”

“Why, are you barfing? I can handle barf. I raised Al, pretty much. He barfed a lot as a kid. Don’t tell him I told you that. He used to get carsick. What the hell are you doing in there?”

“I’d just rather the general populace didn’t see me with my eyes watering,” Roy says.


“I’m also scouring my tongue with my fingernails,” Roy says. “It’s a bit undignified.”

“Aw, jeez,” Ed says. Something collides repeatedly with the door. Roy suspects it’s Ed’s forehead. “I should’ve warned you. I just thought… you could handle it. I mean, you handled a fucking cougar in your face; I thought jalapeños would be, like, whatever.”

“It’s not your fault,” Roy says.

“Yes, it is,” Ed says.

“I should have known better than to take a bite without looking,” Roy says. “Especially when it comes to the preferred pizza of someone who I’ve seen literally eating hot sauce for breakfast.”

“It’s nutritious,” Ed says.

“Punching holes in your stomach lining is generally not considered healthful,” Roy says.


“At least that explains why you can eat like a pack of wolves without putting on an ounce of fat,” Roy says.

“Yeah, well,” Ed says. “How’s your tongue? They’re gonna start soon, and I’m not going back in
there without you.”

“Who plays ‘Gladiator’ at a party, anyway?” Roy asks.

“Winry thinks Russell Crowe is dreamy,” Ed says. “C’mon. I’ll get you a soda.”

“I don’t need a soda,” Roy says, spitting in the sink one last time before he opens the door. “I need a lobotomy.”

Ed, mostly in shadow but for the faintest gleam of light from down the hall, looks like pyrite incarnate as he smiles.

“Don’t you dare,” he says. “You’re gonna do great things with that brain.”

“We’ll see,” Roy says.

Ed seizes his arm and aggressively links their elbows in order to tow Roy back to the living room.

“Yeah. We will.”

True to Ed’s prediction, everyone in the room seems to get something itchy in their eye as ‘Gladiator’ winds to a symphonic close. Several of the guys grow extremely interested in the ceiling, although it appears to be so bright that they can’t look at it without blinking profusely.

Ed, who is using his hoodie sleeves to clear the mysterious dampness in his eyelashes, sniffles and looks at Roy’s dry cheeks.

“Aw, shit,” he says. “I knew it was too good to be true. You’re a cyborg. Fuck.”

“It’s sad,” Roy says, “but this is what he’s been holding out for, too. I think it comes as a relief. He’s done what he meant to, and now he can rest.”

It doesn’t hurt that he’s seen this movie twelve times. Or that it’s just so strange how well he and Ed fit together on the couch—perhaps Ed doesn’t know that, if he’s never had a relationship. Perhaps he thinks that human beings always slot together like they were cut to match—that shoulders’ breadths always fit neatly in an arm’s length; that arms always hook and wrap snugly around waists; that fingers always fill each other’s spaces. Perhaps he doesn’t have any grounds for comparison, and that’s why he’s not distracted by how easily their bodies align. Perhaps he simply doesn’t know that this is extraordinary.

Perhaps he also doesn’t know that staring into someone’s ear canal in company is considered a bit gauche.

“Uh,” Roy says. “See anything you like?”

“I’m looking for the cyborg parts,” Ed says.

“You say the sweetest things,” Roy says.

“Russell Crowe is such a beefcake,” Winry sighs happily. She gazes up at Treavoris. “He’s almost as hot as you, babe.”
“Eew,” Ed says.

Winry takes a moment to stick her tongue out at him before she hops up and goes over to start opening the cabinets of the entertainment center. “What else does everybody wanna see? And what else did your parents leave us, babe?”

“I don’t know,” Treavor says. “‘Casablanca’, probably.”

Roy loves ‘Casablanca’. The room at large does not need to have that ammunition against his manhood, however.

“Hey!” Winry says. “‘Mulan’!”

“Oh, shit,” Ed says.

“What’s wrong with ‘Mulan’?” Roy asks. “It’s kind of cute.”

“Did you bring earplugs?” Ed asks.

“What?” Roy says. “No.” A dreadful prospect dawns. “Do they—please tell me they don’t—”

“I hope you’ve got cyborg ear-closers hidden under there somewhere,” Ed says.

The nostalgia sing-along goes about as tunefully as Roy feared in his deepest, darkest nightmares. His ears are still ringing when the credits roll, and everyone leaps up in bizarre unison to race for the restrooms. Ed considers their—well, his—empty popcorn bowl and reaches down to switch it out for the mostly-full one belonging to the couple that was sitting on the floor.

“You know,” he says, crunching his way through at such tremendous speed that it’s a wonder he can talk at all, “I thought for the longest time that ‘kernel’ and ‘colonel’ were the same thing. So, like, people would talk about colonels in the military, and I’d be like, ‘Boy, kernels are small; those must be the little pipsqueak guys who have to carry everybody else’s guns.’” He chews reflectively. “You know what this needs?”

“Jalapeños?” Roy hazards.

Ed stops chewing long enough to stare at him. “We gotta stop spending time together,” he says. “You’re starting to read my mind.”

“Think of a random word,” Roy says.

“Botulism,” Ed says.

“You weren’t supposed to say it,” Roy says. “I was going to guess.”

“Oh,” Ed says. “Well, while we’re on the subject—wanna talk about botulism?”

“Not especially,” Roy says.

“You’re no fun,” Ed says.
“I beg to differ,” Roy says. “I think I’m extremely fun.”

“You probably think Boggle and a glass of wine is the recipe for the perfect night,” Ed says.

“That’s absurd,” Roy says. “Scrabble is vastly superior.”

Ed snickers. “Okay, drunk Scrabble sounds… kinda fun.”

“Drunk *strip* Scrabble,” Roy says.

Ed’s pupils dilate, and his cheeks go pink, and this close up he’s sort of mesmerizing.

Before Roy can qualify that he’s never actually *played* drunk strip Scrabble and just assumes from all available evidence that it would be a rollicking good time, the couple whose popcorn Ed stole wanders back in, joined at the mouth like a pair of fish, and settles on their chosen spot of carpet again. When they come up for air, Roy sees that it’s the girl who was wearing brown pigtails yesterday and the guy who was Jack Black during the icebreaker and failed to respond to *any* of the ‘School of Rock’ quotes.

“Hey,” the girl says. “Didn’t we have some popcorn left?”

“I thought we did,” the guy says.

Ed glances sidelong at Roy. Roy looks back.

“You must have eaten it all,” they say in unison.

They look at each other again.

“Jinx,” they say at once.

Roy blinks at Ed. Ed blinks back.

“Fuck,” they both say.

“Whoa,” says the girl.

“You guys totally practiced that,” the guy says.

“We did *not*,” Ed says. “He’s integrating me into the cyborg hive-mind—against my will, by the way. You have to save me before it’s too late.”

Roy pats Ed’s head. “Resistance is futile, dear.”

“You are *such* a nerd,” Ed says.

“Who is more nerdy?” Roy asks. “The nerd, or the nerd who follows his references?”

“Oh, my *God*,” Ed says.
Chapter 3

Roy makes it all the way through ‘Tangled’ (despite the fierce debate about whether Zachary “You know, the guy on ‘Chuck’” Levi or Jim “You know, the guy on ‘The Office’” Krasinski is cuter) and twenty minutes into ‘Avatar’ before his head and heart are fighting it out over who can pound the harder.

It’s getting to be too much—the noise, the people, the laughing, the chattering, the spinning colors on the screen. He kisses Ed’s temple, murmurs “Baby, I’m going to run upstairs for a minute,” and makes his escape.

Lying on the bed with his phone clutched to his chest, he feels a little stabler—not really any more sane, but at least stable. A little less like the planet’s hurrying through space without any gravity, and he’s only barely clinging on.

Much as he could embark on a long treatise about the evils of the cellular phone, his feels like a lifeline at times like this. If he needed to—if he really needed to; if it was the difference between dangling from the edge and letting go—Maes and Riza are a swipe and two thumb-taps away. They’d pick up, too. It’s just about eleven; that’s two in the morning for Riza, but she’d pick up. Is Maes going to stop taking calls if he gets himself saddled with a sproglet (his word—Roy prefers ‘recombinant gene creature’, though he concedes that it’s a bit long)? His whole universe is going to reconfigure itself, won’t it? All he’ll want to talk about is sproglets; all he’ll want to do is nurture things; he’ll only ever have things in common with other sproglet-mongers and their kin. The distance is bad enough—is Roy going to get pushed out of Maes’s life altogether to make more sproglet space?

It probably won’t be a push. He’ll probably just… fade. Fewer and fewer phone calls; no more Skype chats with Gracia holding up bunny ears in the background; the Hughes household will shut down after nine. Maes won’t have time for emails; he won’t have time for texts; he’ll be so insulated in the day-to-day of his own life that he’ll forget he and Roy ever had two that overlapped almost completely. Pretty soon it’ll just be silence.

What difference does it make, anyway? Shoring up old friendships is hard, against the sheer weight of time and distance trying to make them crumble, and Roy, frankly, doesn’t have much to offer. He never has anything to say that doesn’t involve naming a new microscope (the lab has all of the Founding Fathers now). He’s usually in the middle of something and has to call back, and sometimes—often—he genuinely forgets. He only calls them when he’s needy, when he’s lonely, when he can feel his constitution cracking and knows he’s slipping towards a full-fledged breakdown.

Riza would always answer, though—wouldn’t she? Theirs is a bond of veins and ribs and hair and thoughts that grew together, intertwined; no time difference and no span of miles could separate such tangled vines. No depths of romance and no quantity of sproglets (Roy suspects Riza would rather die than reproduce, but he tries never to say “never”; more likely she’ll accumulate a large pack of frighteningly well-trained dogs) could tear them apart.

He picks up his phone and emails her the picture he took down the side of the mountain. He types out Wish you were here <3, which says just about everything without saying much at all.

He thinks about texting her, but it’s enough just knowing she’ll get the email tomorrow morning at some unholy hour and smile. He could text Maes instead, just for the breath of unguarded human contact, but—what the hell would he say? Hey, remember that time we were a little drunk, and
you were telling me that love is sacred, and that you’d this-is-Sparta kick me down a flight of stairs if I ever faked being in love with someone? Does that still apply if it’s a mutual agreement of fakeness for the purpose of material gain? …wait, don’t answer that.

He doesn’t get too much longer to languish in languor and wallow in self-pity before the door opens a crack. Ed’s hair, followed by Ed’s forehead and Ed’s eyes, appear in the gap.

“I thought you might be sleeping,” Ed says, stepping in and closing it quietly.

“Sleep is for the weak,” Roy says. “I haven’t slept since 1906.”

“You look pretty good for a hundred and eight,” Ed says.

“I exfoliate,” Roy says.

Ed gestures to the empty side of the bed with an elbow, keeping both hands in the pocket of his sweatshirt. “Can I join you?”

“It’s your room, too,” Roy says. “At least if the heart on the door is to be believed.”

“Seems legit,” Ed says. He flops down and releases a massive sigh. “They’re coming up on the part with the blue people having hair-sex. I saw it with Al and Win in the theater, and I just lost my shit, I was laughing so hard, and people started throwing things at me, and… I don’t think Winry ever forgave me. So I figured I’d cut and run.” He looks over. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” Roy says. It’s a bit generous. “Long day, that’s all. Long, bizarre day.”

“You’re tellin’ me,” Ed says. He wrestles the tie out of his hair and shakes his head, making bright gold spill all over the pillow. “You mind if I ditch my leg?”

It takes Roy a moment to process that ostensibly nonsensical statement. “Oh. Sure, go for it.”

Ed sits up, pauses, glances at Roy, pauses some more, slides off of the bed, turns away, unzips his jeans, shimmies until they crumple around his ankles, steps out of them, and removes the prosthetic.

“So, uh,” Ed says.

He settles on the edge of the bed, rolling his shoulders and looking faux-idly at the lamp. Several inches above where his knee would be, his thigh rounds off. There are a few faint, pale scars across the… stump. Is that something Roy shouldn’t say? Is it something he shouldn’t think? He doesn’t have the vocabulary for this.

“I dunno about you,” Ed is saying, “but tonight I learned that apparently money can’t buy hearing aids for the tone-deaf.”

“I guess even currency has its limits,” Roy says.

Ed swings himself fully onto the bed again, curling the toes of his right foot. “So what do you want to do tomorrow? I’m vetoing further adventures in running the fuck away from wildlife. Unless we get a camera crew, in which case, sign me up for promotional shit.”


“I’m going to have nightmares,” Ed says. He looks at Roy, looks away, and looks down at his
knee. He lifts it up to his chest and wraps both arms around it, and then he looks at Roy again. "You sure you’re okay?"

Did he think Roy was going to be repulsed? No doubt most of it was a matter of comfort, but all the same—there was a very delicate sort of trust in it. To be less than clothed and less than whole in front of another human being… That was a brave thing.

Roy has been brave, once or twice. He doesn’t much care for it, but sometimes…

Well, sometimes you’re sitting two feet from a half-naked early-twenties amputee, and fuck your insecurities.

“No,” Roy says. “I mean—I’m not sure. And I’m not really okay. But it’s not—it’s nothing to do with you, or anyone, or any of this; it’s… it’s all right. That’s all. It’s fine.”

Ed is watching him with a very emblematic Ed expression—mixed confusion and conviction, with a burning foundation of compassion underneath.

“What the hell does that mean?” he asks.

“Nothing,” Roy says. Bravery is for fools, of course; fools and the dead, who don’t have to endure the consequences. “Is it all right with you if I hop in the shower first?”


Roy’s already digging through his suitcase, trying not to think—or is he trying to think, through the screaming whirlwind of voices in his head? “Yes?”

“Nothing,” Ed says.

When Roy comes back out, still waging the unending battle against the drips from his hair, Ed darts past him—being down a knee, a calf, and a foot doesn’t seem to deter him at all—and the shower water starts up again. Even thinking about all of the long blond hairs that are going to be straggling all over the tub and nesting in the drain like lost worms doesn’t gross Roy out very much. Thinking about Ed drenched in water, wreathed in steam, and garlanded in gleaming soapsuds does not gross Roy out at all.

This is a problem.

Fortunately, Roy has managed to fan his blazing cheeks into submission by the time Ed reemerges.

“Hey,” Ed says. He leans against the bathroom doorway; a few last gusts of steam billow out around him, and his hair streams down his shoulders, painting lines of wetness on his shirt. His pajamas pants simply hang empty on the left side. “I was just thinking, like… I mean, do you think we’re gonna be able to do normal lab shit after this? It’s just… I mean, even if we’re too mature to be awkward about it—which we are! I think. Maybe. Whatever. I mean… Either way, we’re, like, friends now. Kind of. By default. Aren’t we? You sorta can’t just go back to normal small talk after something like this, right?”

“I don’t know,” Roy says truthfully. “I’ve never… It’s not like it’s going to be a breakup or
“It’s like that part in the first Harry Potter,” Ed says, “where Harry and Ron and Hermione—”

“Fight the cave troll?” Roy says. “And that’s not something you can do without becoming friends with someone?”

Ed chews on his bottom lip. “See, that’s exactly what I mean. You just finished my sentence. And got the Harry Potter thing. And… just… well, shit, cave trolls can go fuck themselves.” He unfolds his arms from across his chest in order to wave them in a manner that is equal parts emphatic and unrevealing. “Mountain lions, man.”

“I’m starting to doubt my own memory that that ever happened,” Roy says. “I’m glad you’re a witness.”

“Oh, yeah?” Ed says. He nods to… Roy. Roy in general? Ah, Roy’s face in particular. “We should put some Neosporin on your souvenirs there, or they’ll scar, and you’ll have them as witnesses, too.”

“I should have taken a picture of it,” Roy says.

“Yeah,” Ed says. “So you could’ve been the first person to get ‘Instagram’ written as the cause of death on their certificate.”

Roy heaves himself up off of the bed and pads over towards the bathroom. “You and I both know that the first was some tragic hipster who wanted to make a slideshow of skydiving and forgot to pull his chute.”

“I don’t think you got hugged enough as a child,” Ed says. He isn’t moving out of the doorway.

“I didn’t,” Roy says. Slowly, to cover his hesitation, he takes a step closer.

Instead of shifting aside, Ed hops twice to cover the space between them and then flings both arms around Roy’s chest.

“There,” he says, squeezing. “That’s one out of your lifetime hug deficit. C’mere, dumbass.”

He hops over to the sink counter and starts banging drawers out and then back in. Before Roy has time to comment that their next-room neighbors probably won’t appreciate that—and then time to remember that their next-room neighbors are most likely still downstairs, reveling in James Cameron’s extraordinary budget—Ed is holding up a little yellow tube in triumph.

“Rich people think of everything,” he says.

“Except the poor, I suppose,” Roy says.

“Do you need another hug?” Ed asks, and somehow it sounds like a threat.

Roy wakes from a wretched dream about Ed falling off of the pier, over and over, clutching a huge, heavy bottle of Neosporin to his chest as he goes. Sometimes he has both legs, and sometimes he has only the right, and sometimes he doesn’t have any legs at all.
When Roy’s eyes will focus on the shapes in the shadows, he directs them towards the clock.

5:50.

Could be worse.

He blinks, rubs at his eyes with the back of his wrist, and blinks again.

5:51.

Progress.

“Jesus fuck,” Ed mumbles as Roy tries—evidently without success—to slip to the edge of the bed and subtly disentangle himself from the sheets. “…time s’it?”

“Unholy o’clock,” Roy says.

Ed snuffles and rolls over, pressing his face into the pillow. “Go back t’sleep.”

“I can’t.”

“S’easy, just read Hegel. Zaps your brain. Knocks you out.”

“I don’t feel comfortable using German philosophers without a prescription,” Roy says.

Ed groans. “Can’t fuckin’ believe you. ’F you get cut, d’you bleed sass?”

“Purer than maple syrup,” Roy says, sorting through his suitcase for a dark clothes-blob that feels like denim.

“Jus’ lie down quiet for a while ’n you’ll get tired.”

“It’s fine,” Roy says.

“Be that way,” Ed mumbles.

“It’s the only way I know,” Roy says.

Whatever Ed says next gets lost in the bedclothes, so Roy dons his jeans, changes his shirt, finds some socks, and makes a break for it.

———

“Hey,” Chad says.

“Hey,” Roy says. “You’re looking nice this morning, Chad—oh, but no homo. That makes it okay, right? You mind if I make some coffee? Did you make sure to get no-homogenized milk?”

Chad appears to be at a loss for words.

Roy opens the cabinet and considers the options.

“Sumatran?” he says. “Fucking sweet.”
Maybe he’s out of line. Maybe he’s out of his mind. He can hear his pulse in his ears, counting down the seconds. It’s a pity hourglasses went out of style; nothing conveys the sheer, inevitable futility of human existence quite like sliding grains of sand. Anyone who’s ever tried to get a handful of beach will feel the cold brush of the end against their skin as they watch the trickle narrow into nothing.

In just his socks, he goes out onto the deck with his coffee. He sets the cup down on one of the chairs and climbs up onto the balcony railing to sit; when he’s steady, he picks up the mug again. He thinks about dopamine and distance and the fact that people always leave you without warning, no matter how long in advance you know, because the human brain is incapable of preparing to be bereaved. He thinks about how he could post cell phone pictures to Facebook of this sunrise over the lake—and how he could take pictures only for himself, to preserve it, to encapsulate even just a single frame. But if he doesn’t—if he doesn’t even try to pin it down—he’s the sole curator of this moment’s memory, and the riot of sherbet-orange in the sky, bleeding pink into the water, is his and his alone.

When the coffee mug is empty, and the sky has claimed the sun, Roy goes back in and pours himself enough mojo juice to make Chad audibly choke on a comment. Armed and ready to double-fist his caffeine for the day, Roy goes into the living room and selects one of the newspapers he was attempting to read yesterday.

It’s remarkable, really, how Ed takes up so much space—headspace, physical space, percentages of the mattress. It’s like what you’re supposed to do when faced with a cougar—make yourself seem bigger, louder, and more aggressive than you are, to make the higher predator think you’re not worth fighting. But then… somehow it’s when Ed’s at his quietest that he’s the most enthralling—when his head’s tilted just a little to the side, and his eyes are so sharp they look like candle flames caught for just an instant.

And here’s Roy, liberated momentarily both from the co-conspirator and the ruse, gracing him with half a dozen further thoughts.

At eight, he goes back into the kitchen, studiously ignores Chad’s judgmental and/or extremely worried stare, and starts hunting through the refrigerator and the embarrassingly well-stocked pantry. Roy’s never owned a waffle iron in his life, but Mr. and Mrs. Treavor found it necessary to purchase one for their cabin.

Mansion-cabin. Cabin on crack. There ought to be a word for this precise category of excessive expenditure; there’s probably one in German. Something to the effect of stupid-filthy-rich-entertainment-house, with a lot more spit and some umlauts. They could put it on their Welcome mat. Maybe with some edelweiss. And a little cartoony cougar. The hills are alive with the sound of screaming…!

There is a remote possibility that Roy has had a tad bit too much caffeine.
He takes the fruits of his labors upstairs and deposits the plate on Ed’s nightstand.

“Eat fast,” he says. “It’s going to get cold.”

Ed peers at him from within the labyrinth of golden bedhead. “…s… what?”

“I made you a waffle,” Roy says.

“…waff…?”

“From scratch,” Roy says.

“…nh?”

“Turns out it’s a lot harder than putting an Eggo in the toaster oven,” Roy says.

Ed gazes at him uncomprehendingly for another moment before swiveling his line of sight to the food.

“Oh,” he says. “Waffle.”

Roy honestly can’t resist patting his head—or at least the halo of hair, which is about the only thing he can reach. “I’ll get your coffee.”

By eleven, half of the group has sojourned their way off on a scenic nature hike, from which Roy and Ed very cordially abstain. The other half is still in bed. There are rumors that someone from that cadre of film buffs thought it was a fine idea to put ‘The Ring’ on at two-thirty, and all involved parties swore off sleep forever.

In any case, it means Roy and Ed have no competition for the deck chairs. Ed doesn’t really need a second one to put his feet up on, since the feet in question only barely reach past the edge of the one he’s lying on, but Roy decides it’s kinder not to say anything.

“Yo,” Ed says after almost a whole uninterrupted paragraph of Tom Clancy. “Why’d you make me breakfast?”

“Because it’s a nice thing to do,” Roy says. “Such as, for instance, just as an entirely random example, letting a strapping young man read a single page of a novel in silence.”

“Fuck you,” Ed says. “And your waffle.”

“How was it?” Roy asks.


“I’m glad to hear that,” Roy says.

Ed fiddles with his hoodie drawstrings for a grand total of twenty seconds.

“You read slow,” he says.
“I’m sorry, Your Majesty,” Roy says. “You may hereby clap me in irons, although I humbly request that you let me keep the book while I’m in prison.”

“I’ll make sure the guy in the next cell is a rambler,” Ed says.

This time he plays with the drawstrings for sixty-three seconds. If Roy’s being generous, it’s almost sixty-four.

“How do we even know we’re doing this right?” Ed asks. And then, because Ed has all the subtlety of a freight train careening into a Whoopie cushion factory, he clears his throat and says, “I mean, what’s being in love with a guy even like?”

“It’s exactly the same as being in love with anyone,” Roy says.

It’s the way Ed avoids his eyes in favor of picking at a loose stitch in the sweatshirt pocket—that’s how he knows, once and for all.

“It’s the usual,” Roy says. “The agony and the ecstasy, and if you’re talented you can turn it into Sistine Chapels, but most people just sort of slowly melt. Their laughter lights the stars, and you learn every constellation, and if you’re very lucky, they’re looking at you through a telescope, too.”

Ed clears his throat. “I don’t think I’m lucky.”

“You don’t believe in luck,” Roy says.

“Neither do you,” Ed says.

“Which is good,” Roy says, “because I’m not lucky either.”

Ed slumps a little lower in his chair. In another minute, he’s going to disappear into his hood. “You talk like you’ve tried it.”

“Being in love with a guy?” Roy says.

Ed nods.

“Once,” Roy says.

Ed peeks at him over the hood’s edge. “Oh.”

“The one I told you about,” Roy says. “With the wife.”

Ed’s wince would probably be visible from space. “Oh.”

Roy is not destined ever to get through the first chapter of this fucking novel. He drops it onto the next chair over. “Long story short, we were up all night packing so he could leave for Oregon in the morning, and Gracia had passed out on the couch, and when the sun came up, and we had one suitcase left to go, I told him. He said he was sorry, and I said that was stupid, because it wasn’t his fault, and why would he even say that? And he said it was what he would have said about anyone I’d fallen for that I could never have. So I went to go cry in the bathroom, but we’d packed all the towels, and then I had to drive them all the way to the airport with Gracia asking why I looked like shit. And when he hugged me right before they went through security, he whispered that he hoped he didn’t have to say it, but nothing was different, and nothing ever would be, and he’d love me as long as there were stars in the sky and idiots in the world and weird parts of my
hair that wouldn’t lie down. Then I learned that there are few experiences quite as humiliating as sobbing in an airport bathroom.” He picks up Tom Clancy again. “Just for future reference.”

“I don’t get you,” Ed says.

No, you don’t, Roy thinks, looking at the neat little serifs on the letters on the page. If I have anything to say about it, no one ever will again.

“You’ve got all this—misery,” Ed says, “but you don’t really touch on it, you just sort of—” He strikes the heel of his left hand with the plane of his right. “Glance it. And you’re not even bitter; it’s like you’re just… tired. Like the bitterness sort of went stale and turned into wryness, and now that’s how you keep yourself afloat.”

There’s a crease in the cover of the book from where Roy’s been gripping it.

“Actually,” he says lightly, “I think you get me pretty well.”

Ed sinks a little lower into his hoodie still. If it wasn’t for his hair, it might be difficult to see him in there. “That’s not what I wanted you to say.”

“By all means,” Roy says. “Enlighten me, and I’ll say it.”

Ed sighs. “I want you to say it’s all just a big cynical joke, and you’re secretly really happy with how things are and where you’ve been and where you’re going. I mean, you’re smart, and even though you’re kind of a douchebag, you’re not really, because you care a lot about people, underneath all the wiseass shit. I figure maybe you’re like me with that stuff, where it’s partly ‘cause if you stay all prickly on the outside, nobody will find out you’re actually pretty squishy under all the spines, and then nobody’ll pry you open and cut you up and serve you up as sushi.”

Roy swallows. “I’ve… never had hedgehog nigiri.”

“Sea urchin, dumbass,” Ed says. He glares balefully over the edge of his hood. “Did you just hijack my metaphor to compare me to a hedgehog?”

“Possibly,” Roy says. “Hedgehogs are adorable.”

Ed pouts. “Yeah, well, I’m not.”

“Don’t be absurd,” Roy says.

Ed smiles thinly. “Why, Mr. Mustang,” he says. “Are you hitting on me?”

This is already ranking high on the most awkward exchanges of Roy’s life, so he lets the wind have caution; it’s not capable of getting much worse. “Rather clumsily, but I seem to be making an attempt.”

“I’m attempting to be flattered,” Ed says. “Y’know, I think… I think maybe we spiny people should stick together.”

“But not too close,” Roy says, “or we’ll stab each other.”

“Right,” Ed says.

Roy tries to smooth the worst of the wrinkles out of the book cover.

“You think we can make more coffee without Chad sending us to rehab?” Ed asks.
“Fuck Chad anyway,” Roy says.

“Damn right,” Ed says.

They do not move.

“You know,” Ed says, slowly, with all the subtlety of a fireworks show in the middle of a sleepy suburb, “I mean, as far as… being… convincing… I’ve never… kissed anybody. So. Just. If… we get… put in a position where… I mean, it’s a fucking miracle it’s not Christmas, ’cause there’d be mistletoe, and you bet your ass Winry’d be a menace with that stuff. She’d appoint herself the smokey Christmas fairy or some shit.”

“If you want me to kiss you,” Roy says, looking intently at the book, “all you have to do is ask.”

“Oh, like hell,” Ed says. “And I wasn’t—saying that; I was just saying—I was giving you a heads up. And fuck you, you’re not that hot.”

Roy can’t help looking up at that. Ed is sputtering and scarlet-faced.

“And fuck you more,” he says, “because if I asked you’d probably just say no, and fuck you more than that, because it’s not like you can just kiss somebody, and I was just talking about how we were friends, and—and kisses mean shit, apparently, for people that have them and have had them. Also, germs. Fuck your mouth bacteria. I don’t want it.”

“My mouth bacteria is exquisite,” Roy says. He watches Ed’s eyelids lower for a glare. “It could be just a kiss.”

“No fucking way it could,” Ed says. “There’s no such thing. And nothing’s just an anything with you; that’s the thing I can’t… every fucking sentence that comes out of your mouth is a secret fucking coded message. All your gestures are fucking semaphore or some shit. You never say or do anything that’s not calculated and significant, and… and fuck that. I don’t want this to get more complicated, okay?”

Roy directs his gaze at the book again. “Okay.”

“Jesus, that’s exactly what I fucking mean—”

“But if you haven’t experienced it,” Roy says, “are you sure you don’t want to try just to find out?” He looks up at Ed through his eyelashes. “You know—for science?”

“You know what?” Ed says. He jackknifes out of the chair—Roy didn’t know it was possible to move like whiplash. “Fine. Fine. If you’re gonna give me shit for being a fucking virgin because I’m a recluse cripple über-geek with one friend, fine. I’m gonna give you what you’re fucking asking for. And don’t you fucking say you were just kidding, you fucking coward.”

“I wasn’t going to,” Roy says.

Ed stalks across the creaking boards and stands over him. Carefully, gingerly, making no sudden movements, Roy sets the book down again.

“Well?” Ed bites out. “What am I supposed to do?”

“Start by sitting down,” Roy says, tugging the nearest deck chair closer. “Right on the edge there.”

As Ed eyes him warily and finds a perch, Roy sits up straight and swings his knees over the side to
face his… what? Victim? Student? Idol?

He’s not quite sure anymore.

“Look at me,” Roy says. “Constantly. Just… take everything in, very quietly. Until it starts to get uncomfortable.”

“Can I blink?” Ed asks.

“Please do,” Roy says. Ed is staring at him so hard he feels like he’s being flayed alive.

Ed’s mouth pulls down into a frown, and thence into a scowl. “What am I looking for?”

“You’re not looking ‘for’,” Roy says. “You’re just looking.”

“What am I looking at?”

“You’re just… looking.”

“What the fuck, Roy?”

“Love is less a transitive verb than it is a state of being,” Roy says.

“Bullshit,” Ed says.

Roy is, naturally, obligated to stare back. There’s a line dug in between Ed’s eyebrows where the pout has drawn them together. The wisps right along his hairline are fine and airy and butter-pale, and there’s a tiny upturn to his nose. When his mouth starts to twist like that, it always means he’s screwing up his courage to blurt something out.

“And how do you know so much about love, anyway?” Ed asks. “Your one love story there kinda spiraled out of control, and it wasn’t even… I mean, it was just you, wasn’t it? Is it even a love story if it’s one-sided?”

“It’s a story with love in it,” Roy says. “And, for your information, that is not the only time I’ve had the experience. I’ve starred in a few love stories that were requited. How else do you think I learned how to kiss in the first place?”

“You don’t have to love someone to kiss ’em,” Ed mutters. He’s staring at Roy’s cheekbone. “Huh. You’ve got a…”

“A what?”

“A freckle. I think. Maybe it’s chocolate.”

“Maybe it’s your imagination,” Roy says.

Ed glowers. “Maybe you should shut the fuck up and put your mouth where your money is.”

“I did tell you to be quiet,” Roy says.

Ed snorts. “And I did tell you to go fuck yourself.”

Perhaps Ed’s very personality is rooted in being the most cockily pigheaded ass in the modern universe. He’s practically a barnyard of stubbornness all on his own.
But maybe—just **maybe**—Roy has a chance, now, to shut him up for a while.

“Come here,” he says, and before Ed has shaken off the overstated scowl, Roy reaches in and cups his face very gently in both hands. He runs the thumb of his right slowly up along the line of Ed’s jaw and threads just the fingertips of the left into Ed’s hair above his ear, smoothing it back over the curve, slowly tangling his fingers into it. It’s every bit as goddamn silky as it looks.

Ed swallows. Roy swipes the pad of his thumb slowly over Ed’s warming cheek, then lifts it to run it over the curve of his eyebrow next, trying to smooth out the frown lines. He brushes Ed’s bangs back, letting his fingernails graze Ed’s scalp on his temple as they slip free to swing into place again. Ed’s hair gleams in the strengthening sunlight, and his eyes dart quickly, nervously—but there’s a hunger there. Roy can just detect a bit of the flaring lust for knowledge, too, but it’s not the only emptiness that wants slaking.

“Look at me,” Roy whispers, leaning forward until their foreheads meet, until the warmth of Ed’s is seeping into his skin. Their eyelashes graze and catch every time they blink. He can hear Ed’s heartbeat; he can hear Ed’s throat swallowing once, twice, three times. Ed’s breath comes faster, lighter, and the tip of his tongue slides across his upper lip.

“S’gonna taste like coffee,” he says. He looks startled to hear himself so hoarse; he clears his throat. “’Y’know.”

“Did you miss the part where coffee is my addiction of choice?” Roy asks. “There are few tastes I love more.”

Ed tries to smile.

“Relax,” Roy says. “It’s not going to hurt. It’s just a kiss.”

“I already won that argument,” Ed says.

“I beg to differ,” Roy says.

“Douche,” Ed says. He licks his lip again. “I—what are we waiting for?”

“Excruciation,” Roy says.

“I didn’t realize this whole kissing thing was so sadomasochistic,” Ed says. “Or is that just with you?”

“The longer we sit here,” Roy says, “the tenser you’ll be, and the more heightened your senses, and the more explosive the sensations.”

“I don’t want to explode,” Ed says. “I just want you to fucking kiss me so I’m not an unscientific loser-virgin anymore.”

“You’re the most scientific person I know,” Roy says. “And you’re not a loser.”

“You can sweet-talk me later,” Ed says. “And I do mean ‘can’, as in ‘will be physically capable of’, ’cause I know you won’t.”

“I wasn’t aware that you had such a firm grasp on the events of the future,” Roy says.

“I cannot believe,” Ed says, grinding his teeth audibly, “that we are sitting here, breathing in each other’s fucking exhaled CO₂, and you won’t fucking **shut up** long enough to give me one fucking
kiss for experimental refere—*mmf."

He tries to articulate another syllable against Roy’s mouth before he finally gets the hint and gives up.

It’s about what Roy might have expected after that—Ed doesn’t know what he’s doing and doesn’t especially seem to care; Roy presses in closer, curling all five fingers into his ought-to-be-impossible hair. Ed’s mouth is hot and warm and smooth and pliable, and he tastes overpoweringly of coffee and maple syrup. Slowly, carefully, gently—he’ll balk if he’s forced into anything—Roy nudges at his chin with a few knuckles to coax him into tilting his head. Their
lips slot together, fitting as perfectly, as **effortlessly**, as their shoulders did last night. Ed makes a soft noise deep in his throat and pushes back, fisting his right hand in Roy’s shirtfront and dragging him in closer; they knock teeth, and he startles, but he’s not deterred for long.

Roy thinks it wiser to keep the whole thing relatively chaste for now—and favoring the corner of Ed’s mouth, then the meat of his bottom lip, then drawing back enough to breathe on the wetness before diving back in makes **Ed quake** under his hands, so he’s not sure the poor kid could handle much more.

Except that just as he’s considering pulling away and saying something insufferably smug, Ed’s hands flatten on his chest, slide slowly and deliberately up over his collarbones, skate up the sides of his neck, and clench in his hair. Roy tenses a little—just to see if he can move back, just to test the possibility of retreat—and finds himself securely trapped. The way Ed’s grip tugs on his hair follicles makes his whole scalp tingle, and if he wants to pull free, he’s going to have to **wrench** himself away. There may be casualties in the form of bald spots. There may be tears, and they may not be Ed’s.

*Shit.*

Ed twists in closer still; there are only inches left between their bodies, and someone’s going to fall off of the edge of his deck chair soon. Every time they breathe, their chests collide, and Ed is a **dangerously** quick study. Roy should have known. Roy should have known better than this.

That’s the story of his life, isn’t it?

Ed bites his bottom lip—**hard**, and the gorgeous dart of pain ripples straight down Roy’s spine and twists into another scrap of kindling for the embers in his stomach—and then draws back. Roy opens his eyes. His face is threatening to burst into flame, and his knuckles appear to be bone-white where his hand is clenched in Ed’s hair.

Ed swallows. His lips are a terrible, terrible, tantalizing dark red right now, flushed and swollen and gleaming wet. His eyes flick up to meet Roy’s, then away, and his grasp on Roy’s hair loosens in little fits and starts, uncertainly.

“Well,” he says. His voice cracks; he withdraws one hand to cough into his fist. “**Well.** That was—interesting.”

Roy’s blood is beating in his ears, in his fingertips, in his toes, in his groin, in his throat; his heart rocks forward against his sternum three times to every breath. “Ah. Educational, I hope.”

Ed’s other hand drops away from the nape of Roy’s neck; he folds both arms tightly over his chest and curls around them, sitting back. “Yeah. Yeah, not bad.”

Roy nods.

Ed uncrosses his arms long enough to pull his sleeves down over his hands and then huddles up again.

Roy feels giddy, and mortified, and kind of like his heart is hurling itself over and over again on sharp rocks. There’s no room left in the muddle for cowardice. “I think we just fucked it up.”

“I dunno,” Ed says, looking intently at the deck between his feet. “Did we?”

“You were right,” Roy says. There’s a vague mist of resignation to it; admitting that to Ed will probably never be pleasant. “There’s no such thing as ‘just a kiss’.”
“Oh,” Ed says in a very small voice.

Ed doesn’t know what he’s doing. Ed doesn’t know what he wants. Ed is here to keep an eye on Winry and take a breath of fresh air—Ed is here to be liberated from the close, chemically-laced little universe of the lab. Ed is here to be free, for a few days. Ed is here to stop thinking, just this once.

And that’s why Roy’s here, too, really. But somewhere along the line—somewhere in between falling into a lake with him and this morning, this moment with his guts squeezing and his heart tripping and his head banging like there’s a door in it that he can’t afford to open—

Somewhere along the line, he went from tolerating Ed to liking him. Somewhere along the line, all the quirks and weird foibles started to be strangely charming. At some point in the last three days, Roy started to care what Ed thinks of him, and then he started to care what Ed feels.

Kissing him gouged a hole in that door like Jack’s fucking hatchet in *The Shining*.

He can’t open that fucking door.

It wouldn’t be fair.

And he cares now—about Ed. He cares enough to know that he has to get up out of this chair and walk across this deck and go back inside and pick up a newspaper and pretend so fiercely that they both forget this happened.

He has to. He has to, and he’s strong enough, isn’t he? He’s good enough for this. It’s not too much to ask. For fuck’s sake, he has to; it’s the only choice he won’t regret.

He just has to get up. That’s all.

Seconds pass. He can almost hear the ticking; his own breaths echo in his ears.

He doesn’t move a muscle.

Ed buries his face in both hands. His bangs slip forward and drape against the ragged hems of that damn hoodie’s worn sleeves.

“All right,” he says. “Awesome. I fucking told you so. Are you happy now?”

“But particularly,” Roy says.

The snarl sounds weak. “Oh, fuck you.”

“I really don’t think that would be wise,” Roy says, “given the trend here.”

“I should’ve figured you’d turn out to be a fucking asshole,” Ed says, and before Roy can make a feeble attempt at a defense, Ed’s on his feet, and then he’s halfway across the deck, and then he’s somehow managing to slam a sliding glass door behind him.

Roy gets through a whole chapter of Tom Clancy. Something is rotten in the state of ’Murricah, and the intrepid ex-Navy SEAL and the hot FBI chick are tasked with setting it right, which Roy
imagines that they will probably do without even having to stab anyone through an arras. Presumably several things will get blown up at dramatic moments, however, and five bucks says that one of those things is a car. Before he hits the back cover, someone will have said “Time is running out!”, there will have been at least one high-speed chase with slightly confusing descriptions of vehicles and directions, and Rugged Hero and Agent Nice Rack will almost certainly have hooked up.

As he turns the page that reveals the second chapter heading, he hears the sliding glass door dragging open, and he can’t help the way his head snaps up. Even while trying to distract himself by skimming through the text, he’s thought of a hundred-thousand things to say—a billion variants and permutations of sorry and it’s not your fault and you don’t understand. Even with the antics of the cardboard cutouts dancing through his mind’s eye, he’s sifted through the possibilities and found a few gentle ways to say Ed, believe me, I’m a disease.

But it’s not Ed—it’s… Treavisor?

He saunters up from the side where Ed’s deck chair was, pulls it back a little ways from Roy’s, comes around the side, and sits down. It does not escape Roy’s notice that he sits like a dude, with his legs opened wide and his feet firmly planted. He folds his hands and props his elbows on his knees. It is a tragic commentary that bedhead looks slovenly, not adorable, on everyone except Ed.

“Hey,” Treavisor says. He lifts his chin at the book in Roy’s hands. “Any good?”

“No,” Roy says.

“Yeah,” Treavisor says. “My dad really likes them, but I’m, like… My mom wouldn’t let me keep any Stephen King stuff here, because my sister read one once when we were here over Christmas, and then there was a huge storm that night, and she wouldn’t stop crying and stuff.” He pauses, contemplatively. “She’s twelve. And dumb.”

“Stephen King is pretty scary,” Roy says. “I used to get nightmares.”

“Same,” Treavisor says. He pauses again, glancing back at the house, and then looks at Roy like Roy is a leopard without spots—not unthinkable, but perhaps unheard of. “So… Winry’s trying to figure out why Ed banged all the cabinets in the kitchen one by one and then practically kicked a hole in the staircase.”

Roy should be a hot air balloon with a hole in it for Halloween; he’s so intimately acquainted with sinking feelings that he’d be brilliant at staying in character. “If there’s any property damage, I’ll pay for it.”

“Nah, nah, it’s good,” Treavisor says, waving a hand. “It’s nothing more than, like, a sleepover full of twelve-year-old girls does a couple times a year, anyway.”

“If you’re sure,” Roy says, which is more graceful than It’d have to be on a gradual payment plan, though, because right now I can’t afford it.

Treavisor looks at his hands and picks at one of his fingernails for a second before he glances up. “Just… y’know. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Roy says. That’s not even a lie, anymore; not really—he always envisions fine as a sort of baseline, like a synonym for surviving. It’s not the same thing as well, or even as okay, but it doesn’t pretend to be.

“Ed seemed real upset,” Treavisor says slowly. “That’s all. I thought maybe you guys had a
Roy shrugs. The lies are getting progressively more difficult, which is counterintuitive, isn’t it? “Trouble in paradise; what can I say?” The secret is always a sliver of the truth—“It’s my fault.”—followed by an egregious falsehood: “I wanted to give him a minute to cool off before I went to apologize. It’ll be all right.”

Trevisor smiles tentatively. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Roy says.

Trevisor smiles a little wider and releases a deep breath. “Okay. It’s just… I mean, jeez, you guys are really cool. I like you a lot. And you’re always so happy together, it’s like… if something happened *here* that messed that up, I’d feel like shit.”

“It’s fine,” Roy says. “Don’t worry about it. Totally my bad. And Ed’s just dramatic; he’ll settle down.”

‘Dramatic’ isn’t quite the right word for him—‘drastic’, maybe. Ed doesn’t do the slow descent from numbness into abjection that Roy has known for as long as he can remember; Ed feels things more powerfully than anyone he’s ever met. It’s not that Ed *makes* his emotions a big deal; his emotions *are*, and it’s not like he can change that.

“All right,” Trevisor says, standing. He’s still smiling; Roy forces one for him in return. “Just lemme know if I can help, okay?”


Roy presses the tip of his tongue against the point of his eyetooth to stop himself from adding, *Maybe if you pushed me into the lake again, and this time you held me under.*

Nature begins to call insistently right as a series of unseasonably dark clouds roll in. Roy packs up his riveting literature and heads inside. He leaves said riveting literature in the living room and has already forgotten where by the time he reaches the top of the stairs.

The door to their room isn’t locked, which at least is a start. The door to their bathroom is closed, however, which is substantially more ominous.

Roy hesitates, braces himself, goes over, and knocks. Nothing. He tries the handle, and it doesn’t yield. He knocks again.

“Hey,” he says. “I had at least a liter of coffee.”

“Fuck you,” Ed calls through the door—but his voice is steady, and there’s none of the anger in it, and none of the hurt. “Go get a bucket.”
“What are you doing in there?”

“What’s her advice?”

“I dunno. I hid as soon as she got started on her whole ‘Ed, I know you’ve been through more than I have in a lot of ways, but hear me out on this’ shit.”

“I didn’t see her on my way up. You could hide under the bed.”

“Fuck you. I’m not that small.”

Roy looks back at the space between the box-spring and the floor, does a quick distance estimation, and decides he’s going to walk away from that battle. “Okay, you can stay in there and watch me pee.”

“You’re fucking weird.”

“I’m aware.”

The door opens. Ed glares up at him. Roy steps back, and Ed moves past him.

“Hurry up,” Ed says. “Winry can smell fear.”

Roy wants to laugh it off, but—“You’re… afraid?”

Ed’s eyes widen, and his arms wave. “Jesus, Roy, have you ever had to sit through one of her life-coaching sessions? Don’t fucking judge.”

Roy holds both hands up for peace and slips into the bathroom, closing the door quietly behind him.

When he steps back out, Ed’s sprawled on the bed, arms folded, chin resting on them, apparently examining the carpet.

“All yours,” Roy says, gesturing back.

“Look,” Ed says—to the carpet, really, but the normal rules of polite conversation don’t tend to apply to Ed. “Winry said a couple things before I escaped, and I was thinking… Just… She said, y’know, you gotta think about the big picture sometimes, and not let the little shit ruin it if the whole thing is mostly good. And… I mean, obviously that was meant to be, like, relationship advice, but it’s still pretty true, right? What… happened, what we did this morning—that was a little thing. Right? And by and large this whole bigger thing that we’re doing is working pretty great, so let’s just… not get hung up on that, maybe. Sound okay?”

“Sounds perfect,” Roy says, and the lies are getting harder. “I was thinking of going on another hike. In the opposite direction from mountain lion territory, that is. Watching the signal bars on my phone the whole time.”

Ed makes a face that speaks volumes.

“Fair enough,” Roy says.

“Nah,” Ed says. “It sounds all right, just… I mean, half the reason I came was to hang out with Win, and first chance I get, I end up hiding in the bathroom. Figure I’ll go catch up with her while
everybody’s out, and she’s not tryin’ to be all Martha Stewart-y and shit. Sometimes she does weird shit to my hair, though; you gotta promise not to laugh.”

“I promise I’ll find an excuse that makes it look like I’m laughing at something else,” Roy says. “How about that?”

“Deal,” Ed says.

When he’s halfway up the hill on the other side of the house, his will breaks, and he calls.

Riza picks up on the third ring. “Where are you?”

“This guy from the lab grew up with a girl who’s dating a guy whose parents are stupid-rich and have a cabin out here,” Roy says. “And by ‘cabin’, I mean ‘bigger than your dad’s old place’.”

“Exactly how did you get involved in this game of Seven Degrees of Separation?” Riza asks.

“By being a fucking idiot,” Roy says.

“You’re not an idiot,” Riza says.

“You know better than anyone that that’s not true,” Roy says.

“You know better than anyone that you’re not enough of a rhetorician to talk me into calling you an idiot,” Riza says, “so give up. What happened?”

“I—kissed—him. I kissed him. It was stupid. I’m fucking stupid.”

“Roy. You… the… guy the girl is dating, or—?”

“The guy from lab.”

“Does the guy from lab have a significant other?”

“No. And he never has; he’s never dated anyone. He’d never even… it was his first kiss, Riza, and now every single time somebody touches him, he’ll think of how terrible it was, and how terrible I am, and how terrible he felt, and I’ve ruined his love life forever, and I really—I think—”

“He didn’t like it?”

“Well, I don’t… know. That’s not the point; it doesn’t even matter. It’s—complicated.”

“Complicated how?”

“We had to fake involvement to get here and have a free vacation. Which, for the record, we both desperately needed; he’s worse than I am. I don’t know if he sleeps. He’s the one with the Cheetos.”

“I remember the one with the Cheetos,” Riza says slowly. “And… honestly, the one with the Cheetos is the only one I remember, Roy.”

He rubs at his forehead. “What’s that supposed to mean?”
“He’s the only person in your lab that you’ve ever talked about at length.”

“So? He’s bizarre. And he’s always there. And he eats my food all the time.”

“It’s all right to be attracted to him,” Riza says, and Roy’s heart does a weird somersaulting thing not unlike the feat Ed executed during their flight from the cougar. “And I imagine that the situation you’re in would only heighten that feeling, and confuse it a little, and acting on it would intensify it more—”

Roy stops walking before he can trip on something and break his face. “What the hell are you saying?”

“Did he push you away?”

“No, but—”

“Did he tell you not to?”

“He told me to, but—”

“Body language?”

“I mean, he literally requested it; I’m not—but—”

“Did you have any indication that he did not want to be kissed by you?”

“Well,” Riza says, delicately, “but you cannot possibly believe that.”

“We called a truce,” Roy says. “I think he wanted to deck me, right after the fact. He probably still wants to deck me. I never took you for a romantic, Riza—trust me, you shouldn’t start now. He doesn’t want me—if he wants anything, I don’t think he knows what it is, and I certainly don’t think he’d know how to go about getting it, and I can’t…”

He looks up at the net of intertwining pine needles silhouetted against the gray.

“You can’t what, Roy?” Riza asks softly.

“I can’t do it again,” Roy says. “I can’t save up all that love for someone who doesn’t want it, or doesn’t know how to use it, or can’t or won’t give back. Once was enough. Lesson learned. It is not fucking better to have loved and lost; it’s better to let it pass you by and not feel like you’re scraped out hollow and frozen through.”

Riza takes a deep breath. “How do you feel now?”
“Like shit,” Roy says.

“But you’re decided,” Riza says. “It will hurt less to hold back now and wall him out and cope with his hurt at your mixed signals than it would to let him in and risk it falling through.”

“Yes,” Roy says.

“Hm,” Riza says.

“What’s ‘hm’?” Roy asks.

He can almost see her shrugging. “You wouldn’t have called me if you didn’t want me to disagree with you.”

“Remind me why you didn’t go into psychology?” Roy says.

Riza scoffs. “Not nearly enough guns.”

Roy keeps trekking uphill until he crests the rise, and the trees fall away into another one of those indescribable vistas. It’s funny to think that there are places like this out here all the time, no matter where he is, no matter what he’s doing—that the world keeps being magnificent without him. It hardly seems fair, but then, he supposes he’s not especially magnificent himself, so it’s not as though he’s earned a right to it.

There aren’t any palatable-looking logs or stumps available in the vicinity, so he climbs up into one of the pines right at the edge—just a little ways; just high enough for a sturdy branch facing outward, where he can lean in against the trunk and stay still enough for the squirrels to forget he’s there.

He sits, drinking in the view and savoring the silence, until his ass is starting to go numb, which happens to be right about the same time that the moisture in the air solidifies into actual rain.

Well, this is going to be unpleasant. And fairly cathartic. But mostly unpleasant.

Roy holds in a sigh as he jumps down, and the damp leaves squish and scuttle, and then he raises his head to the dripping sky and lets out his breath as a cloud of mist.
“Oh, my gosh!” brown-pigtail girl cries as Roy lets his soggy self in through the sliding glass door. “We barely missed the rain! Are you okay?”

“Of course,” Roy says, toeing off his shoes. “It’s just water; it’s not going to hurt me.”

“You could catch cold,” the girl says, and the guy with both arms wrapped around her like an affectionate squid nods vigorously.

Roy peels off his socks and rolls up his soaked jeans. He’s probably going to leave a trail on the carpets, but at least there won’t be footprints this way. “I’m really all right.”

As he slogs up the stairs, he wonders—is it cynical of him to ask himself whether they’d worry about him if he was waiting on them at a restaurant? Is context the only thing that makes them care?

He opens the door to the bedroom, sopping shoes in hand, and discovers Ed and Winry sitting on the bed. Ed is still wearing his hoodie but has stripped down to his boxers, and there’s a tiny set of wrenches and screwdrivers and a small jar of machine oil in the nightstand. By this point, however, Winry has moved on to the project of painting her fingernails, and Ed is holding the little polish pot for her while she works over a paper towel.

They both look up at Roy pausing in the doorway. Ed goes fire-engine red but doesn’t make any move to abandon the nail polish.

“Oh, hi,” Winry says brightly. “I can finish this somewhere else, if you want.”

“No, no,” Roy says. “Sorry to intrude.”

“It’s your room,” Winry says.

“And Ed’s,” Roy says. “And any of Ed’s visitors’, by which token it’s really yours, too.”

“Shut up and put some dry clothes on before you get pneumonia,” Ed says.

“Yes, sir,” Roy says, crossing to his suitcase.

Ed rolls his eyes and hunches a little lower over the nail polish container. “What are you, five?”

“Seven, at least,” Roy says, collecting a new outfit. “Give me some credit.”

“Six and a half,” Ed says. “That’s my final offer.”

“Done,” Roy says.

“I can’t deal with you two,” Winry says. “How does the rest of your lab put up with this?”

“Sometimes they threaten us with beakers of acid,” Roy says.

“It doesn’t usually work,” Ed says. “We know they’re too chicken to do it.”

“True,” Roy says. He gathers his armful of fabric and starts for the bathroom. “As you were.”
“Right,” Winry says as he closes the door. “Where was I? Oh, yeah—so Paninya changed her mind about engineering, and now she wants to go to law school, and I’m like, ‘Okay, but you do realize that you can’t just decide to get into law unless you’re Reese Witherspoon and also fictional,’ but she seems to have her heart set on it now. At least until next year, when she’ll probably realize her calling is actually, like, architecture or something.”

“I read that the average college student changes their major four times or something,” Ed says.

“So if you account mathematically for us sticking to ours,” Winry says, “that allows Paninya ten career changes?”

“Well… sort of.”

“Crap.”

“Maybe law’ll stick. She does like to argue.”

“So do you, and I don’t see you buying LSAT prep books.”

“That’s ’cause I like free-form arguing.”

“What you like,” Winry says, “is cheesy banter with your boyfriend.”

It’s remarkable that Roy can almost hear him blushing. “Shut up, Win.”

There’s a pause, and then Winry lowers her voice. If Roy didn’t have his ear pressed to the bathroom door, she might succeed in her quest for inaudibility, but as it is, he can just make out the whisper.


“Yes, I did,” Ed says. “He’s the same guy I told you about, who kept trying to take my Cheetos away.”

“Bless him,” Winry says. “But you said the Cheetos-stealing guy was a—I think I’m quoting here—‘colossal douchenozzle with boundary issues and a list of complexes longer than the biochem textbook I use as a doorstop’.”

“Wow,” Ed says. “I can’t… I can’t believe you remembered that exactly.”

“You don’t usually get quite that colorful.”

“Well… he can be a colossal douchenozzle and still be boyfriend material. Evidently. I guess.”

“Okay, fine. But… well, jeez, Ed. How long’s it been?”

“Um. I dunno. Couple months?”

“Jeez, Ed.”

“Maybe if you texted more, I’d remember to tell you shit.”

“You could remember to tell me about a boyfriend. You guys aren’t even in a relationship on Facebook.”

“Fuck Facebook.”
“Point taken, but—I’m just… worried. That’s all.”

“You worry too much.”

“I know. But if you don’t… just… are you guys… serious?”

“…uh. I dunno. Sometimes.”

“What?”

“Mostly we’re stupid nerds, but. Like. We’ve had some serious conversations, too. I guess it’d be weird if w—”

“No, Ed, I meant—is the relationship serious? Are you serious about each other? Are you serious about spending a long time together? Maybe… I don’t know, years, forever?”

“Nothing’s forever, Win,” Ed says slowly. “Not even stars, y’know.”

“Matter is,” Roy calls through the door.

Winry makes a sound best approximated as Eep!, and Ed sighs loudly.

“I didn’t know you could hear!” Winry wails.

Roy puts his head around the door so that she can see he’s smiling. “To answer your question,” he says, “we’re figuring it out as we go. So far, so good.”

She nods mutely, both hands pressed over her mouth, cheeks bright pink and eyes tremendous.

“Careful,” Roy says, gesturing to her nail polish. “You’re probably not dry.”

“Neither are you,” Ed says. “Get back in there, y’damn eavesdropper.”

“I ain’t droppin’ no eaves, sir,” Roy says.

“I said get.”

“You would make a terrible Gandalf,” Roy says. He closes the door securely before he adds, “Especially since you’re Hobbit-sized.”

“Ed, sit down!” Winry howls.

That night, they have lasagna, and Ed eats an incomprehensible amount and ends up lying on the couch with his head in Roy’s lap, clutching at his stomach. Everyone loiters around the living room aimlessly, and someone plugs their iPod in to the stereo but keeps the volume low so that the assembled company can chat continuously about nothing in particular. Ed’s hair drapes down Roy’s knee like gold silk; he doesn’t know whether to make a Rapunzel reference or a Rumpelstiltskin one.

Unsurprisingly, an hour later, when Winry decides it’s make-your-own-sundae night, Ed rockets up off of the couch and instantaneously discovers a heretofore untapped chamber of his stomach. His
expression is completely solemn as he brings back a bowl of pistachio ice cream topped with caramel and toffee bits and says to Roy, “Your favorite.”

He looks scandalized when Roy very contentedly starts eating, and even more scandalized when Roy swipes up a dollop of caramel and smears it on the tip of Ed’s nose.

“You’re sweeter than ice cream,” Roy says.

“I will barf on you,” Ed says.

Instead of following through on that admittedly rather unappealing threat, though, Ed settles in next to Roy’s shoulder and obliterates an overflowing bowl of chocolate ice cream so fast Roy gets brainfreeze.

And later, as he lies very still listening to Ed toss and turn and beat the living shit out of the pillow, he thinks that he can do this. He can handle this. As long as it stays this way, as long as nothing changes, he can get through this, and he can come out on the other side more or less unscathed. He can endure it. He can.

Just so long as it stays… nice.

The moment he opens his eyes the next morning, he feels like shit.

This isn’t Well, everything kind of sucks, I guess shit either. This is There is no point there is no hope there is nothing left but waiting for the end shit, and he has just enough presence of mind left to register the low note of panic that thrums in the bottom of his chest. He knows this feeling. He knows where it leads. He knows how it ends.

This is what he runs from, every minute, every day.

He has to fight it.

He has to get up out of this bed and smile in the face of that glaring red 6:05 and make some coffee and sip it slowly and believe that he can outlast the barren wasteland inside himself.

He has to get up.

He has to.

He’s so tired.

It’s so useless.

So what if he fights back? So what if he tries? So what if he pretends to be normal, pretends to be worthwhile, pretends to be whole? He’s still going to lose. He can fake it forever, and he will not change; he can lie and don the masks and play the happy people’s stupid games—but he’ll always be less than that; he’ll always be empty; he’ll always ring false to anyone who really listens. Not that anyone does; why should they? Why should they indulge the endless jeremiads of miserable self-pity from a sniveling, sluggish little creature passing itself off as human? Why should they squander their precious time feeling sorry for a wretched ball of overwrought pathos that can’t even drag itself out of bed? Why should they give a fuck?
They shouldn’t. And they don’t.

He doesn’t move. The listlessness is overwhelming; the inertia hangs on every last centimeter of bone. His body is too heavy. It’s not worth it. Even if he hauls this sad sack of organs off of the mattress, even if he makes it all the way downstairs, even if he makes it all the way to tomorrow—he’ll still be shit. He’ll always be shit. He’ll always be fucked up in the head and torn up all over and reassembled wrongly. He’ll always be missing the little pieces that are supposed to make him all right. He can strive for wellness with the pills and the pats on the back, with the asinine incentives he makes up to tease himself and the stupid little treats—he can compensate forever, if he wants to. He’ll never be right. He’ll never have any fucking money, and he’ll never have any fucking friends, and he’ll never look at someone and catch them looking back with that expression like he holds the sun in the sky. He’ll never be somebody’s everything, because he’s nothing at all.

He’s exhausted. Not sleepy-exhausted, just… tired. He’s so damn tired. Everything aches.

He watches the numbers on the clock change. They take fucking forever. Sometimes he counts down the minutes, but he always seems to get ahead of the clock, which doesn’t make much sense at all. Sometimes he counts by Ed’s faint breaths from the other side of the bed, or from the rustlings, or from the occasional snores. It’s nice that someone can sleep.

He should get up.

But it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter if he gets up today, tomorrow, every day this week, every day this month—because there will be a day he can’t. It’s in his blood; it’s in his genes; it’s in the tricky little chemicals his brain won’t make. It’s in his DNA, bound up and twisted into every cell of him. It’s in his family history; he takes after his mother’s side, and he is doomed to fail. Isn’t it more graceful to give in to the inevitable? Isn’t there more dignity in letting go?

The clock numbers crawl on to six-thirty. To seven. To seven-fifteen. Seven-thirty. Seven forty-five.

He should get up.

Seven-fifty.

Eight.

Someone’s stirring somewhere down the hall; he should get up, and make a cup of coffee, and open up the newspaper and see people who deserve to feel like this. He should remember. He should have some perspective. He should get up, and get over himself.

Eight-oh-five.

Ten after eight.

Eleven after.

Twelve.

Ed wriggles, mumbles, stretches, and yawns. Then he says, “Holy crap, what are you still doing in bed?”

Roy could say Sleeping, but… never mind.
Silence falls like a dusting of snow, but before it can stick, Ed’s voice cuts through it—he sounds… nervous. Scared. “Roy?”

And Roy remembers that Ed’s family members have a tendency to leave or die.

“I forgot my medication,” he says.

“Oh,” Ed says. Apparently it’s too early for him to bother muffling the relief. “Well—what is it? They might have some. And if they don’t, I mean, I’ll go to the pharmacy if you want. Anywhere you get old people retiring, there’s a Walgreens on every corner. I prob’ly wouldn’t even need to get a cab.”

“I take Paxil,” Roy says.

Ed is quiet for a long moment before he says, “What’s that for?”

“It’s an antidepressant,” Roy says.

“Oh,” Ed says.

Go on, Roy thinks. Say whatever it is you’re thinking; go ahead. Reevaluate everything I’ve said and done now that you can see behind the curtain.

“Could I get your prescription refilled for you or something?” Ed asks uncertainly. “I… dunno how it works; I’ve never… I mean, I was on a shit-ton of painkillers after the hospital, and Winry’s granny hooks me up with Vicodin and shit every time I have to get used to a new leg, but…”

“I’m already in withdrawal,” Roy says. “By the time I acclimated, we’d be going home. It’s fine.”

“You always say that,” Ed says. “Have you ever meant it in your life?”

Now he’s getting it.

“Jesus fuck,” Ed says at the silence. “Can I at least get you a cup of fucking coffee or something? How do you take it? It’s—like, three and a half sugars and some milk, right?”

“How do you know that?” Roy asks.

“I’m not a dipshit,” Ed says. “And you pretty much chain-drink it if you’ve still got something running after eight in the lab.” He takes a deep breath and then swallows hard. “So… you want some?”


Ed slides off of the bed, and then there are a few indistinct noises of shifting and shuffling that Roy eventually identifies as him donning the prosthesis and then some clothes. The door opens and shuts. Footsteps move down the hall.

This, too, shall pass.

Life is short and not always awful; he has to believe in that. He has to.

He’s just so tired.
Ed sits on the floor on Roy’s side of the bed and drinks coffee with him.

“So how long’s it been?” Ed asks. “Well—if you wanna talk about it. You don’t have to. I just… thought… you might.”

“I was nineteen when I got diagnosed,” Roy says. The coffee’s good. He’s not sure if Ed made it, or Chad did. Either way, it at least convinced him to sit up against the headboard so he could pour it down his throat instead of just in his face. “I’d always sort of assumed most people felt like this, and they were just better at dealing with it. The friend with the wife is the one who talked me into trying the pills. It was Christmas our sophomore year. I was pretty much wrecked from trying to get through finals, and he brought me and Gracia both to his parents’ place for the holidays, because they lived close, and he basically sat me down in his bedroom and said ‘Look, everybody here loves you, and nobody thinks you’re a freak, and meds can’t make it any worse.’”

“People should never say that,” Ed says. “Anything can get worse.”

Roy fingers the handle of his coffee mug and shrugs a little. “He was kind of right. They don’t make it worse, really; just… different. Instead of these oscillations back and forth, where sometimes you feel okay, sometimes you feel good—and then you swing down and feel like the universe is collapsing, and you’re getting crushed, and you’re going to suffocate…it just sort of blots that out. And you’re kind of consistently… numb. Like there’s Saran wrap between you and the stuff you used to feel, and you can see that maybe you should be over the moon about something, but you just aren’t. And the bad days are bad, but they’re not as bottomless as they were. So at least I can fucking function most of the time.”

Ed swills his coffee, gazing into it for a moment before he looks up. And that look is… fearless. It’s a look like the one Maes used to give him, the no bullshit, buddy one that used to make him cave ten times out of ten.

“How bad does it get?” Ed asks.

Maybe he could take it. Maybe he could listen and get it—Ed’s been through some shit; Roy knows that now, or at least the basic contours of it. Maybe he could hear it all without passing judgment, without offering suggestions, without trying to fix something that’s built wrong. Maybe he’d understand.

There’s a shrill scream from downstairs.

Ed’s out the door like a shot, and Roy stumbles trying to follow him without upsetting the coffee cups—then stumbles some more trying to jump into yesterday’s jeans—then stumbles a little more, for good measure, because his fucking foot’s asleep—

Down the stairs, clinging to the railing so he doesn’t do a header and make this worse, whatever this is—

There’s a gleam of Ed’s ponytail going around the corner into the foyer—

Where a tall, slim Chinese kid with a long ponytail of his own is wrapping Winry up into a bearhug.

“So good to see you!” he says. “How late are we?”

The plural pronoun is the only reason Roy looks past him and notices the pretty girl standing
behind him, who’s wearing a red-and-white sundress and a bored expression.

“Only three days,” Winry says, “which is actually better than I expected, from you.”

“So cruel,” the guy says, holding a hand over his heart, “and so beautiful.”

“Save it,” Winry says, stepping back to let Treavisor bro-hug the newcomer. “Lan Fan, hi!”

“It’s nice to see you,” the girl says. “We’re sorry to arrive halfway through. Someone persistently forgot to get the car serviced, despite multiple reminders, one of which was written on his arm with Sharpie while he slept.”

“Not naming any names, mind you,” the guy says cheerfully.

“You want me to take a look at it while you’re here?” Winry says. The gleam in her eyes is slightly frightening. “It’s not the new Bimmer, is it? Tell me you brought the new Bimmer.”

“Jesus,” Ed says faintly. “Win’s moving up in the world.”

The guy turns at the sound of Ed’s voice, and his face goes startled, then soft as his gaze alights on Ed.

“Good morning,” he says, swaggering over to where they’ve been lingering by the foot of the stairs. “I know we haven’t met—I’d remember you.” He’s wearing really nice designer jeans and a shirt with just enough buttons undone that his collarbones peek through the gap when he moves. He holds out a hand. “Ling Yao. To whom do I owe the remarkable pleasure?”

“This is Ed,” Winry says as Ed lifts his hand slowly, with the air of one expecting it to be bitten. “Reme—”

“The same Ed who is the lovely Ms. Rockbell’s best friend?” Ling asks, taking Ed’s hand in his and raising it to kiss instead of to shake. “Ph.D candidate in bioengineering and staggeringly maligned by photographs that make him look only a little bit stunning?”

Ed goes red.

Roy sees red.

Lan Fan sighs.

“Yes, that Ed,” Winry says, rolling her eyes. “And that guy who wants to murder you is his boyfriend, Roy.”

“Hello, Roy,” Ling says cheerfully, and his smile doesn’t falter as Roy clasps his hand more than a bit too tightly to be friendly. “You’ll have to forgive me. Surely you know better than anyone how it feels to be simply floored by this young man’s aspect, hmm?” He beams. “But then, you’re a looker yourself—do people often walk into telephone poles trying to stare as the two of you go by?”

“Uh,” Roy says, trying to figure out whether to be furious or flattered and ending up stranded at confused. “Well—”

“Ed!” Ling says. Everything that comes out of Ling’s mouth seems to be accompanied by an exclamation point. “Aren’t you a gymnast, too?” He’s latched onto Ed’s elbow and is towing his victim down the hall before anyone’s finished blinking. “The tour can wait; all these houses are
the same, of course. You must show us your remarkable talent! What an incredible mind, to hold all these disparate things, and to be an expert in so many disciplines—do people tell you often that you’re rare?"

“You mean, like, plutonium rare, or steak rare?” Ed asks. “‘Cause I’m pretty sure I haven’t been cooked. Maybe irradiated a little. I used to get sunburned a lot.”

“You are absolutely delightful,” Ling says, sounding awed, and then Roy hears the sliding glass door being dragged open, which jolts him out of his disbelieving stupor enough to give chase.

By the time he catches up, Ling has hauled a barefoot Ed all the way outside and down off the deck, to the small patch of damp grass between the railing and the encroaching trees. For the sake of his own soles, Roy hovers on the last step of the deck stairs, still too bewildered by the proceedings to interrupt.

“Um,” Ed says, kicking at the grass with his right foot, curling his right toes, looking down at his left and then back at Roy with a flash of something not too distant from fear. “What do you want to see?”

“Anything,” Ling says breathlessly. “Regale me! Anything at all, my dear friend; anything you do will be magnificent.”

That’s the kind of attitude that can only be sustained by someone who’s never had to fail.

“O… kay,” Ed says. “Uh… lemme see.”

He swings the weight of his whole body, planting his hands on the grass, and cartwheels so lightly it’s like he’s flying, like he’s a rag doll, like he’s a whirligig suspended only by the air. He lands—putting his right foot down first; Roy can see it, now, the caution, and his heart clenches at the thought that it must be devastating to someone as vital and instinctual as Ed to have to hold himself back. Next it’s a deft handspring, then a series of should-be-impossible flips and twirls Roy doesn’t even have the vocabulary to name. Ling’s hands are clasped beneath his chin, and his eyes are shining, and as soon as Ed pauses for breath, he breaks into riotous applause.

It’s funny, isn’t it? If you look at it the right way, it’s rather hilarious—that the gestures have all been fake, and now Roy’s jealousy is scaldingly real.

It rises in his throat like bile, and he curls his hand around the bannister on the stairs as Ed, flushed and panting lightly, turns to Ling with a rueful grin.

“There’s more to it,” he says, “but it’s sorta wet out here, and I don’t wanna fall. And I need a springboard for some of it. Anyway, that’s the idea, I guess.”

“Winry’s praises don’t even begin to do you justice,” Ling says solemnly, gazing into Ed’s eyes until Ed’s cheeks erupt into a darker shade of red. “How are you even possible, my friend? Such an extraordinary being. Come, come; I won’t accept a tour from anyone else—what is worth noting here, aside from you? Is there anything that compares?”

Uncertainly, Ed wanders back towards the deck, and Ling seizes his elbow again before Roy can conjure something cutting to say. They sweep up the stairs past him, Ling already chattering about parallel bars and rings, squeezing Ed’s bicep and summoning a nervous stutter of a laugh. Roy stands very still and listens to the roar of his raging heartbeat in his ears.

He has no right. He has no claim. He chose not to; this is his own doing; he has to live with that. It wasn’t worth the risk. Ling is welcome to the gamble; he has so much less to lose.
The girl in the sundress leans against the railing beside him and sighs. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Roy says. “Ed seems to like the attention.”

The girl toes at a splinter in a nearby board, nudging it with her sandal. Fortunately Roy missed one pitfall this morning. “Ling’s like that,” she says. “He comes on so strong there’s no time to say ‘no’, but he has the attention span of a distracted gnat.”

Roy stares at her. “But don’t you mind?”

She shrugs. “He’s like a boomerang.”

Roy stares a bit more, which illuminates very little.

“Difficult to explain,” Lan Fan says, “only loosely governed by the laws of physics, and definitely not straight—but he always comes back.”

“Is that enough for you?” Roy asks slowly.

Lan Fan smiles thinly. “To be honest, I don’t know if I’d have the energy to put up with him all the time. So it’s nice to get a break.” She tucks a lock of hair back behind her ear. “It’s just too bad that he’s so attracted to people who are already taken. I think it’s the principle of wanting what you’re not supposed to have.”

“I think you’re right,” Roy says.

They stand there for another second. The waves lap soothingly against the sand.

“Want to make out?” Lan Fan asks.

Roy should never, ever, *ever* have agreed to any of this. He is never going to be the same.

He clears his throat and attempts to sound painstakingly polite. “No, thank you.”

“Okay,” Lan Fan says. “Let me know if you change your mind.”

“I’ll do that,” Roy says.

“I should probably go make sure Ling still has his clothes on,” Lan Fan says, starting back up the steps. “You want to come?”

All Roy wants is a quiet place where he can vomit several times in peace. “Sure,” he says. “Sure, yeah.”

When they top the stairs, Ling’s voice is ringing from the end of the hall: “What a splendid little place this is! Ah, and of course, Winry is so thoughtful—our room is right next to yours!”

There is a small, angry thing pulsing in the back of Roy’s throat. He thinks it’s his capacity for cold-blooded murder.

“Won’t you come see what amenities have been thoughtfully provi—”
“Ling,” Lan Fan calls loudly, “we can admire the showerhead—” Jesus, is that supposed to sound like a euphemism? “—another time. Why don’t we go do something outside? We only have two days.”

Yeah, Roy thinks. Go take a hike. Off a cliff. Onto some sharp rocks.

“You haven’t seen this showerhead!” Ling’s voice returns.

Rocks infected with a deadly and extremely fast-acting bacteria, Roy thinks avidly. In an area notoriously overrun by cougars. And bears! But they’re all immune to the terrible, extremely painful disease, so they can pick your bones clean without any adverse effects; they didn’t do anything wrong.

Has there ever been a more pathetic specimen of human being than Roy Mustang? He doubts it.

“All of you losers get down here!” Winry shouts from the foyer. “Everyone’s going out to Harrah’s to hit the arcade!”

“Everybody bring your driver’s licenses so we can get overpriced drinks!” Treavisor says.

Roy starts towards his and Ed’s room to retrieve his wallet and then hesitates as Ling drags Ed back out into the hall by his elbow.

“Let go a second,” Ed says. His whole face is bright pink, but he doesn’t look unhappy, and Roy doesn’t want to die so much as simply cease existing. “I need some fucking shoes.”

“No, you don’t,” Ling says, gazing at him. “You’re perfect just the way you are.”

“Ling,” Lan Fan says, “let the man go.”

“Jealous, my darling?” Ling asks, arm slipping free of Ed’s and winding itself around Lan Fan’s waist instead.

“Only in your sad little dreams,” Lan Fan says, pulling on Ling’s ponytail.

“I think we’ll have to settle this with a Dance Dance Revolution tournament,” Ling says.

Lan Fan’s faint smile is terrifying. “I will destroy you.”

Ling kisses her temple, and they drift down the stairs intertwined.

“What the fuck just happened?” Ed asks.

“I wish I knew,” Roy says.

Ed runs a hand down his face and shoves the door to their room open. “Two more days of this shit. Where are my fucking shoes?”

The Harrah’s philosophy, which appears to be MORE GLITZ!!!, is not ameliorating Roy’s growing headache. He should count himself lucky that there weren’t enough seats for them to join Winry, Treavisor, and Lan Fan in Ling’s BMW, given that Winry was still exalting its engine at top
volume when they all pulled into the parking garage.

Most of the couples link up at the hand immediately upon beeping the locks on their unreasonably expensive cars. Roy looks at Ed. Ed looks back.

“Race you to the token machine,” Ed says.

“You little shit,” Roy says.

Ed takes off like a shot. “Not little!”

How is it that Roy can get a surge of adrenaline just watching Ed’s hair whip behind him? How is it that the pull on his heart can be strong enough to move him?

“You are a huge pain in the ass!” he yells as he follows.

“Cover me,” Ed hisses.

“You can talk like a person,” Roy says.

“I am a person,” Ed says. “By definition, I’m always talking like a person. Jesus fuck.”

“Now you’re talking like a heathen,” Roy says.

“Just fucking cover me,” Ed says.

It’s one of those fantastic zombie-shooting games where you actually ratchet the plastic rifle to reload, and there’s a pedal to push with your foot to make your on-screen avatar duck behind objects. Roy prefers to hide and snipe, and Ed prefers to rush out into a giant cluster of zombies and fire wildly while they try to maim him, and bizarrely their strategies complement each other quite well.

“Maybe you should tell them about Jesus,” Roy says, training his sightline just past Ed’s pixelated persona. “They might decide to repent.”

“Maybe you should bitch less and shoot more,” Ed says.

“Maybe—”

“Aw, crap!”

Ed is being mobbed by zombies, and the only sensible thing to do is to go on a kamikaze zombie-pistol-whipping rampage trying desperately to save him…

…and to die horribly and end up at the dreaded Continue? countdown screen.

“Damn it,” Ed says, shoulder-bumping Roy—which, in practice, means shoulder-bumping Roy’s bicep due to the height difference.

“You want to keep playing?” Roy asks. “I’ve got more tokens.”

“I hardly think preserving the world from a dire zombie apocalypse is a waste,” Roy says.

Ed smiles ruefully up at him. That’s all he wants. All he wants is Ed’s warm eyes and the hint of a challenging grin always darting around that curving mouth; all he wants is the ease of this moment of companionability.

Why does he always fucking fall in love with people he should just be friends with? Why does he always fuck it up and make it awkward and complicate it and ruin what they have?

“Nah, it’s cool,” Ed says. “I’m going to go hit the Jurassic Park one where you have the little car and shit. It’s Al’s favorite.”

“No, you’re not!” Ling says, appearing out of nowhere to fling an arm around Ed’s shoulders. “It is time to break our fast!”

“I already had breakfast,” Ed says. It’s difficult to tell whether he’s trying to peel himself free of Ling’s embrace or wriggling closer.

“It’s time to lunch our eon, then!” Ling says. “It’s a buffet, my friend! All we can eat, purportedly! If Winry’s stories are to be taken as truth, I think you and I may just put them out of business.”

Ed reaches out towards Roy, and it takes him a long moment to comprehend the import of the curling and uncurling fingers extended to him.

“C’mon,” Ed says.

Roy really shouldn’t take his hand, but he does it anyway.

On the upside, it is a strange, unprecedented, and curious experience to be at the end of a Ling Yao train speeding towards food.

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Ed gets conscripted into an extraordinarily vicious-looking game of air hockey against Winry after they’ve all stuffed themselves stupid, so Roy wanders off past several token-eating temptations (namely, Lord of the Rings pinball and the spider-stomping game) in favor of Skee-Ball.

Aunt Chris still keeps a Skee-Ball machine and one of those claw arm games at the back of the bar by the dartboard—whether for the designated drivers to stay entertained or for the sloshed-as-shit to embarrass themselves, Roy’s never been able to tell. He used to pass hours with both of them, leaving the coin box door unlocked so he could feed quarters back in as he went along. He’s pretty good at darts, too, and at pool (although practicing with tipsy patrons is practically cheating), but nothing ever soothed him quite as well as the completely thoughtless swing-and-release rhythm of the damn Skee-Ball set.

It’s only when the clinking cache of tokens in his pockets has been exhausted that he pauses to notice the massive stack of tickets that has poured out of the machine—and the fact that he has an audience.

“Whoa,” Winry says. “Roy… hang on, take some of mine—”
“I couldn’t,” Roy says, waving away the offered coins and tearing off his winnings from the ticket lottery. “Thank you, though; I’m really… I’m definitely done.”

Lan Fan’s eyes on him are sharp, bright, and assessing. “Do you always get it in the right hole for the high score?” she asks.

“Oh, my God,” Winry says.

“I highly doubt,” Roy says, “that there is any direct correlation between sexual prowess and arcade game skill.”


“Ask me what?” Ed says. Ling is at his heels, grinning cheekily; Ed has a fistful of tickets of his own.

“How’s Roy in bed?” Lan Fan says before Roy can tackle her to the floor and cover her mouth with both hands.

Ed flushes to the roots of his hair. “Oh. Uh. Well…”

“Don’t even rise to it, baby,” Roy says, fitting an arm around his shoulders and steering him towards… something else. Anything else. He holds out his pile of tickets. “Let’s go get you a teddy bear or something.”

“Jackpot,” Ed says, clutching the accumulated tickets to his chest. “Although I bet all their prizes suck.”

Unsurprisingly, Ed’s eloquent premonition proves true.

“I think I’ve narrowed it down to the pimp hat or the neon stuffed dragon,” Ed says.

“Excellent choices,” Roy says.

“Are they staring at us?” Ed asks without looking away from the shelves of cheaply-manufactured crap.

Roy glances down into the reflection on the glass case full of even cheaper crap. “Yes.”

Ed frowns. “What am I supposed to say, anyway?”

Roy makes a show of thumbing through the six tickets they didn’t run through the feeder because they’d hit exactly five hundred. “About what?”

“If somebody asks—that. What Lan Fan just did.”

“She was out of line,” Roy says.

“She still asked, though. And I oughta have something to say.”

“You should always say ‘yes’,” Roy says.

Ed eyes him. “Even if it’s not true?”

“Especially if it’s not true,” Roy says. “Wouldn’t you be hurt if somebody asked how you were as a lab partner, and I said anything except ‘brilliant’?”
Ed is quiet for a moment, running a fingertip back and forth along the edge of the counter and looking up at the shelves. “So… sleeping with somebody is kind of like working with them on an experiment.”

Roy resists the urge to bring palm to face hard enough to break his own nose. “Well—not really, but—”

“Yeah,” Ed says. “And then having a kid is sort of like if you write a paper together afterwards.”

They stare at each other.

“Unless you’re two dudes,” Ed says.

“It’s really not like being lab partners,” Roy says. “Not at all.”

“Are they still watching us?” Ed says.

Roy glances sideways into the glass. “Yes.”

Ed blinks up at him. “Kiss me.”

“What?” Roy says.

“Fucking kiss me,” Ed says. “It’ll be cute or whatever. And you didn’t even give me any tongue the other day. I’ve seen movies; I’m not stupid. That was, like, a training wheels kiss.”

“I really don’t think that’s a good idea,” Roy says.

“You are always fucking talking about how to make this convincing,” Ed says, “but we’re practically platonic in front of everybody ninety-eight percent of the time.”

Roy’s blood moves for him; Roy’s brain sparks for him; Roy’s heart beats, his fingers curl, his eyelids rise and fall, and his lungs fill and empty—for Ed, for Ed alone. “Did you calculate that? I’d be interested to know what formu—”

“I don’t ask for much,” Ed says.

At least not much that he knows.

Roy lifts a hand to cup his jaw, leans down, and seals their mouths together. Both of Ed’s hands twist into his shirtfront, and he pushes up onto his toes; he’s hungry for it. How is it that nothing is ever routine, for Ed? How is nothing ever boring, or wearisome, or perfunctory?

And you can taste it in his mouth. You can taste the passion, and the heat, and the liveliness; the all-encompassing enthusiasm has a flavor. Is it gratitude? Is that what it is? Is it the simple fact that Ed takes no part of his life for granted?

Maybe Roy can stand to learn from that. Maybe Roy can try to appreciate this for nothing more or less than what it is—mouth-to-mouth, lip-to-lip, tongue-to-tongue, breath-to-breath union with someone beautiful. Maybe this discrete moment can be enough. Maybe if he tries hard enough; maybe if he smooths down the hairs slipping free from Ed’s ponytail; maybe if he slows down to enjoy the gentle press of Ed’s nose against his cheek. Maybe if he tickles Ed’s tongue a little bit with his; maybe if it’s playful; maybe if it’s sweet. Maybe if he rocks forward in towards the heat of Ed’s body and just lets them be—lets them be close; lets them be gentle; lets them be partly sweet and partly sensual; lets them be two halves of one gesture of affection.
And it’s nice—the way they fit together; the way they move together; the way Ed’s breath hitches, and his grip tightens, and he smiles against Roy’s mouth. The way his tongue pushes back, as he gets the hang of it; the way he tangles it with Roy’s and huffs a laugh, then draws back grinning, licks his lips—

“I want the dragon,” he says.

“…beg pardon?” Roy says with what’s left of his voice.

“I decided on the dragon,” Ed says. He turns to the dumbfounded girl behind the counter and pushes the ticket-count receipt towards her. “Can I have the blinding-colored dragon, please?”

“Sure,” she says. “Um.”

Ed’s eyes narrow, and his very wet, very red lip starts to protrude in a pout. “What?”

“Nothing,” the girl says, snatching up the receipt and pushing a small ladder over towards the shelves. “Just… you, um—made this shift a lot better. Um.” A plush dragon lands on the countertop in front of Ed. “Have a—nice night? Thanks for playing at Harrah’s…”


Ed clutches the dragon to his chest with one arm and employs the other to hold Roy’s hand, leading the way back to the cluster of rich kids they left behind. What in the world is he doing? This isn’t fair.

“So what next?” Ed asks. “I don’t have any more money.” He bounces the dragon in his arm. “I think I’m gonna name him Fred.”

“That’s a bit conventional,” Roy says. “Why not something interesting, like… Orville?”

“Redenbacher or Wright?” Ed asks.

“Either,” Roy says.


Funny. That’s about how Roy feels. “Maybe we should do something else.”

“There’s a little botanical garden at Tropicana,” Winry says, waving a brochure for good measure. “Apparently it’s free.”

Bless that girl’s bounteous heart for being kinder even than she knows.

Ling grabs Ed’s elbow halfway through the perennials, and with a flash of Fred Orville’s unnaturally-colored hide, they disappear off down the walking path. Roy pushes his hands into his pockets and tries very hard not to care too much.

But the several uninterrupted hours of light and noise and chatter and music and sound effects and people, of course, are taking their usual toll. He feels ground down and worn out—emptied, expended. Nothing on the planet sounds more appealing than retreating to a dark, silent room and
pulling a blanket over his head, and at the same time… he doesn’t really want to be alone. He wants to be away from all the messy sound and clumsy interaction of humanity, but somehow he’s lonely before he’s even left.

That’s the real fucking kicker, isn’t it? It’s better with Ed—or at least not-worse—because Ed kind of sees him. Ed kind of understands. For all that Ed has a temper like a flashbomb and the emotional intelligence of a pet rock, he gets introversion, and he doesn’t judge. The worst thing is being surrounded by people who don’t know and wouldn’t care.

At least the plants are nice. And quiet.

If only Roy could be a plant. That would solve a number of his problems, wouldn’t it?
Chapter 5

He’s ready to quit *Homo sapiens* for good by the time they straggle back into the house that evening. Ed held onto his arm a little too tightly for the duration of the ride, and Sara demonstrated questionable music taste in addition to her creative schedule-management skills by blasting some bizarre Ukrainian pop group the whole way back. Roy feels like some predator has clawed out the core of him and flung his lifeless body onto the railroad tracks. It would be lovely if a train would come, if only so that he wouldn’t have to keep pretending to be happy.

He wants to go upstairs, retreat to safety, bury himself in the bedclothes and shut out the light—forget the endless jarring sound effects of the thousand arcade games; forget the elbows and shoulders jamming into his every time they moved through crowds; forget the colors; forget the too-loud laughter; forget the overload. He wants to let it wash away and seep into his past. He wants to think of something other than the tremble of Ed’s breath against his cheek; something other than the way Ed smells like laundry detergent and shampoo and lightning. He wants to blot out all of the stupid, shitty fantasies batting their wings at the bars of their cages; they’re going to break through—

“C’mon, everybody!” Winry says, and he follows the herd into the living room.

Someone puts the TV on. It’s a show with a laugh track, fortunately; he barely even has to direct his eyes towards the screen. Chad produces passable Mexican food in considerable quantity; Roy thumbs salsa from the corner of Ed’s mouth. Ed worms his way in under Roy’s arm again.

And that’s when the booze comes out.

Chad spins out cocktails like this is his true calling—not that Roy couldn’t top him, and not that Roy thinks his liquor choices are solid, but hey; you get to be a little bit of a snob when your playroom friends were Jack Daniels and Johnnie Walker.

He has a moment of deep disappointment remembering that he’s not supposed to drink on his meds—and then an upswing of fuck it remembering that he’s not on them right now anyway.

“Could you just get me a rum and Coke?” he asks when Chad (apprehensively, he thinks) looks their way.

Ed’s shoulders tense as Chad’s gaze turns to him. “I don’t… need anything. I’m good.”

“Ah, live a little, won’t you, Edward?” Ling says smoothly, eyelashes low. “This will be so much fun.”

Ed swallows, shifting. “I don’t…”

“You can have a sip of mine,” Roy says.

Ed shoots him a look like he’s a saint and a savior.

It’s not fair.

One drink turns to two; two to three. Ed has about half of the fourth after the show loses its luster even for the people who gave a shit about it in the first place, and everyone just starts laughing too loudly at stupid things.
“Hey,” the girl with the brown pigtails (who is wearing her hair down at the moment, but names are hard) says when the insipid conversation hits a lull. “Do any of you guys have a song? You know—like, the theme song. For your relationship.”

“Motherfucker,” Ed mutters, low enough that only Roy will hear.

“Play yours!” Winry says delightedly.

Pigtails Girl blushes all the way through the duration of something very cute by some female artist with a breathy voice. Her boyfriend looks like he wants to die, but also like he’ll defend her lame song choices to the death, and Roy can’t help thinking that’s kind of nice.

Winry drags Treavor up with her to dance to “Crazy In Love”, which is also cute, but which earns them a series of wolf whistles and catcalls that are not gentle on Roy’s pounding head. The girl who was Kate Middleton the other day blushes prettily, beams at her sandy-haired beau, and puts on the Jason Mraz and Colbie Caillat song about being in love with your best friend.

Abstractly, Roy wonders how many weddings have seen this played for the first dance—with, perhaps, the maid of honor and/or the best man simmering in the background, wondering exactly when their years of patience for the happy couple’s obnoxious habits, their years of commitment to the shared interests, their years of listening to every problem and wiping every tear amounted to so much chopped liver.

Hopefully all of those weddings also had an open bar.

At Maes’s wedding, the man of the hour waved his arms madly until everyone shut up, and then he took Gracia’s hands in both of his and drew her onto the dance floor. They were both beautiful that night—giddy, joyous; they never stopped smiling, either of them.

“As a few of you may know,” Maes said to the room at large, “I met the goddess before you a few days before the start of our sophomore year. We both got to the condiments at the coffee shop at the same time, and we both wanted the creamer, and we started one of those extremely awkward chains of ‘After you’, ‘No, after you’.” Everyone laughed, albeit politely. Maes didn’t even seem to hear them. “To break the ice by making things even more awkward…” This laughter was more genuine; Maes still didn’t seem to care. “I started interrogating her about her coffee preferences, and then we ended up sitting down and talking about school, and inside the hour, I’d invited her back to my place for a movie later.”

He paused, dramatically. A room full of people who loved them held its collective breath.

“As fewer of you probably know,” he said, “Roy and I had consolidated all of our accumulated junk at the end of the previous year and put most of it into storage. Now, Roy, being the clever and forward-thinking, dashing, single—” He waggled his eyebrows and winked at the tittering group of bridesmaids. Roy plastered a grin on over his despair. “—young man that he is, had taken care of the whole thing while I was panicking about finals. Which meant that the storage unit was in his name, and he had the key. Which would have been fine, if he hadn’t still been in L.A. Which meant that I’d just invited the love of my life over to an empty apartment to watch a movie from a collection that I didn’t have.”

He cleared his throat and grinned some more; Gracia was laughing by now, and that was all that mattered.

“One mad dash to the last struggling video store in the county later,” Maes said, “I was the proud owner of a used VHS copy of ‘The Lion King’. So that was what we watched.” He turned to her,
and she was the universe, and Roy was so genuinely happy for him that it made the heartbreak hurt more. “And I wouldn’t change a second of my life since then.”

They danced to “Can You Feel the Love Tonight”. Everyone cried, except for Roy, who pushed his champagne glass halfway across the table and held himself together by force of will.

It’s not fair. And he has no right to think it’s not fair; he has no entitlement to fairness; he has nothing. He’s just a whiny kid who can’t grow up right and refuses to accept that the world doesn’t like him much more than he likes it, which is hardly at all.

“We don’t have a song,” Ed says, recoiling away from the AV cable Winry’s pushing at them eagerly.

Roy looks down at him—at his bright hair, his bright eyes, his soft mouth, that faded red sweatshirt that makes up his sanctuary. He’s not innocent in this. Not anymore.

“Sure, we do,” Roy says. “Here, c’mon.”

He gets up, abandoning his drink and dragging Ed behind him, and puts on the H.I.M. cover—because it’s faster, and darker, and sexier—of “Wicked Game”.

He wraps Ed into his arms; it’s not really a slow-dance, because he’s not especially coordinated right now. But it’s tight, is the point—it’s Ed’s body to his, drawn in close, their chests together, their hearts pounding hard; it’s his mouth by Ed’s ear, and he can whisper-sing along—

“What a wicked thing to say... you’ve never felt this way... what a wicked thing to do... to make me dream of you...”

“Hang on,” Ed says, at a volume for others to overhear. He plants both hands on Roy’s ribs and pushes away, except then he grabs Roy’s hand. “You. Come on. All you guys just... have fun. Whatever.”

Then he’s hauling Roy from the room like a bat out of hell, almost before Winry can unhook Roy’s phone and jam it into his other hand; and it’s hilarious, is the thing, because they probably all think he’s about to get laid as a reward for picking such a sultry musical number, but actually Ed’s going to push him out the window to his death.

That’s all right. It’ll be a relief.

It’s too bad, though; he kind of wanted to know how Ling and Lan Fan were going to handle the whole song thing. Polyamory isn’t an especially popular topic, or at least not presented in a positive light.

Ed drags him all the way into the middle of their bedroom, leaves him there, and goes back to shut the door. Only then does he whirl around with his eyes blazing.

Roy’s self-preservation instincts kick in before he lets himself say You’re so pretty when you’re pissed.

“What the fuck was that?” Ed asks.

“I just picked a song,” Roy says.

“You just picked a song,” Ed snarls. “We’ve been fucking through this—you don’t just do anything. What the fuck, Mustang?”
“I don’t know what you want me to say,” Roy says. “We’re selling it. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

Ed’s lip curls, and he bares his teeth; he is Simba in spades. “What the fuck are—don’t you dare fucking throw that back at—God, I can’t fucking stand your back-and-forth bullshit!”

“Sorry,” Roy says.

“You’re not,” Ed says. “And fuck you for—everything. Fuck you for all of it.”

“Ed,” Roy says. He’s way too damn tipsy for this; he knows there are words he could say that would smooth all the ruffled feathers and defuse this before it detonates—but he can’t find them. It’s like playing hide-and-seek with his own vocabulary. He could do this; he could fix this; he’s just so… numb, and clumsy, and confused. “Look, it’s not…”


He snatches up his pajamas—which someone kindly folded on his pillow; it’s so idyllic being rich and spoiled, and so surreal—storms into the bathroom, and slams the door.

Roy takes a few deep breaths. He looks down at his hands, and then at the closed door, and he waits to see if it’ll open again. He hears a lot of shuffling and rustling, but it stays very firmly shut—which is bad, that much he registers clearly.

Fuck. He’d better do something.

He crosses to the door and raises his hand to knock, and that’s when the shower water comes on.

Fuck and double-fuck.

For a moment he considers picking the lock. It wouldn’t be too difficult, even with his hand-eye coordination slightly impaired by the general hazy buzzing in his brain.

He’s already taken out his wallet, because he can almost certainly Jimmy the thing open with a credit card, by the time he realizes that this idea is a bad one. Barging in on a soaking wet and naked Ed—a soaking wet, naked Ed who has deliberately retreated to a private space, no less—and demanding the opportunity to apologize and make himself understood would most likely end in his getting a toothbrush rammed up his nose.

And he would deserve it.

In the better interests of both his nose and the local toothbrushes, he puts his wallet on the nightstand and collapses on the bed. He takes out his phone, looks at it for a long moment, entertains second thoughts, welcomes third ones, cordially wines and dines fourths, and then… gives in.

Need advice on how not to be a colossal fuckup, he texts to Maes.

Maes probably took his beautiful wife out for dinner and dancing. Or maybe they’re at home, snuggled up on the couch under a fleecy blanket, having just finished a romantic comedy, making meaningful eyes at each other over the last of the popcorn. Or maybe they’re having great sex and gaining an entirely new appreciation of each other, and themselves, and the wonderful life they share.
Odds are actually pretty good that they’re sitting at the kitchen table budgeting their income, or that Maes is on-duty and is sitting parked out on the shoulder on some unnervingly empty highway. Somehow Roy just assumes they’re always blissfully happy, one-hundred-and-twelve percent of the time. Maybe that’s a good thing; maybe it’s not.

His phone vibrates.

You’re not a fuckup of any size. What’s wrong?

Damn him.

What’s wrong is that I’m a fuckup, Roy types in, which requires a great deal of laborious effort given the way his thumbs keep missing their targets.

You’re not, comes the reply. What’s going on? Talk to me. The worst I can do is gently rib you about your perfectly valid life choices, right?

Maes long ago learned that the key to translating regular speech into Roy Language is to couch everything in terms of worst-case scenarios.

Shit be goin’ down, son, Roy texts, which is uproariously funny, because, despite the distinct advantage of coming from a crappy part of L.A., he persists in being the anti-gangster. He’s hurting his throat trying not to giggle at the irony for a long moment, but then he feels like absolute crap as he starts typing again. Just go back to sleep. Or movie. Or extracurriculars. That word is hard. I only text you when I need something. I’m a parasite. A parasitic fuckup. A colossal parasitic fuckup. I suck. In every way. I suck happiness out of people. Go to sleep. I’m sorry. Never mind.

He stares at the pixels on the screen once it registers as sent. Did he really write that? How self-absorbed. It’s no wonder his friends always flee across state lines just to be rid of him.

He’s receiving a call from Maes Hughes. He is mostly aware that this is not a coincidence. Maes’s picture in the address book is one from the wedding; he’s wearing a huge, cheesy grin and straightening his bow-tie. He looks like a million bucks. Missing him is like having a hole punched in the pit of one’s stomach by a cannonball coated in acid and laced with arsenic.

Roy swipes his thumb across Maes’s wonderful face to accept the call.

“Hello,” he says.

“Are you drunk?” Maes asks.

“A bit,” Roy says.

“You’re not supposed to drink on your meds,” Maes says gently.

“I’m not on my meds,” Roy says. “I’m on a mountain.”

Maes pauses. “As usual, my dear friend, your lyrical metaphoric genius is lost on me.”

“No,” Roy says. “Literally a mountain. In a cabin. Well, it’s a huge mansion-cabin… -thing. Only we had to pretend to be in love, and I pretended too well, and the whole experience stands as further evidence of my colossal fuckupery.”

“Who’s ‘we’?” Maes says. “Roy—”
“He’s got hair like a Rapunzel-themed wet dream,” Roy says. “And no leg. And the greatest natural aptitude for chemistry of anyone this side of Curie, and he’s in the shower right now, and I keep being shitty to him because I’m so fucking terrified of how he makes me feel. But it’s not that he makes me feel, is it? He just is. I’m the one feeling. My response, my responsibility. Fuckup.”

He thinks he’s presented a pretty bulletproof case here.

“Oh,” Maes says.

“I shouldn’t be allowed outside,” Roy says.

“Why are you terrified?” Maes asks. “Love is… well, jeez, Roy, it’s the most beautiful thing on Earth.”

“When it’s whole, maybe,” Roy says. “When it’s symmetrical. Not when it’s some deformed, stifled obsession burning you from the inside out. Not when it eats at you until you feel thin, Maes. Not when it’s a hatchet against a brick wall, and if you even try you’re going to cut yourself to ribbons on the shrapnel.”

“Roy—”

“No,” Roy says weakly. “Don’t give me the Hallmark bullshit. That’s too fucking easy, okay? You could tell me a million times that I’m worth it, or I’ll find someone, or it’ll work out—you know I guess it could. And I could win the fucking lottery, couldn’t I?”

“Only if you played,” Maes says.

“You don’t know,” Roy says. “You were lucky. You and Gracia are like… chocolate and peanut butter.”

“…thank you…?”

“I mean, you just found her. You fucking bumped into the love of your life getting coffee because you forgot to ask about my travel plans before you got in your stupid car. And then you were done, Maes. Twenty years old. Done. Finished. Box checked. Happiness guaranteed. What about the rest of us? When have we done our fucking time?”

“I don’t know, Roy,” Maes says softly. “You can’t be looking too hard; it’s like an optical illusion.”

“And you’re wrong,” Roy says. “I’m not worth it. It wouldn’t work out. It’d fucking crash and fucking burn, because I can’t make anything that would fucking fly out of these bits and pieces and all this shit in me. Have you ever looked at yourself in the mirror first thing in the morning and thought, The only thing in the world that I’m good at—that I am actually proficient in—is suffering? That’s my fucking talent, Maes. It’s not giving to people, or making them happy, or making them laugh, like you; it’s being a fucking waste. Why the fuck would anybody ever want to dedicate their life to that? That’s throwing it away.”

“Jesus, Roy,” Maes says.

“Maybe that’s it,” Roy says. “Maybe I should try to find Jesus. I’m so damn jealous of people who believe in shit. People who think it’s more than just this part being horrible, and the next part being dead. Where do you think Jesus hangs out? Maybe he’s in electrons. Quantum physics has unplumbed depths, and there’s this whole God particle thing—what if—”
“Roy,” Maes says, “listen to me. This is what you’re going to do. You’re going to get a full glass of water. You’re going to drink it. You’re going to apologize to Mr. Rapunzel for your behavior. You’re going to brush your teeth. You’re going to go to bed. And then you’re going to wake up tomorrow, and you’re going to lie in bed for fifteen full minutes—you have to count, Roy; fourteen isn’t enough—and you’re going to think about how you would apply your standards for other people to yourself. You’re not fair to yourself, Roy. You have accomplished incredible things, and you’re an incredible person, okay? You’re down on yourself all the time, but you’re a good person and a good friend, all right? Get outside of yourself for fifteen minutes, and look at your life, and then call me again and tell me what you saw.”

“So bossy,” Roy mumbles. “Ed’ll break my face if I call him Mr. Rapunzel.”

“Definitely don’t call him that, then,” Maes says. “You have a nice face. It’d be a shame if he broke it.”

“Better’n my heart,” Roy mutters.

Maes sighs softly. You can just see him pushing up his glasses and pinching the bridge of his nose. “Roy—”

The shower water shuts off.

“Gotta go,” Roy says.

“Call me tomorrow,” Maes says.

“All right,” Roy says. “You’re a tyrant. I don’t know how she puts up with you.”

“I make up for it,” Maes says. “I’ll spare you the details.”

“Thank you,” Roy says.

“Especially since you won’t need any of my tips if you shack up with Mr. Rapunzel.”

“You are the worst best friend ever,” Roy says.

“I’m going to tell Riza you said that,” Maes says. “She’ll be secretly delighted.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” Roy says. “She’d shoot us both. From the top of a building a full city block away, no less.”

“Good point,” Maes says. “And goodnight, Roy. I’ll be waiting for that call, you hear me?”

“Can’t avoid it,” Roy says. “Goodnight.”

Maes makes kissy noises until he hangs up, because Maes is a giant five-year-old, albeit one who carries a gun and fights crime on the extraordinarily dangerous highways and byways of southern Oregon.

Roy lays his phone down on his chest, folds his hands just beneath it, and stares at the ceiling.

Momentarily, Mr. Rapunzel himself opens the bathroom door and starts across the room, dressed in his test tube pajamas with the day’s clothes balled up in his arms. He looks intently at the opposite wall as he rounds the foot of the bed, drops his clothes onto his suitcase, and sits down on the edge of the mattress.
“Ed,” Roy says.

Ed detaches his prosthetic leg and somehow manages to prop it against the nightstand aggressively. “What?”

“I’m sorry,” Roy says.

Ed’s wet hair hangs in heavy tangles down his back, framed by his shoulders as they tighten. “Stop saying that.”

“You said I should only say it when I mean it,” Roy says. “And I do. I acted like a piece of shit and treated you disrespectfully—several times, several ways. I regret that. I would take back everything I said and did that was hurtful if I could, but I can’t, which I’m sorry for.”

Ed is silent for a long moment, fingers curled around the edge of the mattress. Roy can barely hear him breathing.


“Okay,” Roy says softly.

More silence. He supposes he deserves it.

“Who were you talking to?” Ed asks.

“The friend,” Roy says. “With the wife.”

“How is he?” Ed asks.

“No idea,” Roy says. “We talked about me.”

“Oh,” Ed says.

Roy looks at his back—his shoulders are sturdy, when they’re not buried under an oversized sweatshirt, which makes sense given the whole gymnastics thing; he always sits so poised he’s almost tilted, like he’s ready to bolt out of the room at a moment’s notice. There is a whole knot museum in his wet hair. He has cute ears. He has cute wrists; they’re barely visible around the cuffs of the pajamas, but Roy remembers: one torn through with white scars almost to the palm of his hand, and one smooth and pale and underscored with little purple veins.

Roy thinks, I always wanted to be more than this. I used to think that maybe if I worked hard enough, I could become the kind of person who might be worthy of someone like you.

Kids are dumb, aren’t they?

He rolls off of the bed and heads for the shower.

“If I pull any shit tomorrow,” he says, “please kick me in the balls. Whichever foot you like. Don’t be gentle.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” Ed says levelly, without twitching a muscle towards turning around.

“I’d deserve it,” Roy says. “I should know better by now, about good things and how I fuck them up. I’m sorry for that, too.”

Ed’s shoulders shift, rotating a few degrees. “Look, it’s not—”
“Don’t worry about it,” Roy says. “I’ll try to be quiet. Go ahead and go to sleep.”

He shuts the bathroom door.

It still feels like all of his extremities are made of blunt lead; undressing is a little bit of a challenge, but he’s managing reasonably well when there’s a very insistent knock on the door.

“Roy,” Ed says.

“Present and accounted for,” Roy says.

“Fuck you,” Ed says. “Look, just—it’s not like you’re the only person who fucked up, okay?”

“It’s fine,” Roy says.

A fist collides heartily with the doorframe. “Don’t say that, either!”

Roy kicks his abandoned clothes into a slightly neater pile on the floor. “Is there anything I’m allowed to say?”

“No,” Ed says. “Shut the fuck up for five seconds. I’m trying to tell you that I shouldn’t’ve—”

The door handle turns, and the door swings a little ways open.

Ed stares at Roy, who recently bested his unusually complicated shirt and succeeded in becoming buck naked.

Roy stares back. Ed’s hand is still on the doorknob, and it’s clenching progressively tighter as incomprehensible seconds pass.

“I thought you locked it,” Ed says faintly. “I was—just—fidgeting. I…”

Roy blinks. He swallows. He roots around in his brain for a rejoinder. His brain is extraordinarily unhelpful today.

“See anything you like?” he asks.

Ed slams the door.

…aw, fuck.

It’s almost seven-thirty by the time his eyes open and begin cordially declining to be shut. Does that count as progress, or is it just the hangover?

It hardly matters anyway; both avenues end in him scrubbing his face with both hands and dragging his uncooperative body out of the bed.

Ed is a small, unmoving lump under the blankets, topped with a huge puff of mostly-dried, rat-nested hair. Roy is resisting the powerful urge to reach over and start combing it out through his fingers. Mr. Rapunzel indeed—Ed would probably strangle him with that hair if he tried touching it.
Jesus, he’s pathetic.

He puts some pants on, goes to wash his face, and then directs his stumble down the stairs, clinging to the railing as he goes. If he’s going to die in a melodramatic accident, he’d at least like it to be a good one—like a massive chemical explosion caused by tragic mislabeling, or a malfunctioning elevator dropping him to his splattery death. The aspiring young scientist tripped on the stairs after a night of poor choices and cracked his fat head open does not sound like the start of an impressive obituary.

Fortunately, his stumble preserves him all the way down the staircase, at which point it dutifully carries him to the kitchen.

“Good morning!” Chad says. “Rough night?”

Roy stares at him for a second. Is the guy legitimately concerned about his health and well-being and expressing considerate sympathy, or is this a brilliantly cruel jab at him for all of the vigorous gay sex he was supposedly having last night?

Maybe Maes is right. Maybe he needs to start letting go of the worst-case scenarios. Maybe carrying them is only adding to the weight piled up on his shoulders, crushing him down. Maybe if he just starts forcing himself to pick things off and release them to drift off into nothing…

“A bit,” he says. “How are you?”


“Always,” Roy says.

Chad opens the blessed cabinet for him. “The new Guatemalan is awesome. Can I make you anything?”

“No, thanks,” Roy says. Even touching the outside of the bag of beans makes him feel marginally better. Maybe Riza’s right, and he does have a problem. “The coffee would be jealous.” He pauses, unwinding the cord for the grinder. “I was thinking… maybe I’ll make an omelet for Ed.”

Chad’s head tips a little to one side, like a puppy. “That’s… really nice.” Before Roy can mention the idiomatic race results for nice guys, Chad starts into the fridge. “Here, lemme see what we’ve got here…”

When Roy is wrist-deep in chopped- and diced-up bits of bell pepper and ham, and the bacon’s spitting spiritedly, Ling saunters in wearing basketball shorts. …nothing but basketball shorts.

“Hello, my friends!” he says. “It smells positively beatific in here!”

“Roy’s pretty quick with a cleaver,” Chad says. “Can I make you any breakfast? Pancakes, maybe?”

“Can you make French toast?” Ling asks. “With apricots. And blackberries!”

Chad blinks. “Sure thing. I think. Let me see what we’ve g—”

“Wonderful!” Ling says, planting his hands on his hips—just above the waistband of his shorts, which are slung so low they’re in significant danger of sliding off altogether. “And… Roy.”
Rarely has his name sounded so sinister when not uttered by a teacher or a policeman.

Roy feigns nonchalance so fervently that he really deserves an Oscar. “S’up?” he says as he shepherds all of his chopped-and-diced things into a neat mound with the flat of the blade.

“How do you feel about threesomes?” Ling asks.

Roy is very, very fortunate that his automatic reaction is to freeze, because that is the only thing that prevents him from amputating his own fingertip.

“I beg your pardon?” he says slowly.

“Threesomes,” Ling says cheerfully. “You know, *les ménages à trois*. I understand you’re not interested in lending, but perhaps you might be amenable to sharing…?”

Roy puts the knife gently down on the counter instead of burying it in Ling’s chest—or his own. He’s proud of himself for that. He catches up a stray dishtowel and carefully wipes his hands.

“Look,” he says. “Whatever affection and attraction and… love… mean to you—that’s fine. That’s your business. Everyone sees all of those things, and the ways they fit together, a little bit differently, and that’s fine. But I don’t tango with three. And I’m not going to change my mind. I hope you can respect that.”

“I will certainly try,” Ling says.

If Ling’s going to be noble—or at least not a total douchebaggy jackass piece of crap—Roy should grow a pair and do the same.

He watches his hands twisting the towel around itself.

“If Ed… understands those things… in a different way,” he says, “that’s up to him. I’m not here to tell him how to live.”

For one thing, he doesn’t have the least fucking clue himself; and for another, what if Ling is *right* for Ed, somehow, in some capacity, in some way that satisfies some need Roy never could? What if Ed misses that winking flash of the golden opportunity because of what Roy wants but can’t have and won’t take and…?

It wouldn’t be fair, that’s all. He’s wrought enough damage here; the least he can do is to back away from the fragile possibility of something good.

…except.

“What I don’t get, though,” he says, carefully, “is how you can treat your girl like a perpetual backup plan. Do you really think she’s going to stick around?”

Ling’s grin is enigmatic and… terrifying, really.

“Ah,” he says. “You see, my friend, Lan Fan and I have a… an *unconventional* relationship, you might say. Now, this is strictly confidential, but I know from everything in your manner that you are trustworthy…” He smiles a little wider and shrugs. “My father is a very prominent man in Shanghai—a very prominent, very successful, very *wealthy* man. And when he wished to send his sons off to the fine schools of America to study, well… how could he be sure no one would target them as hostages when they were so far from home?”
The next grin has none of the enigma—it’s all terror.

“Technically speaking,” Ling says, “Lan Fan is not my girlfriend. She fulfills many of the qualities and—ah—positions one might expect, but in truth of fact she is…” He licks his lips and raises his eyebrows, beaming. “A… bodyguard with benefits.”

Roy wonders where his voice ended up, since it doesn’t seem to be anywhere in the remote vicinity of his body, let alone someplace accessible to his mouth.

“I didn’t know that was a thing,” Chad says, sounding deeply intrigued.

“It is a thing.” Ling says. “It is a fine thing. Except when she nags me to do my homework. I’m going to get my ass kicked for that, by the way, because she is around one of these corners, listening closely in case I’m threatened.”

“Bingo,” says a familiar voice that Roy tries and, unnervingly, fails to pinpoint.

“Or perhaps Ling-o,” Ling says contentedly.

Roy coughs up something that seems to have words trailing from the end of it. “…right. That’s… nice.”

Ling inclines his chin just slightly and grins again. “Enough about me—I am so very rude sometimes! How long have you and dear Edward been together?”

Roy hesitates. Again with the worst-case scenarios—but what other explanations are there for a question like that? Ling has sharp, clever dark eyes and an impregnable poker face, on top of which he’s jonesing to jump Ed’s bones—he can’t be asking out of soft-hearted, romantic-souled curiosity. He just can’t.

Which means that either he’s prodding at the foundations of Roy’s and Ed’s ‘relationship’ to see how much shared history he’d have to split down the middle to steal Ed away; or he’s caught a whiff of artificiality, is on to them, and is trying to trip Roy up and catch him out. He might have already asked Ed this question so that he can compare answers. Roy might be teetering on the edge of a trap.

“A few months,” he says. “I don’t know, it’s… it was such a gradual thing; I never know exactly when to say that we transitioned from friends to… well.”

“Lovers?” Ling asks, blinking, face open and receptive, ostensibly the pinnacle of tact. “That’s very interesting. Surely there was a particular day—the first time that you were both aware it was a date, perhaps? These things do not happen without anyone noticing.”

“It was subtle,” Roy says. “I think Ed and I would pick different days, honestly, because we were both thinking of it in different… What does it matter, anyway? Does putting an X on a calendar make it more real?”

“It makes it more concrete,” Ling says calmly. Trying to read him is like trying to sound out hieroglyphics. “You have some fascinating perspectives on personal agency, Roy. Very… progressive. I did not expect that from you, given that you seem slightly… old-fashioned… in your gentlemanliness.”

Roy would like to humbly request that a hole open up in the floor and drop him into an alternate universe where he’s not having this conversation. He doesn’t really give a fuck what else is going on in said universe; he’ll take any dystopia he can get as long as it doesn’t have a Ling Yao
interrogation in it. “Thanks, I guess?”

“Certainly,” Ling says.

“I dunno,” Chad says slowly. If his presence hadn’t been magnifying the awkwardness of this by a power of ten, Roy would most likely have forgotten he was here by now, but no such luck. “I think it’s kind of… sweet, sort of. Not to know when you stopped being regular friends and started being more than friends. And it seems like you guys really… click. So I can kind of see that. And it’s nice, to have a basis like that.”

In this brief, beautiful moment, Chad might be Roy’s favorite person on the planet.

“Thank you,” Roy says. “That’s very kind of you. Ling, if you’ll forgive me—Ed’ll be up soon; I was going to bring him breakfast.”

“Ah, yes,” Ling says, enigma straight through again. “I will leave off the questions while you cook, of course. I hope you will forgive my curiosity—it is a rare thing, to see a young man so relaxed about these things.”

Roy doesn’t remember the last time he actually felt relaxed, but that’s beside the point. “I suppose it is.”

“Interesting,” Ling says. He wanders over to examine the view from the window, and Roy finally feels safe enough to start cracking eggs.

If only they were skulls.

If only he could become the sort of person he pretends to be.

If only there was a future for him, somewhere near enough to sustain himself with dreams of—a future with a crappy little apartment where the heater banged and the windows weren’t quite sealed, with no dishwasher and a bed that was slightly too small for two, with someone, anyone, who would wake up in the morning and be genuinely glad that he was next to them.

The pan sizzles; Ed’s breakfast is starting to smell more like breakfast than like pure salmonella, which is always a good start.

The problem is that it’s not lottery tickets—it’s not a dollar or two laid down on the counter at a gas station convenience store. It’s a part of your life and your soul that you put on the line, and if the gamble fails, it’s not just a couple bucks you can’t spend on groceries; it’s a piece of you that disintegrates, and the time and energy and effort that you poured in is all moot. And suddenly you’re down months or even years of your gasp of tenancy on Earth, and you have to start over from scratch convincing yourself that you’re even worth offering to other people—that it even makes sense to try again—

He and Chad are elbow-to-elbow at the stovetop now, and Ling’s French toast is making Roy’s mouth water, and people don’t make any fucking sense. Ed’s not a nurturer, is he? He’s not a bleeding heart babysitter; he’s a pragmatist and a scientist and a brilliant mind without much sense of self-preservation, let alone any instinct for caring for others, and… well, Jesus, Roy’s a black hole. He’s a vortex. He needs; he consumes; he takes and takes until there’s nothing left. It’s like he said to Maes—he sucks. He sucks people in and wrings them for sympathy until they can’t give anymore, and they run for the hills. He doesn’t blame them, but Ed doesn’t… Ed shouldn’t have to put up with that. Ed shouldn’t have to suffer him. It’s better if he just leaves well enough alone.
Ed doesn’t know what he wants, anyway—how could he, without any experience behind it? All he knows—all he can know—about relationships is the crap he’s gleaned from Hollywood, where it’s all banter and spitfire volleys and flash and razzle-dazzle and opposites attracting. He doesn’t know about the work, and the day-to-day grind of it, just like anything else; all the television’s told him is that the person your parents hate most is probably the One. Roy’s facial features are all more or less in order, and he can dress himself and fix his hair and sling a quip out at romantic-comedy speed, and he’s put his tongue down Ed’s throat. By Hollywood standards, they’re destined, but Hollywood says nothing about the long haul to happy, and Ed doesn’t have the slightest idea how sour it gets when the honeymooners come home.

Roy doesn’t want to be the one to teach him. Roy doesn’t want to build him up and let them both down when it all starts to crumble, and Ed tears himself away. He’s too tired to lose another friend to his greedy fucking heart.

He probably already has.

“See you later,” he says to Chad and Ling when his culinary masterpiece is completed, and he’s set it on a tray with enough coffee for a small army.

“I look forward to it,” Ling says pleasantly, and Roy is not ashamed to retreat somewhat hastily up the stairs.

One yellow eye cracks open and peers at him as he opens the door and backs in with the tray balanced in both hands. He brings it over, puts it down on the nightstand, and picks up his coffee mug.

“Good morning,” he says.

“Y’mean it is a good morning?” Ed mumbles. “Or a morning on which t’be good?”

Shit.

“Whichever you prefer,” Roy says. “Go on and eat before it gets cold. I have to make a phone call.”

One hand emerges from beneath the blankets and starts feeling around on the tray for the fork. This is probably going to end in spilled coffee and egg in the bed, so Roy bows out while everything is still upright.

The hall ends in a tall window with a fantastic view of the lake, so that’s where he retreating to dial.

“Good morning, sunshine!” Maes chirps after two rings. “How are you feeling?”

Roy sets his coffee mug down on the windowsill as he considers.

“Sober,” he decides.

“Well, that’s a start,” Maes says. “Did you apologize to Rapunzel?”

“Yes.”

“How’d it go?”

Roy attempts to sort through the blurry, skipping, half-burnt movie reels that depict last night in his memory. “Okay, I guess.”
“Whoa, rein in some of that enthusiasm before you hurt yourself, bucko. What happened?”

“The first thing out of his mouth today was a *Hobbit* reference,” Roy says.

There’s a long pause on the line.

“Roy,” Maes says slowly, “I know you’re insecure, and I know this stuff is hard, and whether or not you believe me, I do understand your pain, but… You *have* to snap this one up, Roy.”

He rubs his eyes with his free hand. “Yeah, but—what happens when I run out of references?”

“You’ll never run out of references. You could learn Elvish together and have little flashcards with hearts on them and reward each other for getting stuff right with kisses and draw out the family trees toge—”

“You know what I mean.”

“You mean that you’re so scared of something going wrong that you’re not even willing to try for everything going right.”

“I never claimed to be anything more than a coward,” Roy says.

“You never had to,” Maes says. “Because you’re not. You and I both know the playing field’s not even. I don’t blame you for wanting to sit it out. I’m just… I just want you to think for once about how much you have to *gain*, Roy.”

“I appreciate the sentiment,” Roy says.


“Not a goddamn chance.”

“You’re no fun.”

“That’s what I’m trying to *tell* you.”

“You don’t have to be *fun* to be *loved*, Roy.”

“Oh, *bullshit*.”

“It’s not! I’m not fun; I’m obnoxious, and look where I ended up.”

“But you’re a good kind of obnoxious,” Roy says.

“Oh, *thanks*, Roy.”

“Whereas I’m just a drag. Like off of a cigarette. *Carcinogenic*.”

“Roy,” Maes says, “it’s not about being fun. It’s about being open—keeping your eyes and your arms and your heart open, even when it’s pretty damn likely you’re just going to get a penknife through the ribs the next time somebody comes in for a hug. It’s an uphill battle, yes, but it’s one you’ve got to keep fighting. People are lazy, okay? It’s just how we are, as human beings; we don’t want to *work* for love—to love others, to be loved, any of that. But you have to. It takes effort. You have to put the time in, and you have to roll with the punches, and you have to hold yourself accountable, and you have to stay generous even when you’re scraping the bottom of the barrel of what you have to give. And the kicker is that there’s no way to win, of course. And as
soon as you give up, you start losing. But that doesn’t mean it’s not worth it, all right?”

“You true talents are wasted on the sheriff’s department,” Roy says. “You should be a life coach. Or a speech writer. Or someone who writes the pithy stuff in greeting cards.”

“You should be yourself,” Maes says softly. “That’s all anyone worth having is going to ask for.”

Roy leans his forehead against the windowpane and watches the waves. “Me sucks. I should be somebody else for a while.”

“No,” Maes says, “you should first learn to love yourself for all of the wonderful things you are—and all of the not-so-wonderful things, too. Then other people will follow suit.”

“You’re getting into Lifetime movie territory,” Roy says.


“Forgive me,” Roy says. “You’re doing a gouda job. I’d be a cheddar person if I took your advice. I don’t know jack.”

“You are un-camembert-able,” Maes says.

Roy kind of wants to cry.

“Come on,” Maes says softly. “Roy, this is so simple—just brie yourself.”

Roy is going to cry. “Maes, don’t.”

“Don’t what? Punning’s in my blood; you know that.”

Don’t make me miss you more than I can stand, Roy thinks. Don’t make me need what I can’t have and am trying so hard to live without.

There are footsteps on the stairs, and his throat is full of broken things. “I have to go.”

“Okay,” Maes says, softly enough that he must have heard some of the shit that wasn’t said. “You take care of yourself, and of Mr. Rapunzel. Text me later?”

“Yeah,” Roy says. “Give Gracia my best.”

“Keep it,” Maes says. “Give it to him.”

“We’ll see,” Roy says.

“Bye, you,” Maes says.

Winry tops the stairs and smiles at him, her hand lingering on the banister, her expression subtly concerned. Subtle concern is his due, isn’t it? His destiny; his truest friend; his hard-earned consolation prize.

“Everything okay?” she asks.

“Just fine,” he says. “Fantastic.”

She doesn’t look convinced—but then, she’s not an idiot, and he’s not an actor.

“Cool,” she says noncommittally, which he supposes is the politest way to respond to a blatant lie.
“We were all gonna go out on the big yacht if you wanna come. Is Ed up and human-looking yet?”

“Signs point to no,” Roy says.

Winry rolls her eyes, softening the sarcasm with a grin. “I swear, I don’t know what he needs all that darn coffee for given how much he sleeps.”

“I suspect he might be trying to replace his blood with caffeine,” Roy says. “It could be an unexpected route to immortality.”

“Good thing he’s milk-phobic,” Winry says. “Otherwise he might wake up one morning and realize he was a latte.”

“Starbucks-tall,” Roy says.

Winry snickers. “Can I tell him that?”

“Your funeral,” Roy says.

“He wouldn’t dare murder me in my sleep,” Winry says. “The Furies would hound him forever. I guess the odds of me getting a faceful of coffee would be pretty high, though.”

“Selfishly, I have to counsel you to avoid that,” Roy says. “You have a very nice face.”

Winry blushes faintly. “You know, I’m starting to think Ed never mentioned you because he just wanted to keep you all to himself.”

Perhaps Roy’s a good actor after all.

“So about the yacht adventure of a lifetime,” she says. “He’ll probably come if you do. You in?”

“Sure,” Roy says, despite the thousand valid reasons clawing at his lungs. “Why not?”
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

…lake ecosystems don't work like this. I'm pretending I don't know that, and I'm hoping you will join me.

“I’m going to sunburn,” Ed says. “Then I’m going to get melanoma and die.”

“That escalated quickly,” Roy says.


Ed is, as far as Roy can tell, always thinking fast, but at the moment he’s too busy doing an impression of a cat in a sunbeam (albeit one with sunglasses) to catch the tube of sunscreen Winry hurls directly at his face. Fortunately, Roy’s reflexes are extremely swift at the moment due to the fact that every nerve in his body is piqued for panic.

Ed sighs feelingly. “I never said anything about your intelligence quotient or your planning skills or anything, Win; don’t put words in my mouth.” He snatches the tube away from Roy and examines the small print on the back with that mesmerizing single-mindedness he has—the gemstone-facet sharpness of his eyes; the faint scowl; the furrowed brow; the hunched shoulders with the whole body poised to pounce on the slightest snippet of information dangled before him.

“I hate this shit,” he says. “It always feels like I’m coating myself in egg albumen.”

Roy was having a bit of trouble with the rolling motion of the whole boat as it was, and now his stomach clenches and then twists and then flips itself like a dead fish.

“Would you like some help?” he asks. Rubbing sunscreen into Ed’s skin is the single most transcendent torment he can imagine, but at least it would distract him from seasickness.

“With what?” Ed asks distractedly as he slathers a generous dollop on his nose and smears it over to the nearest cheek.

And then, of course, Roy remembers that the famed and faded red hoodie has nothing to do with the brisk little breeze snapping up off of the waves—it’s armor and a sanctuary, which Ed will not be parting with on penalty of death. His back won’t ever be exposed. In company, it’s unlikely he’ll even go so far as to push up his sleeves and put the surgery scars on display.

That thought makes Roy pause for a second, because Ed offered him that privilege—that trust, to share a truth so closely guarded that most people probably don’t even realize that it exists.

Is it a stretch to hope that Ed saw something in him worthy of including?

Or was it just a matter of necessity as part of the collaborative deception?

“Back of your neck?” Roy asks. “So you don’t get it in your hair.”

“I’m not completely dysfunctional,” Ed says.
“I wouldn’t even joke about that,” Roy says.

Ed glowers at him.

“Maybe a little,” Roy says. “But only out of love.”

Ed glowers a bit more and then takes a break to look bewilderedly at the gleaming sheen of sunscreen grease covering both his palms. Roy seizes the opportunity to seize the bottle, and then to smooth out a little white dab that got missed on Ed’s cheek.

“Have I told you lately that you’re adorable?” he asks.

The glower is back in full force. “Have I told you lately that you’re a piece of shit?”

“I think so,” Roy says. “Probably in so many words. Shift.”

Ed wrinkles his nose and then reluctantly hunkers down at a different angle on his deck chair, with his back to Roy this time.

This part is completely beyond Roy’s capacity for metaphysics—how is he supposed to act like he’s acting for Ed while actually not acting but nonetheless presenting with a tremendous awareness of all of the others’ watchful eyes?

Well… fuck it anyway.

Carefully he guides Ed’s ponytail forward and aside over his shoulder, shepherding the flyaways back into place. He squirts a bit of sunscreen on his fingertips and spreads it thoroughly across the nape of Ed’s neck—warm skin, wispy hairs, the contour of his vertebrae. If only this was his. If only he could kiss it, claim it, know it better than the knuckles on his own hands—

A flitter of a thought strikes him, and he starts massaging at the strained tendons of Ed’s neck with his thumbs.

“Ow,” Ed says, which could, Roy supposes, theoretically mean *Ahh, thank you, you’re far too kind* in a language he doesn’t know. “Are you trying to kill me?”

That’s less likely to have an alternate translation. “Not avidly,” Roy says. “How in the world did you get this tense?”

“Jeez,” Ed says, squirming about as riotously as is human possible without pulling away. “I dunno. Life is stressful.”

Roy can’t argue with that.

“It’s his posture,” Winry says, sauntering over like a blonde Audrey Hepburn in her broad-brimmed sunhat. “Or the lack thereof, I guess. You’d think he’d want to make the most of every inch genetics grudgingly gave him, but…” She shrugs.

It’s a good thing Roy has a strong grip on Ed’s shoulders, or Winry might be imminently headed overboard. “*Fuck you, Win—!*”

Winry, of course, just laughs. “Ed, you’ve on vacation, on a *yacht*, with a hot guy rubbing your neck.”

“Thank you,” Roy cuts in.
“Callin’ ’em like I see ’em,” Winry says. “But seriously, if you can’t relax now, I gotta figure you’re not even capable.”

“Maybe I’m not,” Ed says, glaring. “Maybe I’m defective.”

Roy runs his fingers through the gleaming gossamer strands of the ponytail, gently tugging the tangles free. “Don’t say that.”

Ed makes a deeply contented noise in the back of his throat. “I’ll say whatever you fucking want if you keep that up.”

“Oh?” He scratches his fingernails gently against Ed’s scalp around the band of the ponytail and earns an absolutely pornographic noise. If the whole gig continues like this, his plan for blackmail will backfire spectacularly and send him running to the restroom to think unsexy thoughts in private.

“Oh, God,” Winry says. “I don’t want to see this no matter how hot Roy is. If you’ll excuse m—”

“See what?” the girl with the pigtails (who has, in a fine mishap of her moniker, not actually worn pigtails in several days) asks, bounding over like a bloodhound on the scent. “Are they gonna make out again?”

Ling appears behind her from out of nowhere, the better to peer at them from over her shoulder. “That is an excellent question, to which I would not begrudge an answer.”

“You’re all sick,” Winry says. “Ed’s like my brother.”

“He is most certainly no relation of mine,” Ling says. “I repudiate any accusations of illness.”

Roy can just see the edge of Ed’s cheekbone, which is rapidly deepening from soft, peachy pale to a shade perhaps best described as blood-soaked strawberry on a stoplight.

Slowly, carefully, Roy lowers his hands to Ed’s shoulders again and gently squeezes.

“You know,” he says, “you’ll find better stuff on the internet.”

“‘Better’ is quite subjective,” Ling says as Pigtail Girl’s face floods with color to rival Ed’s. “While the detachment of the involved parties makes for a thrilling sort of shamelessness, the element of interactivity is sorely lacking.”

“You guys are all such pervs,” Ed says, burying his face in both hands.

Roy pats his head.

“Life is brief and fleeting,” Ling says. “It is our sacred duty to enjoy our sensual faculties while they remain intact.”

“That was almost a haiku,” Winry says admiringly.

“I’ll polish it later,” Ling says. “How many syllables…” He holds up his hands and starts counting on his fingers. “‘Perv you call me; perv I am’…”

“Hey, Win,” Treavisor calls from where he’s on the upper level, sailing-driving-yachting-whatever-the-appropriate-verb the good ship Sunspot III. He’s wearing a light tweed sports coat, khaki shorts, a truly revolting pair of loafers, and a captain’s hat that is probably a priceless antique—the sort of apparel Roy couldn’t wear even if some unlikely fiscal miracle meant he could afford
the pieces, simply because he’s not elite enough. The outfit would rebel the moment he tried to put it on; it would go up in spontaneous flames before it let him don it. “Is this the one you wanted to stop at?”

Belatedly, Roy wonders whether there is a training course on how to sail a yacht, or whether they’ve all put their lives in the hands of an overprivileged twenty-something without the faintest idea what he’s doing.

Winry darts to the rail, as if four feet will make a difference in her view of the forested island they’re approaching. “Yeah, this is the one!” She beams at the assembled company. “I read on the internet that this is one of the best beaches on Earth, and no one knows about it!”


“It looks like a pretty normal beach to me,” Ed says.

“You guys are such party-poopers,” Winry says.

“If no one knows about it,” Roy says, “who wrote it up?”

“Maybe it’s like Yelp for beaches,” Ed says.

“They could call it ‘Kelp’,” Roy says.

Ed snickers. “Their tagline could be ‘Life’s a beach, and then you die.’”

“The ratings could be out of five little shells,” Roy says. “With five being ‘mussel-see’ and none being ‘downright shellish’.”

“I’m pushing you both over the side in a second,” Winry says. “Sweetie, there’s a dock somewhere!”

“Where the heck is ‘somewhere’?” Treavisor calls back. “You wanna come up and help me look?”

Winry bounds up the half-stair to join him at the helm, and Ed turns to Roy.

“We are kinda sick,” he says.

“We could make a fortune on the internet with that idea,” Roy says. “Just imagine being able to afford all the Hot Cheetos you could ever eat.”

“With Lime,” Ed says, but Roy’s totally winning this round; his eyes have gone vast and wistful. “Man, if I had a couple million bucks, fuck buying a Ferrari; I’d get a personal chow mein chef.”


“Okay, that settles it,” Ed says. “You and I need money. These nefarious plans aren’t gonna execute themselves.”

It feels like Roy’s heart is caged in a glass terrarium, bound by the solid walls, banging to get out, bursting to be free, striving to take solace in the sweet perfection of this little moment stretching out between them—

And it’s trapped. The walls are too thick; the dark is too deep; his will is too weak. He doesn’t
deserve to be happy. He doesn’t want it enough; he doesn’t try enough. He hasn’t earned it. He’s never done anything worth rewarding.

Ed is eyeing him doubtfully. “Ground control to Major Mustang. Come in, Major Mustang.”

“Give my wife my love,” Roy says.

Ed stares at him.

“I thought we were referencing ‘Major Tom’ lyrics,” Roy says.

“I thought you were not totally fucking lame for a second,” Ed says. “Then I remembered.”

“Would you say that you have a short memory?” Roy asks.

Ed’s eyes widen again, this time in rage and horrified betrayal.

Just before he combusts, Roy reaches out and taps a finger on the tip of his nose.

“Boop,” he says.

Ed unfreezes, the better to bare his teeth. “It’s almost as short as your lifespan, you asshole!”

Just as Roy starts to laugh, Ed grabs the collar of his shirt in both hands and drags him down into a bruising collision of mouths. Whatever can and could be said of him, Edward Elric does nothing by halves; there’s no coyness in this kiss—which is apparently only the third kiss of his life, but he’s skipped past the light meeting of lips, of tongues, of breath, and delved straight in for depth and wildness. There’s an animal aggression to it, but somehow the passion of it feels… pure.

Just a kiss; just a kiss; just a very good, very hot kiss sending tremors down Roy’s spine, sending sparks along his nerves and fire through his veins; just a kiss; just Roy’s fingers burying themselves in Ed’s hair without his permission, twisting themselves in deep and tilting Ed’s head gently to line them up even closer—

Just Ed’s tongue flicking against his, darting, twining, slipping away; just Ed’s body rising to set their ribs to interlocking as Roy’s breath catches, as his heart pounds, as—

As Ed nips the end of his tongue so hard his eyes fly open, and he stumbles back, hand flying to his mouth.

“You bit me!” he says.

Ed grins, more than a little bit wolfishly, and Roy’s heart skips, skips, squeezes. “You’re lucky I didn’t draw blood for that.”

Roy probes his tongue gently against the backs of his teeth, trying to figure out if he can taste blood or just his own amazement.

Generally speaking, biting someone you’re making out with is either a foray into foreplay… or a declaration of war.

Maybe for Ed, they’re the same thing.

Winry’s voice rings out from the upper deck. “There it is!”

“This is worse than parallel parking,” Treavoris says. “If I scratch this thing, I’m dead meat.”
“Yeah, right,” Ed mutters. “They’ll just buy you a better one.”

“And a pet,” Roy says, “to apologize for how bad you feel. And some hired help to feed the pet. And a separate house for the pet. And—”

Ed punches him in the arm.

“Oh, my God!” the girl-who-doesn’t-actually-have-pigtails squeals, bouncing at Ling’s elbow a little ways away. “Send that to me, please, please, please?”

Ling is tapping away at his phone. “I may have to make this pay-per-view, but since you asked so nicely, perhaps an exception is in order.”

“Wait,” Roy says as a very special sort of dread dawns on him. “Were you—”

“Recording your steamy and hilarious tonsil hockey match?” Ling asks. “Yes. It is, as I believe you say, ‘a free country’.”

“Actually, it’s illegal to distribute video of someone without their permission,” Roy says.

“Fortunately,” Ling says without looking up from the screen, “it is also illegal to commit homicide as retribution.”

Ed makes a growling noise in the back of his throat that sends heat lancing through Roy’s guts so sharply that it’s a miracle he doesn’t pass out on the spot. “This is a pretty big lake. What do you figure the odds are they even find your body?”

“Zero,” Lan Fan says from directly behind them. “No one will be murdering Ling. Ever.”

She speaks with such steely-eyed conviction that even Ed seems to be dumbfounded.

“Oh, shit,” Treavisor says from above, breaking the thin layer of terror that has iced over everyone below. “Babe, why don’t you drive for a se—”

“On it,” Winry says.

The next thing Roy knows, Ed is dragging him over to the railing, grabbing his hand, and slamming it down on the rail, and then they’re both clinging on for dear life as the yacht careens wildly, listing to the side as the engine roars and the deck tilts to a dizzying angle; everyone scrambles for cover—

Then Roy blinks, almost vomits, blinks again, and finds them nestled up against a small dock and bobbing placidly.

“You’re right,” he says. “That was sorcery. The only explanation is that Winry Rockbell is an evil witch.”

“Right?” Ed says.

“Hey, somebody’s gotta tie us up!” Treavisor calls.

“Chill,” Ed says.

That’s all he says before he vaults over the railing, taking Roy’s heart and stomach over the side with him.
Roy doesn’t even have time to gasp before he’s at the edge looking down—and his throat seems to be sealed regardless—but of course Ed swung himself directly onto the ladder that leads down the side of the boat.

“You are such a shit,” Roy says.

“That’s why you love me,” Ed says, and then he jumps from the ladder without so much as a moment’s hesitation, broaching the three feet to the dock in one beautiful, arcing leap. He plants both feet solidly on the boards and then reaches both arms upward as if to praise the sky. “Put your eyes back in your head and throw me the rope, asshole.”

Rather than pitching it at that stupid golden head and/or getting laughed out of the county for sending it directly into the water, Roy accepts the cord Winry offers, wraps a few coils around his arm, and starts down the ladder after Ed.

There’s a tense moment where he’s not entirely sure his legs are long enough to prevent him from taking the most humiliating dunk of his pathetic little life, but then his toes make contact with the dock, and his weight starts to shift over onto it, and Ed reaches out a hand. And that—that feels so safe to some miserable part of him that he can’t quite bear to look at the fingers stretching out to steady him.

“So,” he says, passing the rope and pretending to be interested in the boards beneath his feet. “How would you like to enjoy this most secret of beaches?”

“Fuck the beach,” Ed says as he kneels to wind the rope around one of the mooring posts. “I wanna wander around and see what’s here.”

“Islands are always promising,” Roy says. “It’s probably not isolated enough to have established a significant amount of endemic species, but we can always hope.”

Ed looks up at him and grins so broadly and sincerely that Roy wants to drop everything and take him straight to the Galápagos—just to see it all reflected in his eyes; just to see the great heart and the great mind and the flaring inspiration in him flourish all at once. Roy wouldn’t even need to be there; just the images would be enough. Just Ed with the tortoises, with the iguanas, with a snorkel, with a sunburn, with a smile like the stars and the ocean, with a head full of evolution and his boots in Darwin’s footprints and his soul brimming over with delight. Roy just wants to give that to him, and that is perhaps the scariest revelation of all.

There’s no such thing as altruism, in Roy’s mind. Giving has a goal; charity has a payoff; generosity is motivated by the self-satisfaction that comes of doing something “good”. If he’s already contemplating how to shower joy onto Ed without any hope of a profit, he must be in the advanced stages of abject devotion, and the time for remedies is past. It’s all over. He’s doomed.

“Let’s go see if we can find a flower that kills people,” Ed says.

“Aren’t most people more interested in curing cancer?” Roy asks.

“If you think we’re ‘most people’,,” Ed says, “you’re crazier than I thought. Hey, Win, we’re gonna go check this shit out!”

“Does Roy have his phone?” Winry shouts back.

Not around this much water, he doesn’t; it’s cuddled up with his wallet on the nightstand back at the cabin.
At the way he shakes his head, Winry sighs—they can’t quite hear it from here, but the rise and fall of her shoulders and the rolling of her eyes kind of gives it away. “Just be back in, like, an hour, okay?”

“Yup!” Ed says, waving as he starts down the dock towards the beach. He glances back at Roy, grinning again, and by *God*, that’s the most dangerous weapon this side of an army storehouse. “How long do you think ‘like an hour’ is in real time? Two? Three?”

“That depends,” Roy says. They hit the beach, and he can’t help grimacing at the inevitable prospect of sand gallivanting around in his shoes for the rest of eternity. To Winry’s secret beach site’s credit, however, he can’t argue with the pull of the place—for all of its unsavory designs on his footwear, the sand is fine and clean and laid out in beautiful rolling hills and valleys, broken only by tiny imprints of animals’ wanderings. “How long do you think it takes a yuppie male to get bored of sunbathing?”

“Shit,” Ed says. “No idea. Their behavioral patterns are a fucking mystery to me. Like, what the hell did Winry’s guy have on his *feet*?”

Roy wants to laugh and cry and kiss him until they both suffocate. “I sometimes suspect that loafers, rather than money, are the root of all evil.”

“We should write a book,” Ed says. “You know that ‘Shit My Dad Says’ thing that was a blog and then a book and then a TV show? It could be ‘Shit Roy Says in a Stupid-Calm Voice Like Being Hilarious Is Normal’.”

“I’m not hilarious,” Roy says.

“People are gullible,” Ed says. “And you kinda are.”

They’re about to trek off into the forest yet again, this time without even the aid of cell phone GPS, and Roy is tongue-tied and trapped like a rat and unable to think of anywhere he’d rather be.

“Hey,” Ed says. “You think there are tide pools around here somewhere?”

“It’s perfectly possible,” Roy says. “Some of the terrain looked promising as we were coming around.”

“Fuckin’ *tide pools*, man,” Ed mutters. “Tide pools are the *sh*t*.”

“They really are,” Roy says.

“Which way, d’y you think?” Ed asks as the trees thicken around them.

“We should probably stay as close as we can to the coastline,” Roy says. “And yes, I’m going to be keeping track of our route this time.”

“Joke’s on you,” Ed says, but Roy can hear him grinning. “There’s no fucking trail out here.”

“I suppose I’ll just have to pay attention to where we’re going, then,” Roy says.

“Rather than to my ass,” Ed says.

That’s certainly putting the ‘ass’ in ‘embarrassing’; Roy has to sputter for a response. “I don’t—well, I don’t look at it any more than is—reasonable—and it’s not *my* fault it’s so—*nice*—”

Ed flushes hotly all the way to the roots of his hair, so maybe Roy has a chance of winning this
round after all.

“You’re so full of shit, you flatterer,” he says. “I bet it’s fucking uneven from years of favoring my right leg.”

“Would you like me to document some observations?” Roy asks. “I could do some measurements later. I should hate for such an important question in the field of scientific enquiry to go unanswered.”

Ed is striving not to laugh. “Shut up, Roy.”

“Do you think I’m joking?” Roy asks.

“Nah,” Ed says. “Since I was born yesterday, I totally believe you.”

“Please do,” Roy says. “You have a killer ass. You could probably be convicted of manslaughter for it. People might have heart attacks, or be so intent on staring that they fall down manholes.”

“You’re crazy,” Ed says, giving him a weird look to rub it in. “And morbid.”

“And mesmerized,” Roy says. “How do you not know you have a great ass?”

“You think I look at it?” Ed says. “I’ve got better shit to do.”

“I’ll write it a sonnet,” Roy says. “There are a thousand rhymes for ‘ass’. And ‘rear’. And ‘rump’. I can’t believe I didn’t think of this sooner.”

Ed raises his hand and circles his finger next to his ear in the universal sign for loony.

“I resent that,” Roy says.

“I resent poetry about my ass,” Ed says. “It’s just some fucking muscle, for fuck’s sake.”

“Not yours,” Roy says. “Yours is a miracle. Yours is as life-giving and awe-inspiring as the curvature of the Earth. Yours needs paeans and marble statues and a coffee table book.”

Ed is definitely laughing now. “Shut up! It does not! It’s just… there; I sit on it. What the fuck, Roy?”

“Has no one ever told you that you’re hot?” Roy asks.

Ed stops short, and Roy should tell him so, but then he’s turning, and he’s livid, with a dash of—something else. A fragment of—fear?

“Ha fucking ha,” he says. “Very fucking funny. Game over.”

“I’ll take that as a ‘no’,” Roy says. He has to swallow hard and brace himself; he’s built so many walls and barricades and electrified fences over the years that even just expressing an unguarded opinion feels unsafe. “Take it from me that you’re beyond gorgeous. No one’s ever complimented you like that before?”

“Oh, people have,” Ed says, and if yellow eyes could spit real sparks, they’d be in the middle of a forest fire. “Drunk fucking sleazeball fifty-year-old married guys at the fucking bar grab my arm and call me pretty all the time. Girls tell me I’m so fucking cute they wanna squish me and can they touch my hair? Not that they wait for an answer, ’cause they’re too busy moving on to how they want my fucking eyelashes like they’re fucking serial killer body part collectors, or—”
“Ed,” Roy says, feeling the urgent beat of his pulse in his fingertips, paralyzed all the same.

“Wasted undergrad guys catcall me,” Ed says. “Every time I walk down a bad fucking street at night, somebody asks what a nice kid like me is doing out so late, why I dress like a hobo, whether I want a ride home, if I know what they fucking mean—”

“Ed, wait,” Roy says.

“And if that’s what being hot is, if that’s what it means—” His ferocity is so breathtaking, and the tenderness beneath it is so dizzyingly sweet; how can he not know? “—then I don’t fucking want it, so keep your fucking compliments to your fucking self, Mustang; I’m nobody’s fucking object and nobody’s fucking prize and nobody’s fucking victim, and they’re all fucking stupid anyway, and if they actually fucking looked at me they’d run—” He drags the right sleeve of his sweatshirt up so viciously that Roy thinks it might tear. “Because this is what they’re getting; this”—He slams his fist down on his left thigh. “—is what I am, and fuck them for thinking they know me, and thinking they want me, and thinking I want that, and fuck them for reducing me to some fucking projection of what they think they’re after, and—”

His voice falters and then fails. He’s panting, and then his shoulders drop, and he folds both arms tightly across his chest, kicking hard at the leaves and needles on the ground and summoning a spray of plant debris.

“Fuck them,” he says. “Fuck that. Fuck people.”

“You want to be seen as attractive for what you actually are,” Roy says, “not what they assume about you.”

“No,” Ed says, glaring daggers at the ground.

Roy closes the space between them slowly; cornered animals bite. “Ed, that’s what I meant.”

“You don’t know shit,” Ed says unsteadily. He hasn’t moved.

Gently, so gently, Roy takes his right arm, disentangling it from its brother and holding it out, looking unabashedly at the intricate web of jagged scars.

“Hey,” Ed says in a low voice. “Leggo.”

Roy trails a fingertip from the inside of Ed’s elbow down to the base of his palm, following the ridges of the scars. “Ed,” he says. “You’re beautiful.”

Ed’s pulse races under his thumb. “Knock it the fuck off.”

“I have nothing to gain by lying to you,” Roy says. “You are absolutely gorgeous.”

He lifts Ed’s arm and lowers his head and kisses down the path he traced with his finger a moment ago.

“Quit it,” Ed says, breathing faster. “Roy, fucking—stop—”

He should have at the first command, no matter how desperate he is to prove the truth. He lets go and steps back and drops his hands.

Ed jerks his sweatshirt sleeve back down and cradles his right arm with the left. He stands very still for a long moment, twisting his fingers deeper into the fabric, staring at the leaves again, and
his expression is dominated by bewilderment, not rage.

“Whatever,” he says, and Roy just wants to reach out and wipe the wrinkles from his brow. They shouldn’t be there; stormclouds look so wrong above the brightness of his eyes. “C’mon,” he says, starting off through the trees again. “I wanna see some starfish.”

“What’s the plural noun for a group of starfish?” Roy asks.

Ed half-turns and spares him a raised eyebrow. “You mean like…”

“Like ‘a murder of crows’,” Roy says.

“Only starfish aren’t very threatening,” Ed says.

“Not especially,” Roy says. “It should really be a ‘constellation’.” That gets a faint grin out of Ed at last. “I’m going to write an angrily-worded letter to the dictionary editors if it isn’t.”

“Dear mortal enemies,” Ed says, putting on a high voice and waving an index finger for good measure. “I find your failure to utilize a pun when the opportunity presented itself extremely disappointing. Dis-a-pun-ting, even. Shame on you all. I hope your printing press malfunctions and prints little ink smudges that look like dicks on every single page of your next edition. Sincerely, Roy Mustang.”

“Something like that,” Roy says.

Before Ed can deliver another scathingly brilliant impression of him, the trees thin out again, and they emerge onto an incredible precipice of rock overlooking open lake for miles, with the far shore barely visible as a thread of green stretched over the horizon.

They stand in silence for a long moment as the breeze gusts, and the waves hiss, and the world turns.

Ed’s shoulders rise and fall in a quiet sigh. “You find it scary, or encouraging?”

Sunlight sparks off the waves. “The way the vastness of the universe and the implacability of nature makes all of our individual successes and failures completely meaningless?” Roy asks.

“Yeah,” Ed says.

“Both,” Roy says. “You?”

Ed smiles a little. “Both.”

Roy puts his hands in his pockets. “You know the best part?”

“What?”

“I highly doubt there are any cougars.”

Ed snorts and starts off along the cliff’s edge with the usual careless sort of grace. “Gee, lemme think where I’ve heard that before.”

“From a very handsome, wise, young man, I’m sure,” Roy says.

“You forgot ‘humble’,” Ed says.
“How silly of me,” Roy says.

“Yeah,” Ed says. “A very handsome, wise, humble, silly, uh… smart, funny, obnoxious, brave, stupid young man who’s also a pretty good cook but totally hogs the blankets.” He pauses. “Well, you’re kinda old. Older than me. Right? But I can’t really call you an old man; you’re just sort of… a dude.” He notices that Roy is staring at him. “What? That’s how you are. That’s why it’s sorta nice being with you.” Roy is struggling with speech; in the meantime, Ed avoids his eyes and shrugs. “Like, even when you’re being sort of stupid, you’re okay. That’s more than you can say for most people.”

“Thank you?” Roy hazards.

“Sure,” Ed says. “C’mon, move your ass before all the starfish get bored and leave.”

“Ah, yes,” Roy says over the drums and the screams and the mortar blasts of the war being waged inside his heart. “Starfish are notorious for their short attention spans.”

“Shut up,” Ed says, but there’s a bubble of laughter in his voice. “Or you’re gonna be notorious for getting pushed off a cliff.”

“That would make a thrilling headline,” Roy says. “Can you imagine the tabloids? One fake gay lover sending the other hurtling to his doom? It’d get dramatized on TLC, and then they’d make a movie.”

“Could I enjoy the royalties from prison?” Ed asks. “Or should we maybe just write the script ‘based on real events’ and go to Hollywood and throw it at somebody who looks like such a douchebag that he must be a producer?”

Roy doesn’t want to take him to Hollywood; Roy wants to take him to Paris, to Prague, to Athens, to Rome—to the old cities, to crumbling ruins and cobblestone streets, to tourist traps and river walks and art museums and monuments that look a hell of a lot larger in real life. And to the light shows and silhouetted skylines of London and Tokyo; to the gleaming gold and incomparable bustle of Thailand and India; to Beijing, to Saint Petersburg, to Munich, to Egypt, to Turkey, to Elsinore—

There’s a whole world already in Ed’s eyes; he wants to see what this one looks like reflected in them.

And that’s the thing, too—the swelling wanderlust is just to watch it all pass over Ed’s expression. He wants to give it all. Because wherever Ed is now is the best place on the planet—the safest, the most right.

No, Roy doesn’t want to drag him up and down the stupid pink-tiled sidewalk of false gold stars in Hollywood. But he can’t help wanting to take him home.

Or letting him become it.

He can’t. It’s not fair. It’s not fair to Ed—who has tried so hard to be so generous—to drop all this old, overstuffed, mud-splattered, un-unpackable baggage on his doorstep. It’s not fair to lay this on him when there’s a yellow-brick fucking road winding away from that door, and Ed can’t afford to trip over somebody’s shitty suitcases on his way towards cities made of gemstones.

Roy can’t do that to him. Roy’s had his chances to ruin people’s lives; this sinking ship is his now, and his alone, to captain and to mourn. He’s done nothing in his life to earn Edward Elric’s pity.
“Whoa,” Ed says. “What the hell are you thinking about? You look like you just got slapped in the face with half of a giant lemon.”

“Perhaps I did,” Roy says, “and you just missed it.”

“If you keep toppling into sad like that,” Ed says, and his voice is casual, but his eyes are not, “I’m gonna sic Winry and her optimism on you just to teach you a lesson.”

“If it’s all the same to you,” Roy says, “I’d rather study under you than Winry. Nothing against her; just that my note-margin doodles will be much more fun.”

Ed eyes him, which means he must have caught the undertone implication that Roy would have an elaborate stick-figure kama sutra within the hour. One of those stick figures would have a highlighter-yellow ponytail. “I’m telling whoever funds your fellowship that. And you’d have to draw pretty fucking fast, if it was me, ’cause she talks around it a lot, but the bottom line is real fucking basic.”

“Oh?” Roy says.

“Yeah,” Ed says. “At the best of times and the worst of times and everything in between, you’ve got two choices—you can give up, or you can keep hangin’ on and grind through it and stick it out no matter what it takes.” He shrugs. “I’m not a quitter. And I don’t figure you are, either.”

He might be surprised.

“I could have doodled a great deal in the time it took you to explain that,” Roy says.

Ed tries and fails to stifle a grin. “Bullshit. I’ve seen you get all Leo da Vinci on your scratch paper in lab meetings; you get detailed.”

Roy cannot argue that he would not like to get detailed where Ed’s potential stick figure exploits are concerned, but that is probably an innuendo for another time.

“What will you have office hours?” he asks. “Can I sweep in and sit on the edge of your desk and ask how I can raise my grade?”

“Sure,” Ed says. “And I’ll break your nose for free.”

“Could you do the jaw instead?” Roy asks. “Less blood. I’m rather fond of this shirt.”


What the hell is going on? Ed doesn’t hand out compliments. Most of the time, Ed doesn’t even seem to understand the concept of commendation for its own sake.

“Thank you,” Roy says cautiously, in case the other shoe duly falls on his face.

“Whatever,” Ed says.

Maybe that’s all it is—maybe he’s reading too much in and dragging too much out; maybe he’s asking for things that aren’t even being offered. It wouldn’t be anything new—him stumbling over boundaries, leaving chaos in his wake.

He needs to take a step back; he needs a few deep breaths and a gasp or two of silence.

The breaths draw him closer to the gravelly border of what’s passing for a path, for lack of
anything quite like a trail. Perhaps this is why he went into the sciences, at the heart of it—
because the world is that much simpler from up here. Because a seascape has all the might and
majesty of a city skyline with none of the smog and filth; because every whitecap dies in an instant
on the sand, but the motion of the waves will outlast every particle of human progress. Because
physics doesn’t lie, and chemistry doesn’t cheat, and facts and mathematics cannot hate you or
spite you or let you down. Because some days the safest place that you can stand is with your toes
just over the edge of a cliff face—somewhere you honestly don’t matter at all. Somewhere that the
teeming tide of life and the gentle oscillation of the moments slipping past feel huge and beautiful,
and the world will be fine without you.

could you do it, like, one step back?”

Roy manages to stop absorbing the rhythm of the universe for long enough to glance at him.
There’s a stubborn set to his jaw, a downturn to the edge of his mouth—and a sharp-edged
uncertainty in his eyes, punctuated by a faint line between his cinched-in brows. He’s completely
serious.

“I’m not about to fall,” Roy says. “I’m fi—”

“Could you maybe not ever say that again?” Ed asks, and, under the usual snark and exasperation,
there’s a flash of something deeper and darker and more genuine.

“I think you’ll have to train me out of it,” Roy says. “It’s my default polite lie.”

“If you lied about that,” Ed says, taking a step closer, “you probably lied about everything, and you
are gonna fall.”

“No,” Roy says, half-turning to head him off and raising both hands for good measure. “I’m not an
idiot.”

“Yeah,” Ed says, “apparently you’re not in the habit of honesty.”

Roy sticks his tongue out.

Ed laughs, and the corners of his eyes crinkle, and his whole body shakes with it, and his hair
swings, and he’s a vision; he’s something preternatural and tremendous; he’s beyond imagination,
let alone attainment; for the simple fact that Roy has kissed him, touched him, held him, he should
be inarticulately grateful—

And he is.

And Ed is so much more even than the ocean wrecking itself on the rocks that Roy turns fully
towards him.

And—

—slips.

Time stutters.

He hears the breath leave his lungs; his eyelids drop and flick open, dark-then-light; and as he
starts to raise his right arm, as his fingers unfurl to stretch out into empty air, he’s already falling.

It’s more of a slide than a drop; his right foot almost regains purchase, but the grit gives way. His
weight shifts; there’s nothing underneath his left foot; gravel skitters away from him and rains down the rock—

The sun splays his shadow upward, above him, as gravity grabs hold and drags at his ankles; he watches his own hand strike for and miss a crevice in the rock that wouldn’t have held him anyway; blood beads on his torn knuckles, and dust cascades around him, and he has time to think one word:

No.

And then a strong hand fastens around his wrist.

His stomach just keeps plummeting, but he’s not falling anymore; he’s—hanging. He’s held. He is suspended; he has stilled; the rocks can’t claim him as he splatters open, and everything he fought to care for spills and breaks.

A fairly substantial quantity of grains of dirt and fragments of rock stream down over his head and shoulders; this is simultaneously the best and worst shower of his sad little life.

“You fucking idiot,” Ed says, and his voice shakes, but his hands are steady—the second wraps around Roy’s arm, too; his weight flattened out on the cliff’s edge can’t possibly be enough to counterbalance Roy’s, but here they are; he’s a miracle— “Would you grab something before you break my wrist, dipshit?”

“What would you suggest?” Roy asks—mostly just to test the meager remains of his capacity for communication by human speech, as the rest of him is nothing but adrenaline and a heartbeat. Glancing down is, by and large, a terrible mistake, but there’s a broad crack in the rock face just above his right foot; a firm kick at it lodges his toe, and then there’s a rounded formation not too far from his free hand, and then the tendons in Ed’s arm aren’t straining nearly so hard.

“All right,” Ed says, and a wisp of his hair appears over the edge, heralded by another spurt of dust; he’s shifting. “Start climbing, already. I got you.”

It’s difficult as it stands to deny him anything, but a request involved in saving his own ass is far beyond Roy’s ability to refuse—whether or not it might be easier on both of them if he would just… let… go.

“Don’t be a fucking prick,” Ed says.

Surely Keats and Shakespeare never heard such eloquent inspiration from a Muse.

Roy digs his tortured fingernails deeper into the fissure they found and starts to haul his weight upward, trying not to pull any harder on Ed’s arm. There’s a great deal of scrabbling noise on Ed’s end; when Roy manages to cram his toes into another pocket in the rock face, he’s just high enough again to peer over the edge, and Ed is shifting and swiveling his way up onto his knees.

“I can’t believe I didn’t dislocate your shoulder,” Roy says.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Ed says, panting slightly. There’s dust and grit in his hair and on his face, his cheeks are scarlet, his forehead’s smeared with sweat, and he is positively ravishing. “You don’t say shit like that until after you’re safe, you friggin’ dumbass. Come on.”

He scrabbles, Ed’s grip tightens until the fingernail marks may never ease out of his skin—his toes catch in tiny nicks in the rock; he slings his free arm over the edge—his heart’s rattling against his ribs, and Ed drags him up onto solid ground.
Ed gives him a long, long look and then releases him and collapses onto the dirt to pant for a while.

“Sorry,” Roy says. He wants to get to his feet, but he doesn’t think his knees will hold.

“Shut up,” Ed says.

“Thank you,” Roy says. There’s a faint throbbing in his fingers now that he has time to feel the grit crushed into the knuckles of his right hand.

“Shut up,” Ed says. He wipes both hands on the front of his sweatshirt and then lays both of them over his eyes.

“You’d be well within your rights to say ‘I told you so’,” Roy says.

“Fuck that,” Ed says without much conviction as he levers himself up to stand and starts brushing dirt off of his clothes. “I don’t even want to think about it anymore.” He straightens, and then he offers Roy a hand.

It’s not really in Roy’s power not to take it now.

Except that when they’re upright, and he’s stabilized, Ed still doesn’t let go.

“You clearly can’t be trusted to walk by yourself,” he says of the way Roy’s staring at their knitted fingers. “You’re on ambulatory probation until you’ve proven that you’re not going to fall off any more fucking cliffs.”

“Yes, sir,” Roy says.

Ed rolls his eyes, and his grip on Roy’s hand tightens just a little. “And don’t you fucking forget it.”

It’s a quiet trek from there—it might be peaceful if it wasn’t for the hammering in Roy’s head, if it wasn’t for the fluttering in his chest, if it wasn’t for the weight of the invisible axe with its cold edge whispering over the nape of his neck.

“I owe you my life,” he says when the blade of it is almost breaking through his skin, when the skeletal fingers carding through his hair have started to tug, when it feels like the aborted countdown is burning in the flesh of his forearm like a new tattoo.

“Good,” Ed says, leading the way along a sloping outcropping that tapers down into the waves—less direct than Roy’s route, but admittedly much less likely to end in total obliteration. “Then you gotta live it to my standards, right?”

“I…” Roy clears his throat. “…suppose it’s not… unreasonable… to ask…”

“Kidding,” Ed says, dragging him on. “If I thought that, I’d be a slave to all the doctors who put me back together. Just—come on. There’s mussels over here—hey, look—”

As it happens, it seems to be physically, emotionally, and intellectually impossible for a scientist not to take at least some measure of delight in a spot of impromptu tidepooling. It’s the best and strangest sort of scavenger hunt known to man—or to Roy, certainly, for whatever that’s worth—and Ed’s incandescent joy is huge and bright and frighteningly infectious. The coveted starfish are cherry-red and sherbet-orange, and the sea urchins’ spines are a shade of violet that shouldn’t even exist. There are also a vast assortment of incredibly bizarre oval-shaped spongey things, which are olive-green with paler green feeler-things, and half a dozen kinds of crayfish-whatnots, and
mussels thick along the contours of every rock—

The waves are crashing and hissing, white foam spilling around their sharp edges, ripples chasing each other over the surfaces of the pools. Seagulls are calling to each other from the cliffs and wheeling overhead, and just the roar of the ocean and Ed’s ongoing excited ramble would be enough to make Roy’s heart feel like it’s being suspended in the warm air above them.

“Hey,” Ed says after some hazy span of not-long-enough. He flops down next to where Roy’s been sitting and watching the swirl and seethe of the water, listening to him discover the near-infinite surprises of marine biology. “What time is it?”

“No idea,” Roy says truthfully.

“I guess we should go back eventually,” Ed says. “Winry’ll actually send a search party.”

“Do you think she’ll enlist the coast guard?” Roy asks. “Or that she’ll send the yuppies?”

“Probably both,” Ed says.

“Can you imagine being tracked through the wilderness by yuppies?” Roy asks.

“Please never say anything that horrifying again,” Ed says, bumping his shoulder for good measure.

“Is this whole conversation your way of suggesting that we leave?” Roy asks.

“Nah,” Ed says. “Just wanted the hunted-by-yuppies nightmares. Thanks for that.”

“I do try to be obliging,” Roy says.

Ed bumps his shoulder again.

He bumps back.

“Okay,” Ed says. “Maybe we should go.”

“If the yuppies don’t find us,” Roy says, “the seagulls will pick our bones clean.”

“You’re so fucked-up,” Ed says in a voice that is almost… tender. He gets up, putting his weight on his right leg first, and stabilizes the left with his hands before holding them both out to Roy this time. “C’mon.”

Back to the yacht, back to company, back to civilization, back to the eyes that judge and the tongues that whisper. And people—well, Ed, apparently—wonder why Roy sometimes revels in the silence and solitude of an empty forest and an open trail. It’s just so much easier to exist when there’s nothing and no one to be accountable to.

“What is it with you?” Winry asks Roy, lifting her sunglasses as he and Ed step out onto a beach blanketed in swimsuit-clad yuppies. “Every time I turn around, you’re covered in dirt and bleeding everywhere! Are you okay?” Her startled gaze fixes on Ed and turns reprimanding. “Why don’t you take care of him, you jerk?”
“Fuck you, Win,” Ed says, breezing past her. “I’m his boyfriend, not his babysitter.”

“It’s my own fault,” Roy says.

“Fuck you, too,” Ed says cheerfully. “You know it’s not.”


Ed throws both hands into the air. “Took you fucking long enough to figure that out, given that I’m dating the fucking guy.” He strides off towards the dock, kicking up an incredible quantity of sand as he goes, and Roy moves to follow.

“Roy,” Winry says, and he half-turns back. She fans herself with her paperback and bites her lip. “Um—never mind.”

He gives her another moment, but she just smiles and waves him on, raising the book again.

“I guess we’ll be up in another minute,” she says. “Are you sure you don’t want to try this secret beach?”

Roy musters a smile for her as he shakes his head. “More for you.”

“I know your game,” Ling calls from the shadow of his umbrella. “You want to follow Ed up the ladder so you can stare at his ass.”

Ed isn’t too far ahead to hear and display a select finger over one shoulder.

“Can you blame me?” Roy asks.

“Au contraire,” Ling says, “I am beside myself with jealousy.”

“Right,” Roy says slowly. He glances over and is about to miss his chance to prove Ling at least partly correct, so he picks up the pace.

Ed, of course, is already halfway up the ladder by the time Roy flails an arm out to grasp the nearest rung.

“Don’t look at my ass!” Ed calls down.

“All right,” Roy says—not without a rather pronounced sense of disappointment.

Honestly, though, it’s not a bad idea to be focusing without distraction on gripping the rungs of the ladder and carefully making his ascent; a single extremely intimate waltz with death by plunging from a great height is enough for one day.

“You’re looking, aren’t you?” Ed says, and there’s a squeak that might be the soles of his Docs, and then a whoosh and a thud, and by the time Roy secures his hands and glances up, Ed’s face is peering down at him from over the side.

“No,” Roy says for good measure. “You asked me not to, so I refrained.”

Arms folded, Ed watches him as he clambers up, then lunges forward to grab his elbow when he wobbles, tipping his momentum and dragging him onto the deck.

Ed must be in a charitable mood indeed; he even waits until Roy’s caught his breath before: “Since when do you give a flying fuck about what I say?”
“I always give a fuck,” Roy says. “It’s just that the size and sincerity of the fuck are variable, and
the question of its airspeed velocity is another matter entire—”

“Shut up,” Ed says, but the laugh bubbling underneath it is seeping through his voice. “They’ve
got a little bathroom thing down in the whatsit—we should clean off your hand. You look like you
got in a fistfight with some barbed wire.”

“You should see the other guy,” Roy says.

Ed rolls his eyes. “If it gets infected and you get gangrene and die, I’m not even gonna feel sorry
for you.”

“And here I thought we had something,” Roy says, starting down the tightly-curved spiral stairs
that lead into the luscious interior rooms of the hull.

No parting comment slings after him—that’s a red flag by most reckonings, but Ed’s right that his
knuckles are in sore need of a hydrogen-peroxide shower, and the way Ling’s too-perceptive gaze
always sticks to his back like arrowheads buried in a bullseye makes him crave a breath of solitude.

His beleaguered skin doesn’t thank him, but he’s thanking his lucky stars that he’s on a yacht
owned by people so inconceivably wealthy that they stock their mountain cabin’s biggest toy’s
bathroom with disinfectants. Back in the real world, to which he’ll be returning rather sooner than
he’d like, the ripoff Windex from the dollar store still works okay if you water it down to make it
last longer.

When he’s bandaged up and has finished pitying his own poverty, he heads back up the stairs and
steps into the middle of a warzone.

“Get down!” Ed howls at him from behind a barricade of deck chairs, but it’s too late—

Lan Fan is faster than a speeding bullet on steroids, and before Roy’s even blinked, Silly String is
coating his face, snagging in his hair, and swinging in plasticky ropes down over his clothes.

“Well,” Roy says, since none of the curse words in his arsenal seem sufficient.

“Noooooo!” Ed cries.

“Man down!” Treavisor leaps over the rail of the upper deck, inspired by some combination of
parkour moves and sheer overexcited recklessness, in an attempt to ambush Lan Fan from above,
but she’s twice as fast as he is—he collides with her retaliatory stream of string in mid-air and
crumbles into it with his landing, like some kind of sick neon-webbed parody of Spider-Man.

“Not so fast!” Ed shouts, and Roy turns to see that he’s jumped up onto a deck chair in order to
hold an arm around Ling’s neck, his string canister’s mouth pressed to Ling’s temple. “Turn over
the hostage, or this douchebag gets it!”

“Oh,” Ling says in an extremely unconvincing impression of displeasure, arching his back and
rubbing his shoulders against Ed’s chest, “woe is me. Will I ever be liberated? How terribly
distressing.”

“You’re the worst hostage ever,” Ed says, wrinkling his nose and trying to writhe out of reach.

“So sorry,” Ling says, nudging his head against Ed’s collarbone, one step away from purring.

“Get off,” Ed says.
Ling’s grin is so unabashedly evil that the pits of hell look pleasant by comparison. “Here? In front of all these people? How very naughty you are.”

Ed makes a noise like a small animal being strangled.

Then he unloads at least fifty percent of the contents of his string canister in Ling’s hair.

“I suppose I deserved that,” Ling says, reaching up to test his new and rather disturbing headdress with a cautious fingertip.

“You’re damn fucking right you did,” Ed says, and in his hands, the rattle of shaking the can to replenish the spray manages to be menacing.

“Hey, Ling,” Winry says. “Catch!”

The water balloon she hurls directly at his face is so overloaded that even though Ling’s surprisingly quick reflexes help him get his hands up in time, it smashes on contact and soaks him instantly.

“None of this is biodegradable,” Roy hears his stupid voice say. Hopefully he’s the only one who hears it; he ignores Lan Fan’s snicker, which indicates otherwise, and turns to offer Treavor a hand in picking himself up off the deck. “What’s it for?”

“Well, it’s the last day,” Treavor says, grinning his gratitude and then starting to dust himself off. “Win and I figured we ought to pack in all the fun we can.”

Roy opens his mouth to say Right. ‘Fun’ and then closes it again. The prevailing evidence indicates that it actually is—he’s the one missing the point. No surprise there, at least.

“I have a question,” Lan Fan says. “Where is the arms store with the water balloons?”

Treavor looks delighted. “Here, come on.”
In an odd twist of fate, ‘fun’ turns out to be relatively enjoyable, insofar as it involves water balloon assaults and yacht-based espionage. It’s not as though Roy brought a great deal of dignity to check at the door, and once he orphans it near the cooler of filled balloons, he is presented with a golden opportunity to drench yuppies with freezing-wet projectiles when they least expect it.

It is definitively superior to paintball—there’s no risk of welts or lost eyes, and the reward for good aim is deafening screams from the targets as they get soaked. It’s also significantly easier to be strategically aggressive when testosterone-fueled madcap kamikaze rage is not the only way to survive without agonizing bruises and permanent paint stains.

Somehow it feels startlingly natural for Ed to fall into stride with him, and then they’re double-teaming people with ruthless efficiency—Ed creates loud diversions with Silly String assaults, and when he’s about to be outgunned, Roy descends with primed water balloons and perfect aim, and they leave a trail of wailing couples in their wake.

“This is too easy,” Ed says, twirling his canister like a six-shooter.

“Consider that they’ve never had to fight for their lives before,” Roy says. His ammunition is running low, primarily because water balloons are so damn unwieldy to carry in large numbers; is it worth the risk of darting back towards the cooler? He’d bet his savings that Lan Fan is lying in wait there for anyone stupid enough to come within pummeling distance—although that’s not actually a very impressive bet considering how pathetic his savings are right now. “They don’t have the instincts.”

“And they don’t play enough zombie-shooting games,” Ed says, peering around the corner.

“I didn’t realize at the time that we were training,” Roy says, hefting his next globular missile and watching the wall to their other side for any comers.

“Everything in life is training for something,” Ed says. He darts a glance past the edge. “Aw, shit. They’re getting smart and banding together. How many of ’em do you think we can take at once?”

“Uh,” Roy says, not especially helpfully.

“Put it this way,” Ed says. “Do you wanna run, or should we go down fighting?”

Roy would conquer kingdoms for his smile. “What do you prefer?”


“All right,” Roy says.

Theirs is a last stand worthy of *Gladiator*—maybe even of *Braveheart*.

Treavisor comes at them first, armed with Silly String in both hands; Ed feints left and then ducks under the spray, and Roy dodges outside, slipping wide of Treavisor’s aim while he’s watching Ed, the better to grab his elbow and, in a single motion, deprive him of his weapon and twist his arm up behind his back. Ed snags his other canister while he’s still startled, and Roy turns his twisting momentum into pushing momentum, shoving the small of Treavisor’s back to send him stumbling out of the way.
In perfect unison, he and Ed turn their newly-acquired canisters on Brown Pigtails and not-Jack Black, who fumble for their respective triggers—in vain; each gets a wad of string to the chest well before they’ve found their bearings. Three boyfriends whose names Roy has long since forgotten try to mob them next; Roy lobs a water balloon at one, and he goes down sputtering; Ed ducks two thick streams of string and darts between them. As they start to turn instinctively to chase him, Roy follows up with two more swiftly-aimed balloons—the first splatters beautifully on one guy’s face; the second breaks on the other’s shoulder, and several rather rude four-letter words sing out after him as he shadows Ed, and they glide onward.

Apparently the last three guys’ girlfriends weren’t idle all this time: they’re each hefting one of the biggest, fattest water balloons Roy has ever seen. He’s only got one of his left, and his string’s running low, and the gleam of the challenge in Ed’s eye is so dizzying that it’s impacting his balance.

The girls grin, Ed grins broader, and Roy rushes them.

One screams and drops her water balloon; the second startles backward and tosses hers upward; the third hurls hers at him, but the surprise makes her send it wide. Roy plucks the falling one out of the air, slips past them, and whirls at the slightest noise behind him to face—

Ling.

Roy could swear that his heart pauses, simply to prolong the moment of his unmitigated doom.

Ling swings a massive water ballon up to hold it directly over Roy’s head, produces a narrow pocketknife from nowhere, and stabs the balloon.

The water is freezing, soaking Roy’s hair in less than an instant and coursing frigidly down the back of his neck, snaking along his spine. The sheer amazement stills him, and then a shudder rattles through him in one wracking wave.

“God, Roy!” Ed catapults just past Winry’s merciless upended bucket. “You suck!”

“But does he do it well?” Ling inquires, smirk speaking a thousand volumes more.

Ed’s eyes widen to the size of Spartan coins, and he trips over his own feet and stumbles—

Roy reaches for him on instinct—

—and Lan Fan catches him in an outstretched, sopping wet towel coated with an intricate doily of silly string and wraps it around him securely.

“Best of both worlds,” she remarks when Ed’s finished screaming.

“That was unfair,” Ed says, prying himself free and scrabbling helplessly at his sticky cheeks.

“Like, seriously cheap. I hate you guys. Fuck you all. Let me guess—this was the last dry towel on the whole fucking boat?”

“Builds character,” Lan Fan says.

“But not friendships,” Roy says.

“Lighten up, you poor dear,” Ling says. “Why don’t we get you out of those wet clothes?”

There are a thousand stunningly clever things that Roy is going to say the split-second that his
throat unsticks, and his brain fires up. Any time now. His tongue has untied tighter knots. Any…
second… now…

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Ed says, and then two strong hands are fastening themselves on Roy’s elbow and tugging hard. “Not on my watch, pal. C’mon, Roy. You can keep ’em on.”

“Why, thank you,” Roy says.

“For now,” Ed says, and then he ducks his to hide the fact that he’s rapidly going thoroughly pink.

Speechless yet again, Roy allows himself to be led back over to the main deck, where Ed rights a chair and pulls them both down into it, fitting himself under Roy’s arm. Roy’s brain wants to argue, wants to fight it, wants to lie—but his body won’t let him; both arms curl around Ed’s waist and hold him close but gently. They must look like a pair of wet rats, and he cannot care; there’s a hot bubble of air in his chest that keeps expanding the longer he sits there, complicit, clinging to Ed and pretending like a child that it’s something other than it is—acting like it’s…

“Hey,” Ed says quietly. “You ever… I mean, I was just thinking—” His fingertips fiddle with a button on Roy’s shirt, twisting at it, tilting it. “You think maybe we should… I dunno. Try this for real?”

Struggling for words is really no fun at all; Roy doesn’t want to do it ever again. This whole so-called ‘vacation’ is a travesty. “I—what?”

“I dunno,” Ed says. His hand drops away; he folds it with the other and looks at them intently. “I just thought—maybe—never mind. It was fucking stupid; I shouldn’t’ve said anything. Fuck it. Just kidding. Haha.”


But Ed’s already getting up, shoving his hands into his pockets, and sauntering over towards the place the railing dips away for access to the ladder down. “I said never mind, Mustang. Get your fucking ears checked.”

Roy should get up, should go after him—should force the words out, fight the silence, make Ed understand—

But Ed gets mean when he’s on the defensive, and what is there to strive for? Precisely how is Roy supposed to say It’s not that I don’t want you; it’s that I’m the definition of a waste?

“It’s not you,” he says, but he can’t put any real strength behind it, because one of the others might hear. “I mean that—you’re—beyond belief, honestly; you’re wonderful, but I’m—”

“Full of fuckin’ clichés,” Ed says, eyes trained on the waves. “I got it. You don’t have to fucking sugarcoat it, okay? I can take the fucking truth.”

His heart won’t stop pounding. His mouth doesn’t seem to want to cooperate; it’s too desperate to protect him, but when Ed is crumpling like this, no fucking sacrifice is too great.

“The truth is that I’m fairly certain I’m in love with you,” Roy says. His voice comes out strangled and sort of lilting. Ed’s probably disturbed. “And I’m sorry. I wouldn’t wish that on anyone. I wouldn’t wish myself on anyone. But it’s—Ed, it’s not you.”

For the first time in over a minute, Ed turns towards him, and the hurt in his eyes is so raw—
“Don’t you fucking bullshit me, Roy,” he says, and his voice shakes, and his hand clenches around the railing. “Not about this. Don’t you fucking lie to make me feel better; don’t you fucking 
dare.”

“I’m not,” Roy says softly. “Not about this.”

Silence, and the waves, and laughter from around the upper deck.

And Ling, slithering up to Ed’s side so smoothly that he makes shadows seem inelegant.

“Fighting again?” he asks. “What a shame; what a shame. Does that mean I have a terribly attractively-shaped snowball’s chance?”

Ed’s forehead crinkles. “Say fucking what?”

“I’m hitting on you,” Ling says, all pure, blinding sunshine-cheer. “In the hopes that you’re angry enough to reciprocate just to spite him.”

“Fuck you,” Ed says, shoulders rising, tightening; his whole body is a single wire, wound taut, and some dubious higher power alone knows what happens should he snap—

“That would also be acceptable,” Ling stays placidly. He moves in closer, way too close—Ed must feel his heat, smell his sweat, taste his breath—his swift pale hands flick up and pin themselves against Ed’s collarbones, curling around the drawstrings of the damn sweatshirt, flirting with the edges of the hood. “Think about what fine revenge you’re wreaking.”

“I don’t believe in revenge,” Ed says, voice low and faintly frail. “And even if I did, he doesn’t deserve it.”

“No?” Ling purrs, leaning in closer, mouth tracing the line of Ed’s throat a spare inch away. “He’s never let you down?”

“Shut the fuck up,” Ed says, starting to lean back and finding the railing in the way. “What the fuck are you doing?”

A small, feeble part of Roy is sort of proud that Ed is frozen, staring at Ling’s hands like they’re foreign and incomprehensible—whereas Roy’s ministrations were met with wild, hungry reciprocation.

The rest of him is bound too tight for breathing with the abject horror of it all.

“Seducing you,” Ling purrs. “In front of your boyfriend. Isn’t that tantalizing ballsy?”

“Good idea,” Ed says.

“Beg pardon?” Ling says.

Ed brings his right knee up hard into Ling’s groin.

The shock and agony on Ling’s face is perhaps more enjoyable than Roy would like to admit, but he can hardly be blamed for that, can he?

But—as with everything, as with everyone—it’s short-lived. Waves from a motorboat passing with deafening gusto slap the side of the yacht; and the deck tilts slightly; and Ed, standing on his left leg with his right knee still raised, sways, then stumbles, then reaches for the railing, misses—
And—

Then—

Goes over the side in a flash of Doc Martens and a streak of gold.

Ling’s eyes are small universes; Roy’s heart is an anvil dangling by a thread, and the balance of a single beat—

—cuts it—

“I didn’t—” Ling begins, but Roy hardly hears him; Roy’s every muscle is straining to send him hurtling towards the railing; he grips the steel with both hands and stares down—

The water’s still froth-white, but there’s no sign of a red sweatshirt surfacing, no glimmer of a blond ponytail straggling up above the waves, no slender reaching hand—

“He’ll—” Ling’s voice falters. “I—he’ll come up—it’s not so far—”

Roy doesn’t give a half a damn for all the words in every Earthly language.

He kicks off his shoes, plants his hand on the edge, jumps up, lets the wind drag just for a moment at his shirt—at his jeans—at his hair—

And then he dives.

He aims safely to the right; a collision would be the end of both of them; how can it possibly be so far down?

The water meets him like a long-awaited lover born of oblivion.

Even splitting the surface tension with his outstretched hands, it’s like a slap to his whole skin—like he’s bruised everywhere in an instant. It seems ridiculous to open his eyes—vague memories laced with chlorine-burn bubble into his startled brain—but he forces them to widen and search before his lungs’ load wears thin.

The sunlight lances through the surface in pale stripes and sparkling beams; he twists around, propelling himself artlessly as the panic rises in him faster even than he can spend the oxygen—where the fucking hell is Ed? How—? He’s not heavy, whether or not he’d protest otherwise; he can’t have sunk too much further; surely Roy had more momentum—

There—a dark shape just a little lower, swinging at the water with three limbs, swaddled in the oversized clothes—so much fabric worn as armor; all his trademarks are so big; they’ve drunk so deeply of the water that wants to claim him—

Let it try.

Roy’s lungs ache; the air’s gone stale; he makes his sluggish body push through the thick of the lake towards the only thing that matters now.

A tiny trail pearls up from Ed’s lips; his hair floats wild like seaweed.

It feels to Roy like he’s moving through molasses—one would think the water would be welcoming; given that it makes up some seventy percent of his body mass, aren’t they nearly brothers?
He can hear his pulse pounding in his temples, and his muscles won’t stop wailing, and he reaches—reaches further—strives—he won’t let a goddamn motherfucking lake beat him, beat them both, drown them, own them, end this—

His fingers barely seem to be listening to his brain; he tries to clench them, tries again; they twitch, milky-white in the filtered light; his captive breath scalds his lungs; his heart bangs harder—

And then he has a fistful of Ed’s sweatshirt, and he grips it for all he’s worth; he kicks as violently as he can muster the energy for. Ed’s eyes fix on his face—and they’re both beating at the water, fighting it; they can’t lose to it; Roy won’t let them; the burn of oxygen deprivation courses through him up and down, but he has an arm looped around Ed’s waist now, and the surface keeps inching nearer, glimmering with the promise of air and sunlight—this silent, choking cage can’t hold them forever; they won’t lose this—his head’s swimming; his muscles whine; Ed’s so heavy, dragging at them both—Ed convulses against him, choking, as the rest of his air escapes in a rush and vanishes—Roy’s raised fingertips graze the surface, then break it, then greet the air; just one more push—

Ed gasps so deeply Roy thinks dizzily that his lungs must be about to pop—it’s a rough-edged, ragged, wet sound, desperate and instinctive; his hands fumble to clutch at Roy’s shirtfront, and his eyes are wild and unfocused; his hair draggles down his face, catching in his eyelashes and his mouth as he wheezes.

“Roy—” he forces out. “I t-tried, but my kn-knee—”

“I know,” Roy manages. Treading water for two of them is the best workout he never wanted. “I’ve got you.”

A sick sort of echo of a laugh emerges from Ed’s lips as he releases one vise-grip fistful of Roy’s shirt in order to swipe his hair back from his face. “I thought—I mean, how fucked would it’ve been if I’d died?”


Ed coughs violently for a long moment. Roy can’t quite look away from him; one of his hands rejects its assigned task of paddling to keep them afloat and applies itself to stroking Ed’s hair back instead. Towards the edge of his vision, something white and circular comes sailing through the air toward them, splashing them both on impact. Presumably that’s a lifesaver ring.


“Haven’t the faintest,” Roy says, slinging an arm out and catching the damn ring.

Ed draws in and presses his face to Roy’s cheek. “Fucking—I just—I could’ve—broken my fucking neck, I—”

“But you didn’t,” Roy says. His feet feel so heavy it’s difficult to believe. “It’s okay. I’ve got you.”

Ed looks up, meeting Roy’s eyes, and his expression is equal parts suspicion and hope.

He heard it this time—the layer of words underneath it. That it isn’t just I’ll keep you above the water—it’s I’ve got your back; it’s I’ll always have you; it’s I jumped off of a boat for you without a second thought, and I’d do so much more, but I could never ask you to do the same.
“Yeah?” Ed asks slowly. “You sure?”

Roy kisses him.

And this one… this isn’t for anyone else—not for any spectator; not to prove a goddamn thing; it’s not even for Roy himself.

This kiss is for Ed. Only for Ed. This kiss is all of the things that could be said if words existed that could contain them.

Ed draws back after a long moment and looks at him again, and this time there isn’t any doubt left.

There is, however, a bit of a pout. “You sure you’re sure?”

“Hey, idiots!” Winry screams down from the deck. “Get your dumb butts up here before you get hypothermia!”

Ed rolls his eyes intently, but he starts trying to propel their ungainly raft-tangle towards the ladder, and Roy can’t do much but to follow.

“I’m okay,” Ed says, scowling, as Winry fusses with how his sopping wet sweatshirt hangs on his shoulders. “Jeez.”

“Shut up,” Winry says, patting at him absently, “or maybe I just won’t care next time.”

“I’d like to see you try,” Ed says, but there’s gratitude radiating from him like a pulsing aura. “For fuck’s sake, I’m okay. Lungs okay. Knee okay. No brain damage.”

“Yeah, we’ll see about that,” Winry says. “But it’ll be pretty hard to tell.”

Ed’s scowl deepens. “Only if you’re a brainless mech-head.”

“Whatsoever,” Winry says.

For all that, when she tries to squeeze the hard-earned breath out of him, he doesn’t hesitate to hug her back.

When they reach the cabin’s dock again, the majority of the party begins to linger meaningfully near the jet-skis, but Ed sets a firebrand gaze on Roy.

“Can we talk?” he asks.

“Oh, shit,” one of the guys says. “Roy, what’d you do?”

“Shut the fuck up,” Ed says before Roy can even open his mouth for Saved his extraordinarily fine ass, if you must know. “You don’t know me, and that’s not what I meant.” He grabs Roy’s hand
and starts pulling. “C’mon.”

Roy goes where he’s led, like a rudderless ship—a Royderless ship. He wonders what happened to the crew. Presumably they all ignobly perished; perhaps a siren lured them overboard, and the ship lost the rudder drifting aimlessly into a reef…

It’s been a long day of near-death experiences and emotional roller-coaster rides.

When Ed draws him up the stairs and into their room and closes the door, he realizes, with a dismayed sort of resignation, that it’s not nearly over.

“So,” Ed says. He sets his jaw, folds his arms, plants his feet, and stares intently at the floor. “Are we—doing this, or not?”

Roy wants to sit down. Or hide. Or drop off the face of the Earth and disappear from human records. Or dissolve into his component molecules and reconfigure himself into something much more useful.

Like a doily.

He’d make a great doily.

Doilies don’t feel a great deal of pressure to perform; it would absolutely be a win-win.

“No,” he says. “I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

Ed’s head rises, and then his chin rises, and his eyes fix on Roy’s, but otherwise he doesn’t move.

“Yeah?” he asks, in a tone of such forced casualness that Roy has to hold himself back from wincing. “Why not?”

“You can’t fix it,” Roy says. These are the words that always skitter under his skin, squirm through his veins, flutter indefatigable at the inside of his skull—they’re so familiar, but somehow speaking them feels like coughing out shards of molten glass. “I can’t be fixed. I can’t be cured. I’m never going to be all right.”

Ed shoves his hands into his pockets and kicks viciously at the carpet, like it’s the only safe place to channel his frustration. “I get that, okay? I’m asking for you, asshole, not you with changes; I’m not fucking stupid. Must...
“You shouldn’t have!” Roy says. There’s a diamond in his throat now, all hard, sharp edges, frigidly cold and intractable. “You deserve better, don’t you get it? You deserve someone who can be good to you, and good for you, and treat you well and take care of you and—I am a quagmire, Ed; I am a sinkhole, and you’ve only seen the surface; you don’t know how deep it goes—”

“I said I don’t care!” Ed crosses the space between them in three strides to glare right up into Roy’s face, and he is incandescent, and Roy would smother him slowly; Roy would clutch that beautiful light in his clumsy hands and put it out. “Why won’t you even fucking try? What are you so fucking scared of?” He fists a hand in Roy’s shirtfront and yanks so violently that Roy can’t help staggering another half-step towards him. “I’m not fucking scared of you, okay? I’m not fucking scared of whatever fucking quicksand you think you’ve got; fucking try me; I eat that shit for breakfast.” His other hand joins the first; Roy can’t swallow and can barely breathe— “Speaking of fucking which, you’re a goddamn liar, Roy, because nobody has ever taken care of me like you do, and nobody has ever wanted me before.”

His heart is pounding in his head and in his wrists and in his fingertips; he could reach out and tuck half a dozen silken yellow strands back behind Ed’s little ear. “That’s ridiculous; people look at you all the time, and Ling—”

“Fuck you,” Ed says, twisting his hands tighter into the fabric. “That doesn’t fucking count, when people see my hair or my face or whatever and are like ‘Sure, I’d fuckin’ tap that’; nobody has ever gotten to know me and seen all the broken shit and all the scars and wanted to keep me.” His voice starts to tremble, and his eyes start to glimmer, and Roy’s heart starts to break. “And here you fucking stand, the first person who’s ever—and you fake it so well that they believe it, and I believe it, and I feel like somebody could actually—and now you’re trying to convince me that the only fucking person who has ever really wanted me in their life is too fucking crazy to be trusted—”

“That’s not what I meant,” Roy says, and he’s powerless to stop his hands from rising to flatten themselves gently against Ed’s chest, curling over his collarbones; Ed’s heart is racing, and his jaw is clenched. “There’s so much that you’re going to do, Ed; you’re so brilliant and so motivated that your potential is almost terrifying. There are so many incredible things ahead of you, and all I would do is drag you down and hold you b—”

“Shut the fuck up!” Ed releases Roy’s shirt in favor of grabbing his wrists and shoving him away—with enough force that Roy has to take a step back this time to save himself from toppling over. “You don’t know that, and it’s my fucking choice how I spend my fucking life, and why the fuck do you always act like you don’t have a fucking future?”

Roy retreats another step, then two, then three—until he can lean against the wall and lay his hands out on it, to ground himself, to give them somewhere to go.

“I don’t,” he says.

Ed’s eyes narrow, and the disgust in his voice stings sort of distantly. “Oh, for fuck’s sake, don’t give me—”

“Everything is cyclical,” Roy says. “Isn’t it? Matter, energy—it moves around, but it has to add up, and we always circle back to where we started out.”

Ed’s lip curls. “What the fuck does that have to do with you being such a fucking dick tha—”

“My mother didn’t just pass away one day,” Roy says, looking at the floor, at his shoes, at his
palm against the wallpaper. “She killed herself. The scarf, that I told you about, that she always wore—she hung herself in the kitchen. It was a Thursday. They think it was right about ten in the morning. I’d just started kindergarten. My father would drive me and another boy from down the street to school every day, and then his mother would drive us home just a little after noon. My mother worked mornings at a bookstore, and she’d always be home and have the door unlocked by the time I got there. She left it locked that day, but she didn’t know that my father had given me a copy of the key—just in case she ever forgot. I let myself in, and I made sure to wave to the other kid’s mother so she knew to drive away, and then I…”

It’s the little things that hunt him through the shadows of every room, that seep in at the edges of every dream—her eyes; her fingernails; the way he touched her ankle uncertainly, and she swung. The puddle on the floor; the welts around her neck; taking the chair she’d kicked away and righting it and climbing it to reach the phone. The 911 operator’s voice; he can’t remember his own—What do you mean, your mommy’s stuck, sweetie? Stuck how? The wait. The silence. The way she turned so slowly, almost leisurely, to face him again—to look at him, without seeing; to stare until the sirens came. The feet in the hall, the shouting, the people all in uniforms, the whole house full of strangers—someone wrapping him into a blanket even though he wasn’t cold—Where’s your dad? What’s your name? When did you get here? Is there somebody we can call?

Ed doesn’t need that. Ed’s got his own crosses balanced on his shoulders; Ed’s got his own graveyard of nightmares.

“When you’re four,” Roy says, “the way people talk about depression makes it seem like a monster that murders people. And as you grow up, you realize that the monster’s been inside you all along.”

He looks up. Ed is very still, shoulders slanted, eyes huge and horrified and intent.

“But you—” He clears his throat. “You’re not—her—I mean, you don’t—”

“But I feel it,” Roy says. A part of him wonders at this moment, with a muffled sort of awe; he’s never said this to anyone. Not to Riza, not to Maes, barely even to himself. “All the time. Over my shoulder. And sometimes I think it’s catching up. Some days I honestly don’t know if I can make it. I run shit I don’t need to in lab so that I have to be around the next day to deal with it. I don’t let myself buy big bottles of painkillers. I try to make up reasons not to, but some days—I’m not much of a liar; some days I don’t believe them; some days—”

“Shut up,” Ed says, and his voice breaks, and then he’s barreling across the gap of carpet between them, and he’s burying his face in Roy’s chest and wrapping both arms around him so tight— “I’ll give you fucking reasons, you stupid bastard; I’ll drag you with me; if it’s a fucking monster, then let’s fight it together; what’s wrong with you?”

“It’s a fight you can’t win,” Roy says. “And if you ever stop fighting, you lose.”

“You ever seen me give up, asshole?” Ed says, gripping him a little tighter still.

“No,” Roy says. Carefully, he lifts his arms and settles them around the shaking body pressed to his. “I guess not.”

“You talk about yourself like you’re a lost fucking cause,” Ed says into his shirt. “Fuck that. I found you.”

“I guess you did,” Roy says. He closes his eyes and buries his face in Ed’s hair; even damp from
the lake water, it smells amazing. Ed’s cheek is pushed against his collarbone, and he never wants to move. “But that’s… not the linguistic setup of the idiom. I mean, just for the record. It’s ‘lost’ as i—”

“Suck my dick,” Ed says.

He has to look up for that, and when Ed scowls up at him, he has to brush a little bit of wet hair back and meet it with a slightly wild grin.

“Would you like me to?” he asks.

Ed’s cheeks darken. “I dunno; it fuckin’ depends.”

Roy strokes his fingertips down Ed’s jaw. “On?”

“Whether you’re any fuckin’ good at it,” Ed says.

Roy’s solitary experience of administering a blowjob was conducted in the bathroom of a skeevy bar. It had been a shitty Friday to cap a shitty week, and the sheer force of the loneliness had swallowed his inhibitions whole; he sat at the counter stirring his Coke with his straw until some guy in a green shirt made eye contact and tipped his head towards the back hall. They kissed twice staggering through the shadows; the guy’s mouth tasted like beer and bar peanuts and sex; he had two inches on Roy, a scraping of stubble, and a vise-grip on Roy’s hipbone. Squinting, Roy could almost imagine him in glasses; the guy whipped his belt off to tie the bathroom door shut, and Roy honestly thought he was about to become a fucked-up crime statistic until the guy grabbed his hair and pushed him down onto his knees.

All he had to go on was a WikiHow article he’d cleared from his browser history and an adrenaline high that was almost whiting out his mind, but no one had ever accused him of being a slow learner, and the guy was so fucking vocal it was impossible to miss the cues. No teeth; take it back in your throat until just before you’d start choking; breathe a minute when your jaw ached so you could get the suction going again…

There was a weird, broken sort of satisfaction in gagging down some other sad asshole’s cum. The guy pulled him to his feet while he was still holding his hand over his mouth, squeezed his shoulder, kissed his forehead, and whispered “Thank you”. He disappeared again like a wisp of smoke, like he’d never been, but the parting flash of gold on his left ring finger set Roy to vomiting until everything was gone.

“I guess you’ll have to be the judge of that,” he says.

Ed smiles. “You guess an awful lot of shit for somebody who calls himself a scientist.”

“You talk an awful lot of shit,” Roy says, cupping his face in both hands. “You want to find out?”

“Y’know,” Ed says, lips parting into a grin that tips wicked, “I really think I do.”

“For science,” Roy says.

“Nah,” Ed says, fisting both hands in his shirt. “For us.”

“Are we not science personified?” Roy asks.

Ed tries to roll his eyes, start laughing, and drag Roy into a kiss all at once, which ends in…
Well, perfection. It ends in perfection.

Roy’s heart is banging with equal parts terror and elation; if only it was just the latter—but it’s something, and it’s something good, and maybe the scales will tip gently towards that good if he just holds out long enough to believe that this is real—

He draws them a step backwards towards the bed without breaking the kiss, then another; just thinking about Ed’s hair streaming out across the sheets makes his blood quicken and his guts heat —

“Hang on,” Ed mumbles against his mouth.

Of course.

He shouldn’t even have asked, really; he ought to have known better than to expect, better even than to hope, that someone as simultaneously guarded and gentle-souled as Ed Elric wouldn’t hesitate to leap into bed with the likes of him after five shitty days of forced companionship.

“Sorry,” Roy says, and he is—apologetic and pathetic; personally and on the whole.

“No,” Ed says. “We’re fucking filthy. We can’t get in the bed like this; I wanna sleep in that later.”

Roy blinks.

The universe realigns itself a little bit.

“We,” he says slowly, “have… options.”

The floor. The wall. They could drag a couch up the stairs; they could do it in one of their suitcases; he doesn’t even care; his whole body is throbbing at the thought—

“You know what else we have?” Ed asks, and his grin is a beacon, and his eyes are alight.

Roy tilts his head in question as his voice fails once and for all.

“Bath salts,” Ed says.

They pour them all in. The water in the massive bathtub froths and foams and turns a rather alarming, very murky shade of pink. Ed pushes up the sleeve of his sweatshirt and starts stirring with his arm, and the whole thing roils.

“You sure this is safe?” he asks.

“Not even remotely,” Roy says. “But if they’re not toxic in small portions, they shouldn’t be in any quantity, right?”

“Shouldn’t,” Ed mutters, betrayed by the beginnings of a grin. “Real fuckin’ reassuring.”

“Well, what do you think?” Roy asks, peering into the depths. “Worth the risk?”
Ed is looking at him, not at the bathtub, and that smile is only getting wider. “I think let’s dive in and see what happens.”

Roy’s hands are shaking, but not so hard that he can’t peel a hoodie off of the lithe body underneath his palms. It’s really not his fault that he gets distracted by Ed’s hips, framed and cradled as they are by the low waist of his jeans; and then Ed’s abs, which are like some kind of nerdy scientist miracle-fantasy porno-dream—

“You ever done this before?” Ed asks, and his breath keeps catching, and Roy is on top of the world.

“Depends on what you mean by ‘this,’” he says, skimming his fingertips up under the obligatory black T-shirt and then tugging it off. Ed’s hair does an adorable sort of fwip thing as it pops out around the departing collar. “I’ve had sex. I haven’t had sex with a guy. I haven’t had sex in a bathtub. I definitely haven’t had sex with a guy in a bathtub. And to be honest—” He owes that much. “—I haven’t ever felt this fucking excited about it before I even got started.”

Based on the clumsy abruptness with which Ed jerks his polo off, either the feeling is mutual, or Ed just really hates that shirt.

“Cool,” Ed says as he pitches it aside, so maybe it’s the latter after all. He drags his hands down Roy’s chest, counting the bones, cataloguing the scars and the blemishes, drinking it all in with those damned amazing eyes. He glances up just as Roy starts to get goosebumps, and the intensity of his focus fades into another grin. “Guess we get to figure it out together.”

“Shouldn’t be too hard,” Roy says, sweeping Ed’s bangs back from his face. “We’re a pair of brilliant scientists, after all.”

“Oh, it’ll be hard, all right,” Ed says, grabbing Roy’s hips to trap them while he grinds his in close.

Roy’s intellect has just enough time to gasp Holy shit yes before it fizzles out and fails him, and the burning of his blood is all that remains.

The bath salts do not seem to be a detriment, at least, but some sentient piece of Roy doesn’t suppose that anything short of a full-scale apocalypse could stop them once they start.

“Wow,” Ed says, curling up against him, all smooth wet skin and glossy hair. He doodles something that might be a molecular structure on Roy’s chest with his fingertip. “That was… wow.”

“Couldn’t have put it better myself,” Roy says. He has both arms wrapped around Ed’s waist and all his hopes hung on the uneven weight balanced against him. He’d never really planned for sex with an amputee, but between Ed’s flexibility and his creativity, there wasn’t more than a moment to think about it—it wasn’t sex with a category, or a disability, after all; it was sex with Ed, and it was fucking magnificent.
Roy holds him a little tighter. The water’s going cool, but he doesn’t particularly care.

Ed goes quiet for a long minute, and then he draws back to search Roy’s face.

“There’s one thing you gotta promise me,” he says, breath hot, eyes blazing but so… fragile, somehow; they’re the center of a small flame, and enough water could douse them right to ash.

Damn you, Roy thinks.

“Anything,” he says.

“Never get me fucking flowers,” Ed says. At the rising eyebrows, he grips Roy’s shoulders in both hands. “I mean it. They remind me of the hospital, and it makes me feel like shit. If hell smells like anything, it’s dying flowers and fucking antiseptic and my own fucking skin. Can’t stand it. Just—please.”

Roy draws him into a hug, rocking a little, breathing deep. “For the record, I think your skin is the best smell on Earth.”

He can feel the smile unfurling against the side of his neck. “Yeah, but you’re a dumbass.”

“True,” Roy says. He drags his fingertips through some of the wet tangles, freeing them from each other. “I won’t. I promise.”


“Of course,” Roy says, but what he wants to say is Always.

Ed is silent for a long moment, and then he clears his throat. “One more thing.”

Roy tries so desperately not to fear. “Yes?”

“You gotta let me in,” Ed says quietly, lifting one arm to wrap around Roy’s shoulders, fingers winding into his hair. “No matter how hard it gets, no matter how bad it gets, you gotta trust me with it. We have to be in this together. Okay?”

Roy thinks of saying I’ll try, which is the most he can realistically offer, but…

Wouldn’t an impossible pledge give him something to strive for? Wouldn’t it help to keep him honest?


Ed exhales softly. “So what do you want from me?”

“Never shave your head,” Roy says. He pretends to contemplate. “And… that’s all.”

“Dipshit,” Ed mumbles, snuggling a little closer.

“You look awfully relaxed,” Winry says, several hours later, as Ed arranges two hamburgers on his plate and fences them in with fries.
“What’s so awful about it?” Ed mutters, but Roy can see the grin burgeoning on his face—and a light brush of Roy’s hand to the small of his back only makes it widen.

Winry shoots Roy a look, which he meets with the single most innocent expression that he can muster, emphasized by a careless shrug.

“Hey,” Ed says, elbowing him in the ribs—but so gently that it’s almost fond. “Eat something before you waste away.”

“If you insist,” Roy says, and kisses his cheek, and curls a finger in one of his belt loops.

Ed leans in and murmurs hotly into the shell of his ear: “If you’re good, you can have me for dessert.”

Roy’s throat goes instantly dry. “You don’t say.”

Ed nips at his earlobe. “Do so.”

“Well, then,” Roy says.

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Despite an evening of milkshakes and rich-person celebration followed by magnificent sex and marathon cuddling, Roy’s eyes winch open at fifteen minutes after six.

The first thing he notices is that his right hand is completely numb, which is presumably a result of the fact that it’s wedged under Ed’s shoulder-blade and has been for goodness-knows-how-long.

He props himself up on his left elbow, grabs his right wrist, and carefully slides his hand out. Ed’s eyelashes don’t even move.

This is clearly the perfect opportunity to admire the eyelashes in question, then. Roy struggles to wriggle his fingers and massage some life back into his palm while he gazes rapturously at the small, bedheaded miracle sprawled out with more than his share of the sheets.

There’s a flutter of panic deep in Roy’s chest—wisps of smoke slipping out from under the vault door, what-ifs and worries and the usual litany of woes.

But mostly there’s his heart beating to an uncharacteristically soft, warm rhythm—Maybe, maybe, maybe.

Ed’s heart is so big, maybe even someone with all of his jagged edges can fit comfortably inside.

Maybe there’s hope for him.

Maybe he’s finally come home.

_____________________

Chad is already rummaging in the refrigerator by the time Roy drags himself into the kitchen, on
the hunt for the not-especially-elusive coffee.

“Hey, there,” Chad says, smiling at him. “Last day, huh?”

“Yeah,” Roy says. “Supposedly we’re leaving at ten, which I figure means eleven at the earliest.”

“Sounds about right,” Chad says.

Chad hands him things and loiters while he makes a pot of coffee and a plate of bacon and eggs for Ed.

“So, uh,” Chad says as he finishes up and starts playing tray Tetris, “it was nice to meet you.”

“You, too,” Roy says. He finds that he kind of means it, so he frees a hand up and offers it to shake. “Take care.”

“Right back at you,” Chad says. He’s got a good handshake, for what that’s worth. “And…” He nods towards the stairs. “Take care of him, too.” At Roy’s raised eyebrow, he grins. “It makes you happy. What can I say?”

There isn’t really a snappy rejoinder for that.

It’s actually looking like they might straggle out the door by 10:45. Roy wonders if the Apocalypse is nigh.

They’re waiting in the entryway with their suitcases while Sara runs back for “one more thing”, and Ed’s just crouched down to do up his Docs’ laces when Ling saunters in, shirtless and yawning with his arms stretched up over his head.

He pauses in mid-yawn, and Ed pauses in mid-knot, and Roy can think of six-hundred-million places he’d rather be right off the top of his head—including the center of an active volcano, and the bottom of an overflowing dumpster.

“Oh,” Ling says. “You’re heading out, then?”

“Yeah,” Ed says slowly. He jerks the knot tight and stands carefully; Roy has to resist the urge to reach out and steady his shoulder in case his knee betrays him. Ed knows when he needs help, and he doesn’t shy away from asking.

Ling considers the wallpaper for a long moment.

“I am sorry,” he says, sounding genuinely thoughtful, “for yesterday. My excitement sometimes gets the better of me.”

Ed’s eyes are dagger-sharp for a long moment before they soften just a touch.

“Yeah,” he says. “Apparently.” He scuffs his left foot against the tile. “Your ’nads okay?”

“I am confident they will recover,” Ling says, folding his hands behind his back. “Thank you for your concern.”
“Sure,” Ed says slowly.

“Do we part as friends?” Ling asks, and he looks so staggeringly hopeful that Roy has roughly equal urges to smack him hard and hug him tightly.

Ed, however, has leveled a pretty good glower. “Maybe.”

Ling wilts. “You wound me, dear Edward,” he says. “An inconclusive answer is worse torment than a ‘no’.”

“Tough shit,” Ed says.

Before Ling can get any more misery in, there’s a streak of blonde tearing down the stairs and flinging itself at Ed.

“Don’t you dare take off without saying goodbye!” Winry howls.

“Couldn’t if I tried,” Ed says, sounding more than a little bit strangled. “Maybe if you—ow, Win—visited—more—”

“I was thinking about getting an old VW wagon and fixing it up and pimping it out into, like, a custom RV,” Winry says, stepping back and beaming. “We could test it out with a road-trip!” She half-turns and beams a little more. “What do you think, baby?”

Treavisor, at the foot of the stairs, has his hands shoved in his pockets. He smiles back. “Sounds good to me.” He moves over with one hand outstretched. “Hey, thank you guys for coming—seriously. It was beyond awesome to meet you.”

“Thanks for having us,” Roy says—sincerely, no less—as he shakes.

Predictably, Treavisor drags him into a man-hug and pounds his back, and Ed is going bright red with the effort of not laughing at him when he pulls away.

Roy mouths You’re next! and then grins his victory as his premonition comes true.

Ed’s still pouting when they get into the car.

Then he puts his head against Roy’s shoulder, and Roy’s pretty sure that all is forgiven on every side.

“National fucking Geographic,” Ed says from Roy’s lap, which is currently serving as a pillow. “Can’t believe this shit. I love that they put your face in it. They should’ve just come right out and called the article Wait, Science Is Still Sexy! No, Really, Look!”

“Then they would’ve had to put your face in it,” Roy says, tugging gently at the hair trailing over his thigh. “Don’t read like that; you’ll—”

“‘Wreck my eyes, and that would be an unspeakable tragedy’,” Ed finishes. He shuffles the magazine he’s holding up above himself defiantly. “And I will not. Come on, this is great! Did you even read it? They kept the part where Izumi called you ‘an extraordinary young man’. Although they didn’t mention me laughing my ass off or you turning bright red.”
“Mediocre journalism,” Roy says. “I wish it had been you instead of me—that would have been a lovely birthday present to you from the American media.”

“This is better,” Ed says, and by the light in his soon-to-be-wrecked eyes, it looks like he means it.

Roy loves this couch, and this apartment, and this beautiful, wonderful, magnanimous boy. *National Geographic* can go fuck itself; he has what he wants.

Ed examines the picture of him again and then frowns up at him thoughtfully. “Doesn’t really do you justice, though,” he says. “Loses a lot of your charm. And a lot of your raw animal sex appeal.”

Ed will not fail to notice the way Roy shifts his legs a little as his jeans start to get slightly uncomfortable. “You don’t say.”

Ed tosses the magazine onto the table, grin growing more wolfish with each passing moment. “You bet your fine ass I do.” He’s up and straddling Roy’s hips in the time it takes to blink. “When’s Winry supposed to get here, again?”

“Much too soon,” Roy breathes against his mouth. “Perhaps—” His will is trembling; his better judgment has a tendency to crumble under the weight of Ed’s gaze alone. “—we should—take this up again after cake—”

“Perhaps,” Ed says, rolling his hips in a way that should be illegal.

That’s when the doorbell rings.

Of course.

“Fuck,” Ed says.

“Or not,” Roy says, kissing his cheek, grabbing his unfairly delicious hips, and depositing him on the next cushion over. “I’ll get it.”

“I’ll lie here and hate the universe,” Ed says, draping himself over the couch arm for good measure.

When Roy opens the door, however, instead of squealing and trying to hug the breath out of his chest, Winry beams at him and holds a finger to her lips. Behind her, Treavor is carrying a cake box, and behind them…

“Bonsoir,” a tall boy with wheat-colored hair and a dusting of freckles says, stepping over the threshold with suitcase in hand. “*Comment ça va?* You must be Roy.”

It’s a good thing there doesn’t seem to be any doubt in his mind about it, because Roy doesn’t have a chance to answer before Ed is strangling the life out of the newcomer and, by the looks of it, barely holding back a considerable quantity of tears.

“You shit!” he gets out, hitting the arm of the boy who cannot be anyone other than Al without relinquishing his death grip. “You said you couldn’t leave until spring break! You liar!”

“It was true when I told you,” Al says, curling his fingers into the back of Ed’s shirt. “Then I convinced my advisors to change their minds. I might have left that part out when I talked to you, but that’s hardly lying, is it?”
“Is so,” Ed says. “I’m going to kill you when I’m done hearing about everything you did and how great it was—I’ll wait ’til you’re stuffed full of cake and don’t expect it.”

“I see my absence has done nothing to dull the terrifying severity of your threats,” Al says.

Roy decides he likes him.

By the end of the evening, Roy has hurt his face laughing a few times, and Ed has eaten an entire quarter of the cake without any assistance. Roy has also learned that Treavor’s family has purchased a second cabin directly next to a ski resort in Colorado; and that despite the numerous polar opposite aspects of their personalities, Al lapses into the exact same searingly incisive, laser-focused brilliance that Ed does once the topic of science comes up.

They’re back on the couch as the night winds down. Ed’s leaning against Roy’s shoulder and watching Al with a funny little half-smile—there’s a great deal of pride in it, and something like relief. Then his attention swivels, and he looks up at the same moment that he seizes onto Roy’s hand.

“Okay?” he asks.

It’s been a lot of noise, a lot of energy, a lot of small-scale chaos—Roy’s nerves are a little raw, and the dark and their bed are calling to him like sirens from the shore, but Ed’s fingers are twined through his, and he’s holding on.

“I’m fine,” he says. Ed’s eyebrow arches, and he adds, “I mean that.”

The more Ed smiles up at him, the truer it becomes.

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