Postmortem

by Akarri

Summary

Roy gets a little too close to realizing the Homunculi’s plot thanks to being in the wrong place at the right time. Naturally, they have no choice but to remove him from the picture.
(Updates mostly daily)

Notes

Here we go again! I'll be aiming to update roughly every day or every other day, depending on how busy I am. Hope you enjoy the story!
Chapter 1

Roy regarded himself to be a reasonable person who surrounded himself by equally well-minded people. He certainly wouldn't consider any of his acquaintances to be conspiracy theorists, but that was exactly the type of impression Hughes made when Roy walked into the record room the night after his abrupt transfer to Central.

The colonel had spent the majority of the day overseeing the details of his transfer from East City, ensuring that each and every one of his office's belongings properly made their way to his new workstation within the nation's capital. His promotion was unexpected and surely would have been chaotic and disorganized had he not personally gotten so involved. The trials of the day had him exasperated, but not enough so to ignore the puzzling lack of his best friend.

When he finally managed to track Maes down after the sun had set and the majority of the building's occupants had returned home, he was expecting three bear hugs and a twenty minute rant about how he would have to come over for dinner every Saturday night for the rest of his life now that they lived in the same city, and was concerned when that wasn't what he got. The shock of what he did get at least rattled him out of his mild annoyance at having to stay late, but only for a moment.

Maes was distracted. He abandoned the vast collection of documents and files he had spread out over a map of the city to greet him, but there was no mistaking the tense nervousness that undulated from him. He tried to avoid discussing whatever was on his mind in favor of celebrating Roy's promotion, but his efforts were in vain when pit against the colonel's stubborn nature, and he eventually opened up.

Reports of riots in Liore had recently made their way into newspapers, portraying the gruesome havoc that wrecked the small desert town that they all thought to be neutralized. Roy had already caught wind of the most recent development but ordinarily wouldn't expect it to stir up such a reaction from the pragmatic lieutenant colonel.

Whenever Maes' mind would wander away from Roy, it seemed as if he was holding his breath, waiting for something terrible to happen and yet having no idea what to look out for. Enough prodding revealed that he was concerned about the surplus of violence that arose lately; from Ishval, to the ongoing border war with Aerugo, and uprisings in the north, west, and now Liore.

"The bodies are piling up all over," Maes said when questioned. "The government's going to have a hard time keeping control at this rate." Roy agreed that the situation was bleak, although it was clear to see that they were not quite on the same page.

"What are you getting at, Hughes?" he eventually asked to cut straight to the chase, long since accepting that he wasn't going to be returning to his new home quite as soon as he had hoped.

The lieutenant colonel studied his friend for a moment, pursing his lip, then shifted his gaze down towards the array of documents that littered the table which divided them. "After the Eastern soldiers neutralized the area, they were replaced by Central troops. Almost immediately after that, the violence skyrocketed."

Roy nodded as he followed along. That reminded him that he still needed to tell Fullmetal about this recent development. The kid had returned to Resembool right after turning in his report about exposing the false prophet, and was hospitalized by that whole Fifth Lab incident almost as soon as he came back. He had only just been released, if Roy recalled correctly, and it was unlikely that he
had caught wind of this.

"I came across some transmission recordings, and..." Maes trailed off and drew his stare away from the table to settle on Roy, striking him to the core with the chilling unease in his eyes. "They wanted chaos to break lose. When there was unrest, orders were to respond with violence. Even though Eastern Command had already reigned in control, the Central soldiers were sent in expecting to be attacked, so they were told to attack first instead... But they should have known."

The colonel felt his expression harden as his mouth suddenly felt dry.

As much as Roy wanted to deny it, blaming communication would be foolish. "You're saying that someone high in the chain of command wanted Liore to tear itself apart." To think that they intended for violence and hatred to fester and spread like a virus until blood stained every road and all signs of civilization were destroyed- it sounded like a conspiracy. Judging by his friend's worry, no one was doing anything to stop it. "And you're sure about this?"

Maes nodded somberly. "Positive."

"But there's more to it than that, isn't there?" Roy asked, keying into the trepidation that radiated off of the man.

"... Maybe. I'm not sure yet." He looked as if he planned to continue, but he was cut off by a yawn, and reached for his coffee mug, disappointment clearly flashing across his visage when he realized it to be empty. Roy considered him for a moment.

"You should go home, Maes."

His friend glanced at him with a start, failing to hide the lack of sleep that shown through every blink. "I'm close to something, Roy. I can feel it. I-"

"It'll be here tomorrow."

"But-"

"You look like you're minutes away from passing out."

Hughes paused and blinked, then slowly allowed the refusal to be replaced by a grim smile. "It's that bad, huh?" He stifled another yawn.

"Aren't you usually the one telling me that the world won't fall apart the moment I get some rest?"

Roy asked pointedly as he began to pile up the loose documents.

Maes chuckled wearily. "Yeah. I guess I should listen to my own advice." He too began to collect all of the information until everything that was sensitive was safely stored away. All that remained was the map, and a collection of recorded dates.

"I'll take care of the rest," Roy offered and ushered his friend towards the exit.

Hughes complied, most likely due to how tired he was than anything else. He paused in the door frame in thought as he looked back at the colonel. "It's good to have you here, Roy," he said with a tired smile.

He was probably taken a little off guard by how Roy Mustang had offered to stay later to finish work out of his own free will but in all honestly, Roy was just as surprised. Perhaps the resignation regarding staying late that he had already established doused his usual determination to do
whatever possible in order to leave. Or maybe he just missed that goofball and had no desire to see
him work himself half to death. But whatever the case was, he waved off Maes' reluctance. The
man eventually left the room with no lack of hesitation, leaving the door open to allow more light
to flood into the dim archive room.

Roy had certainly not expected his first day at Central to end on such a curious note.

Turning his attention back towards the table, his eyes fell on the map that had been sprawled out,
untouched besides a circle of ink around the town of Liore.

If it was true that the military threw the town into ruin, then what did that mean for the other
uprisings that were sprouting around the country?

He traced a finger down the dated list of events, mentally picking out all of those that included an
unusual amount of bloodshed. Pinpointing a few of the locations, he began to get an ominous sense
of foreboding. Roy picked up the map of the country as his breath was held in his throat, unsure if
he could believe what he was thinking, all while hoping it was untrue.

A shadow passed over the table, obscuring the black text from view. His rapidly spinning thoughts
came to a halt when a feminine voice greeted him from the doorway.

"Sir," Hawkeye began with a salute as she stepped further into the dark room, ever professional
even while work hours had officially passed. Her shadow shortened with her movement until she
stood by the other end of the table to face him. Though she was silhouetted by the light flooding
out from the hallway behind her, Roy could still clearly see her studious eyes on him and the subtle
flicker of concern that was portrayed by only the slightest crease of her brow. He had almost
forgotten that she stayed behind to finish some loose ends in the transfer process as well.

Even though she came baring her own news, her first matter of business was to ask "what's wrong"
the moment she caught the alarm in his eyes.

"Hopefully nothing," he replied simply, wishing that was all it was. The colonel released his grip
on the map to let it fall back to its place on the table as he easily willed his expression back into
something more neutral.

"What do you have to report?" When she first walked in, he fully expected her to simply alert him
that she was going home for the night, but the way Hawkeye stood and the very air around her
suggested otherwise.

"We received new orders."

"Already? At this hour?"

"Scar has just been spotted on the north side of town."

"What?" The colonel straightened with a start, sensing all hopes of getting any sleep that night
flying away. "How did he get here so quickly?" Last he heard, Scar was injured in East City.

Shaking his head, he walked towards the exit as his focus changed, deciding to leave the Liore
situation for another day. While the underground scheme that was occurring within the military
was clearly dire, the more immediate issue automatically took priority.

"Never mind," he added before Hawkeye could consider his question. "Gather the team; we're
going after him."
"Including Edward?"

Roy paused mid-stride as the teenager appeared in his mind. He supposed her question proved that he was indeed already freed from the hospital's notoriously tight grasp.

Edward, who was used as a pawn to create another civil war. Who blindly walked into it. It was not Fullmetal's fault, but vexation still brewed at the thought of it. But regardless, he was not going to put a target on the kid's back by sending him after Scar no matter how soon he wanted to have that impending conversation.

"No. We'll keep Fullmetal out of this one... Let's go."

The streets of Central City were particularly dark that night due to the thin, curved sliver of light that was the moon, and the stars that were dimmed by the city lamps that resided on every block. The team was alert and ready, already well acquainted with working late through the night. Stationed at a temporary mission base that was originally an office building on the north side of town, Roy relayed the plan to capture the infamous Ishvalan.

A blockade had been set up around the perimeter of where Scar was last spotted, which was thankfully away from any residential areas. At the center of that zone was their makeshift base, where the colonel himself would act as a lure. Hawkeye left to climb up to the tower across the street in order to keep her scope out for their target. As much as she wanted to stay by his side in case the alchemist murderer actually managed to reach him, he insisted that she would be of more use from above.

Meanwhile, Havoc was on his way to join another small group of soldiers who were tasked with prompting Scar closer to the center of the blockaded area, and the rest would remain at the base. While the colonel didn't think he needed the extra security when he had Flame Alchemy and a clear sky on his side, Hawkeye did not agree. But it didn't make much of a difference, he supposed. They would circle Scar like a trapped mouse and bring an end to this once and for all.

He was certain that everything would go flawlessly.

That is, until a short, irate blond stomped his way into the the old office building that they had claimed for the occasion, followed by an apologetic suit of armor.

"What the hell, Colonel!?"

Drawing his eyes away from the city map that was marked with the strategic placement and movements of soldiers, Roy stared at Fullmetal with a frown immediately in place.

"What do you think you're doing here, Fullmetal?" he demanded, ignoring both the kid's question as well as the stares coming from his other subordinates.

"Why didn't you tell me Scar's here? I still need to get back at him for breaking my arm last time," Ed growled, clenching a brand new metal fist.

"Go back to the dorms. You're not authorized to be here."

"Authorized," Edward scoffed. "As if I need permission."

"Besides," Alphonse added, covering up his brother's sarcastic remark before Roy could retort. "You need all the hands you can get, don't you?"
"In case you've forgotten, Scar \textit{kills} State Alchemists. I'm not going to have a repeat of what happened last time you two got into a fight with him."

"What, so you're going to have him single you out instead? If I remember correctly, you weren't much of a help last time either, Colonel Useless."

"I already have a plan to deal with him, and there's no room in it for you."

"Then change the plan."

"No, Fullmetal. You're a walking hazard."

"\textit{What}?"

Roy paused and withheld a sigh as he looked at the kid who he could only describe as pouting. Alphonse interjected again in an attempt to hastily mollify whatever tension was beginning to form. "Please Colonel, we just want to help."

Roy squeezed the bridge of his nose and sighed through his teeth. He looked over to Fuery, who was pretending not to listen as he fiddled with his communicator.

"Fuery, has Scar's location been confirmed?"

The young sergeant jumped. "Uh- they know he's in the area, but haven't pinned him down yet."

Without another word, Roy brought his attention back to the Elrics, knowing full well that Fuery would update him if anything changed.

"Fine," he groaned, almost certain he would later come to regret the decision. He turned his back to the two and looked down at the decorated map and picked up a pen. "Alphonse is too noticeable, so you two will have to lay low. Perhaps closer to the southern side of the perimeter," he mused, speaking primarily to himself.

Edward appeared besides him as he dropped the tip of the pen on the map in contemplation, staring at a street corner that was a few blocks away from their current location.

"Hold on."

"That's the point."

"Don't think you can take him on without me!"

"Remember your place," Roy huffed, sending the teenager a withering glare that was swiftly ignored.

"Whatever. I'll be right here if you need me," Edward stated, planting an automail finger in the center of the map where a circle had been drawn, indicating where they planned on capturing Scar. It was also where Roy would be stationed.

And with that said, the teenager turned out, his coat billowing gently behind him, and moved to make his exit as his brother watched the scene with mild apprehension.

"Fullmetal," Roy growled irritably and frowned as the kid approached the door. "Fine, but Alphonse still needs to stay out of sight."
Again, he was given no attention as the teenager continued, followed closing behind by his apologizing brother.

Soldiers fell into position within the small blockaded section of the city, all certain that an infamous murderer was lurking somewhere within.

Falmen, Breda and Fuery, who were originally going to be stationed near the colonel, had been moved further away to account for Ed and Al's appearance. Knowing those two, things were surely going to get destructive if Scar ran into them, and he didn't want his men in the thick of the crossfire. While his first lieutenant kept her watchful eyes on the streets below from the tallest building in the area, the rest of the team was scattered in very particular locations, all armed, focused, and ready.

However, the same could not necessarily be said for the impatient teenager who paced from side to side, unintentionally chipping away at Roy's tolerance with every step.

The colonel was standing in the shadows of the old building, turned to face a small clearing, well aware that it was still too early to expect their guest's arrival. Alphonse was hiding in a similar situation on the other side of the plaza, unsuspecting that Roy currently envied him. Why Edward insisted on being right in the middle of everything despite having to share space with his least favorite superior officer was a mystery.

"What's taking him so long?" Edward muttered with his arms folded, and not for the first time that night.

"Stop complaining."

The young alchemist finally stopped his pacing and turned to face the colonel, looking him over with scrutinizing eyes. "What's your problem?"

Holding back the bite in his response required a colossal effort on Roy's part. "... I don't have a problem." Besides the fact that a serial killer was on the loose, of course. And that's also not to mention that he was working at such late hour with only a child for company, and the discovery Hughes revealed to him earlier was still floating at the front of his mind.

"Yeah, you do. Or are you just naturally this irritable?"

Well, no one could say he didn't try. "Fine. You are my problem, Fullmetal," he sighed, keeping his gaze focused on the clearing as he allowed himself to lean against the brick wall of the building that shielded them from view.

"What did I even do this time?" the teen asked exasperatedly, spreading his arms to express his annoyed bewilderment. Roy glanced at him silently as it dawned on him that Ed had no consideration for all he had to change in order to allow his presence here. His unintentional involvement in the Liore riots also came to mind in that moment, further reminding Roy of everything that divided his attention, each factor chipping further and further away at his tolerance.

"It doesn't matter right now. We have other things to focus on. Forget I brought it up."

"What? No way! You can't just blame me for something and then not tell me what it is."

"I'm not blaming you for anything." With a grating sigh, Roy ran a hand through his hair and relented. Anything to get the brat to shut up. He knew Fullmetal was at risk of blaming himself for the riots, but he would much rather discuss an actual issue that had been bothering him than
complain about the teen's usual impulsive tendency to interfere with his plans. "The Liore situation is... distracting me."

The statement put Edward at pause as the irritation was wiped from his face to be replaced by confusion. "Huh? I already dealt with Liore. What's the problem?"

"... The entire town is rioting against the military presence."

"I- what...? Why would they..?"

Upon seeing the pure shock on the kid's visage, Roy exhaled soundlessly, willing himself to calm down. It wasn't the time for this. But as he opened his mouth to bring an end to the topic, he was interrupted when he was targeted by the anger that warped into Ed's expression.

"You know, you've been an ass all night." No, he's been annoyed all night. He got closer to capturing the Ishvalen terrorist with every passing minute, but god forbid he try to do anything without Fullmetal there to interfere. However, Roy was almost too tired to acknowledge that that wasn't what the blond was referring to. "And this is why? Because of these- these riots? Something I wasn't even there to control?"

"No, that- I'm not upset because of Liore."

"Ah ha!" Fullmetal jabbed an accusing finger towards him as if he had just uncovered some deep, dark secret. "You just admitted that there's something else you're mad about!"

Roy opened his mouth, unsure what to say and silenced by the assertion, true or not. He was trying to imply the exact opposite, but either more truth shown in than he intended, or Fullmetal was just trying to annoy him. There went his attempts to avoid an having argument about this. If he wanted to talk about everything he did that irritated the colonel, than so be it.

"You can't just-" he cut himself off and groaned as he tried to wrap his head around the countless things he wanted to tell the kid to stop doing, obscuring any thoughts regarding the unfortunate timing of this discussion. "You can't rush into these things at the last second. Your lack of proper forethought is why Scar got the best of you last time."

"I don't wanna hear it," the kid snapped, scowling at the mention of his loss against the Ishvalan. "Leave it to Mustang to get upset over the littlest things. Not very surprising though, since you're never happy with anything."

"Well excuse me for trying to make sure everything goes according to plan for once,"

"I'm not stopping you!"

"In case you haven't noticed, Fullmetal, yes, you are! Nothing ever goes well whenever you're involved, no matter how meticulously I plan for it."

"That's not true, you bastard!"

"Yes, it is," he exclaimed, amazed that the kid hadn't figured it out already.

"Maybe if you weren't useless, then your plans would go better!"

"You're blaming me? Face it, Fullmetal: you're a magnet for trouble. Liore wouldn't have torn itself apart if it wasn't for you!"
A sharp inhale, widened eyes, rigid body, and for a moment, Roy felt a sense of satisfaction that he would later be sickened by. But as the kid remained still and the seconds stretched on to become uncomfortable, Roy knew he had crossed a line. After a moment of consideration, he was almost as stunned as Edward was by the sound of his own words, wondering how he was driven so easily to make such an accusation.

Ed's feet were rooted to the spot as his breath was trapped in his throat, gazing blankly at the colonel as if he didn't see him at all, staring down hidden demons instead. He didn't need to read the reports to know that families were torn apart and lives were lost because of those riots.

The silence, broken only by the sounds of distant traffic and night life, continued on for far too long while Roy contemplated what to do.

Was he truly in the wrong?

Yes, probably.

But was it bad enough that he would need to apologize?

Yes, probably.

Besides, there was no evidence to support his outburst. If someone else was planning these events, there's no way to know if some other force would had thrown the town into unrest even if the kid had never traveled there.

But as he started to speak, his tongue was stilled by the scowl he was targeted with.

"Fine. If you don't want me here, then I won't waste my time," Edward growled, turning his back to the man as he spoke under his breath. "Have fun dealing with Scar alone, bastard. Hope you end up like I did."

Had he spoken with the same, rash, obnoxiously loud voice that he always used to throw insults, Roy wouldn't have thought twice about the comment. He would have brushed it off as more impulsive teenage rage. But it was that subdued, coldly quiet tone that left him speechless, unable to act as he watched Edward walk across the plaza, leaving him by himself.

Alone with a man hell-bent on killing all State Alchemists on the loose.

This was a perfect recipe for disaster, further proving the point he was just trying to make. But for what reason? Some things were better left unsaid, no matter how true they were, and this was a prime example of when Roy should have just kept his mouth shut. Especially since Liore was brought up as if they both had the same information. But the fact of the matter was, Edward didn't know the potential importance of the riots. Neither did Roy, really, but if they were truly deliberately arranged events for whatever reason...

"Fullmetal!" he called through his teeth, careful to keep his voice from echoing too far. "Get back here!"

But his command was ignored as the blond hastily disappeared within the shadows that were nestled between the tall office building, in search of his brother.

While Hawkeye was watching the whole scene and would keep an eye on all of them the best she could from above, it was still unsafe for those two to be running around. Her position gave her view of the majority of the area, but some of the smaller alleyways were another matter. If Scar showed up, there was no guarantee that the other soldiers in the area could get to them in time. Not
to mention that Roy now looked painfully defenseless.

While he would like to say that he could best the likes of Scar in battle alone with the help of his alchemy, he was not arrogant enough to risk it, especially with so much on the line. At this rate, Edward's absence would send the entire plan into disarray. The playing field was now imbalanced.

With a quick scan around the area, he sprinted across the plaza to chase the young alchemist down, mentally cursing himself for allowing this to happen. As he reached a crossroad, he turned in every direction. In the corner of his vision, he saw a hint of movement and a flash of red fabric further down and ran after it without a second thought.

Roy squint his eyes through the darkness as he turned a corner. As he recognized the small figure of his subordinate standing with his back to the colonel within the tightly knit maze of buildings, a voiceless sigh of relief slipped past his lips and he slowed his pace to a walk. It occurred to him in the back of his mind that they had gone in the opposite direction as to where Alphonse was posted, but in that moment, he didn't stop to think about it.

Perhaps he should have.

"Fullmetal," he called, his voice slicing through the mute alleyway. They had gone further away from the rest of the troops and were possibly the only two in the seemingly desolate area. As he approached the teenager, who was yet to turn and face him, he sensed that something was different. What, however, he couldn't put his finger on.

Perhaps it was because Edward was simply standing there instead of looking for Alphonse, as if he was waiting for the colonel to catch up with him.

"About what I said," he began once he got close enough and stopped, staring at the blond's back. Although he couldn't focus on whipping up an apology to Fullmetal of all people when he couldn't even see his expression. It was impossible to know what he was thinking. "Turn around."

When Edward finally swiveled his body to face his superior officer, Roy had to force his expression to remain neutral once he was met with an unsettling, vaunting smile that simply did not belong on his face. His golden eyes were narrowed knowingly, as if he held some surreptitious information that would change everything. The colonel had no choice but to tell himself the kid was being cynically arrogant for getting his boss to apologize, and then persuaded himself to move on. He didn't quite trust himself or Edward enough to audibly question how odd it seemed.

"... What happened in Liore isn't your fault, and no one thinks it is. And... I-'"

"Don't worry, Mustang," Edward cut in, his voice laced with an ominous confidence as he took a step closer to shorten the gap. Somehow, Roy felt the desire to get away from him, but ignored it due to how ridiculous the notion would have been. "I'm not mad. Besides, you're about to get what you deserve anyway."

"What do you-"

The disquieting air that radiated off of the kid should have been warning enough. But somehow, Roy still had not expected to need to defend himself before it was too late.

There was a flash of swift movement, triggering Roy's trained instincts. But even as he brought his arms up to intersect Ed's, his automail limb managed to overpower him with an ease he did not expect or understand.

The small, almost unnoticeable prick felt on the side of his neck would have been waved off as a
bug bite, had Roy not caught sight of a syringe that slipped out of Ed's sleeve and the strange transparent liquid that was skillfully injected into him before he stumbled backwards to distance himself. He found himself incapable of wondering anything else besides where he was hiding the small tool this entire time, where he got it, and of course, why he used.

With a hand on his neck and astounded, widened eyes on Edward, he was frozen still as his mouth gaped open for what felt like an eternity. Fullmetal stared back with an amused satisfaction that sent a tremor of unease shooting down his body.

"What... the hell?" he muttered, struggling to comprehend what just happened. "Did you just drug me?"

Fullmetal said nothing, as though he hadn't even heard the question. If he did hear, he had absolutely no interest in answering. Or perhaps, he would let the obvious answer his question for him.

Before Roy could process anything else, his brain seemed to have turned upside down and an incredible dizziness streamed through him and he found himself falling forwards on his knees within the same second. His head was forced to bow as his entire body felt weighted down by gravity. He exerted every ounce of strength just to stop the pressure from crushing him as his head began to throb, but he felt the energy get sapped from his muscles until he could no longer hold up his arms.

Seconds before he would have undoubtedly fallen on his face, Edward kicked his defenseless shoulder, shoving the colonel onto the ground without any resistance whatsoever left in his body.

As the ability to move quickly drained, Roy rolled himself onto his stomach and watched morbidly at his own hands as he tried to get them underneath himself, but to no avail.

This didn't make any sense.

With his eyelids growing heavy, he looked over his shoulder to Edward, who was still watching him with that unsettling smile in place.

That expression- he could only describe it as sadistic.

But that did not fit the Fullmetal Alchemist in the slightest. Whoever that was standing above him, it wasn't the kid he had known. Nothing Roy had said should have warranted such a reaction.

Something here was very, very wrong.

"Not so high and mighty now, huh?" the blond taunted as he stepped over the colonel's body. Roy clenched his teeth, far too focused on keeping himself conscious than to consider answering.

Ignoring his silence, Edward plopped himself down to sit on Roy's back as if he was nothing more than a bench, extracting a rough, strangled gasp from the man. He knew the kid would weigh more than average with his automail, but this was incomprehensible. Perhaps it was the drug that was skewing his perception, but while he laid there, struggling for breath as he felt his rib cage cry under the weight, he was further convinced that something was terribly wrong with the young alchemist who then began to laugh.

"Oh man, just look at yourself! This is priceless!" he exclaimed with a sick grin that Roy could just barely see out of the corner of his eye.

"Who... are you?" he choked out through his teeth, eyes falling into a glare from both distrust and
the fight just to keep them open.

Ed stopped his laughter and stared down at the colonel for a moment, before whistling as if he was impressed. "So you're not a complete fool after all," he mused with a patronizing tone that one might use to compliment an animal. "But who I am doesn't really matter now, does it? I could have appeared to you as anyone, but after seeing your little argument with the pipsqueak over there, I figured this would be more fun."

Roy was sure the kid was talking, perhaps explaining something of importance, but he didn't understand a shred of it through the fog that had quickly invaded his mind.

"But before you fall asleep, make sure you say goodbye," he continued and leaned down so the colonel had the perfect view of his sickening grin. "Because in a few minutes, you'll be dead."

"What..." he trailed off before he could say any more, feeling his own voice flee from him. Even keeping his head up became too arduous of a chore and he was forced to let it fall, paying no mind to the dirt and gravel and nearly fell into his ajar mouth.

His vision blurred and Roy was certain he would have thrown up with nausea by that point if his body had the energy to manage it. Mind spinning, stomach turning, he strained his eyes to make out the simple lines of his own hands, but even that became impossible.

Useless; the suffocating sensation that the drug coursed through him whispered that word to him.

He didn't want to die, and especially not by this. Not by what appeared to be his own subordinate.

He needed answers; not this so-called peace, damn it!

It was too soon and too meaningless.

Roy was not even given more than a few precious seconds to consider his situation before his eyes shut against his will and he felt a powerful force pulling him at every limb into darkness, unsure if it was simply unconsciousness that awaited him, or the death that the kid smirking down on him had promised.
"Alert me as soon as you hear anything."

Hawkeye dropped the radio handset back down on the receiver and immediately drew her rifle up to eye level to peer into the scope aimed for the lifeless city.

More nothing.

Since she witnessed Edward walk across the dark plaza below her tower, no one had seen any sign of the colonel after he disappeared in order to follow.

While she couldn't hear, it was not hard to guess what the two alchemists were talking about before this occurred. Either Edward had grown impatient and ran off to find Scar himself, or they were arguing about something to the point of chasing him off. Whichever the case, she was neither pleased nor surprised about it. This was no time for either of them to be going off alone, especially when she couldn't keep an eye out for them.

Riza alerted the others to this new obstacle and told them to act accordingly over the radio. Even when their leader wandering off, every member of the team knew that he would want them to carry on with the plan until ordered otherwise, but she couldn't ignore the possibility that he was in trouble as well. As much as she wanted to leave her post and look for Roy, he was right when he said she would be more useful from above.

Perhaps if one of the foot soldiers ran into Alphonse, they could just wait for Ed to appear, hopefully followed by their uncontrollable colonel.

Several minutes after her last communication, she answered a call coming from Fuery at the other end, hoping for some good news.

The young soldier was anxious and nervous, struggling to form his sentences into something coherent. "I- I think you should come down and... and check this out for yourself," Fuery eventually managed to say, unknowingly setting a heavy weight of uncertainty in the pit of her stomach.

"I'm under orders to stay here," she reminded him, fighting to keep the concern from her tone.

"I- I know that, but... it's the colonel. They found him." The announcement should have been delivered in a more positive, assured tone. It should have been a good message that would have eased her anxiety. It did nothing of the sort, only managing to further tear at her walls, bringing her closer and closer to accepting the fear that was rising for the missing colonel.

"Speak clearly, Sergeant. What happened to him?"

"I don't know! I don't- they said that he's... he's... I- no, I- I don't know what to believe. I really think you should go check for yourself," the young man stuttered, sounding downright hysterical.

"... Alright. Just tell me where to go."

After being given a street address by the frantic soldier, Riza willed her trained hands to steady as
she quickly dismantled her sniper rifle, returned every piece to the case in record time, and began trekking down the stairs of the tower, silently apologizing for abandoning her post. Roy's safety took top priority. If there was even a fraction of a chance that he was in trouble, Riza had to act on it.

As much as she loathed to admit it, wild theories and fears ran through her mind as she tore through the many flights. It was clear to see that something had gone awry, given Fuery's tone and insistence that she leave her position, but she assured herself that the colonel was okay. No matter what happened, he had to be okay.

With the rifle case slung over her shoulder, Riza swiftly checked to ensure her trusty handgun was on her as she nearly kicked the back door to the building open and sprinted down the dark street, lit only by passing streetlamps.

*He's okay, he's okay, he has to be okay.*

As the lieutenant turned a corner several blocks away from the tower, her eyes fell on a small cluster of uniformed figures standing at the entrance of an alley. The hole in her gut formed by trepidation sunk into a greater chasm the moment Riza approached the soldiers and saw the despondent expressions on their faces.

She recognized every one of them from previous missions, but she did not know them well. They, however, knew her well enough to appear anxious at the sight of her. Many avoided eye contact while simultaneously stepping out of the way, granting her a clear path into the dark alleyway. She planned on demanding answers from one of them, but the words never came. Instead, she found herself following the path as her mind raced and heart beat rapidly.

Further down the way, Riza saw another small group of soldiers huddled in a semicircle alongside the back wall of a building. At some point during her walk towards them, she had stopped breathing.

Once she finally got within range to make out who was there within the shadows, a kneeling Lieutenant Havoc looked up at her.

It was the grim, subdued pain in his blue eyes that sent a panicked jolt through her chest, her heart painfully constricting with worry.

When she looked down at what he and the others were standing around, the world froze.

There on the cold stone ground, was Roy Mustang. Limbs sprawled out in unnatural angles, blood tainting almost every inch of his blue uniform, neck and head propped up against the wall, dark, empty eyes gazing out at nothing, unthinking, unfeeling- dead.

For a moment, her heart has stopped beating and the blood pulsing in her ears was replaced by a hollow silence.

This wasn't him; this wasn't Roy.

The man she knew by that name was charismatic and ambition, never slowing down as he always strived for more.

He wasn't this cold, lifeless *thing* that was slumped on the ground.

This wasn't real. It couldn't be.
Colonel Roy Mustang couldn't just die and in a lonely alley of all places.

He had people supporting him and things to do. This wasn't how it was supposed to go.

"Riza." Havoc's voice broke through the fog that had invaded her mind, causing her eyes to snap up to his, unaware of the aghast expression that had taken over.

The other lieutenant looked just as winded as she felt, but the extra time he was given to think allowed him to at least reclaim his voice to some degree. The shock that was undoubtedly in place previously had been replaced by a deep sorrow and anguish that was held from broiling over only by shock.

He said nothing when he finally got her attention, though he desperately wanted to. He desired to say something that could miraculously ease the agony in both of their hearts, but no such things was possible, and they both knew it.

Seeing him in the same state as her made it all more real.

Roy Mustang had died when no one was looking.

As soon as she was struck with that reality, the strength in her legs abandoned her and the first lieutenant dropped to her knees, her wide eyes falling back on the body of her beloved superior officer, paying no mind to the gun case that clanked onto the ground behind her and echoed down the painfully quiet alley.

Riza had been disconnected from reality, simply floating in her own cold, motionless space as the world moved on. The many eyes on her vanished as she focused solely on the corpse before her, her body entirely numb.

Numb, yet in so much pain.

Every part of her being cried and shrieked, frozen by the mercilessly frigid wave that quickly spread through her limbs as if it had infected her bloodstream. It hurt so much. She was convinced for a moment that she too was just moments away from dying.

Or perhaps something inside of her had already passed away along with Roy.

Behind the battle between horrified acceptance and denial, one question stood out above them all in the back of their minds: how?

Roy Mustang was careful and precise. Yes, he was also a little too confident for his own good, but it was well-earned. He knew when a battle could not be won and how to get himself out of tight situations. There was no explanation as to how he could get caught so off-guard by Scar that he wouldn't even put up enough of a fight to alert any of the soldiers stationed nearby. Judging by the lack of scorch marks in their surroundings, he never use his alchemy either.

It didn't make sense.

And yet it stared right back at her with dull, lifeless eyes that would ingrain themselves into her memory for the rest of her life.

"Scar must've found him." Havoc whispered needlessly. His voice was hoarse and guttural as he kept his eyes down at the bloodied ground in front of him.

Images of the Ishvalan terrorist appeared in her mind at the mention of his name. The man who
used alchemy to destroy a person's body just with touch; that explained the lack of visible wounds. Dark stains of red continued to spread through the fabric of Roy's uniform despite seeing no tears in the fabric whatsoever, torn apart from the inside. Even his face was clear of external injury, if one were to ignore the large trails of blood that had earlier escaped from his mouth, nose, and eyes, staining his skin in the most hauntingly macabre way.

It was gruesome and... terrifying. It was one thing to see the deadly effects of Scar's alchemy on nameless alchemists, many of which she and the colonel shed no tears over, but it was entirely different to see it happen to a loved one.

Riza looked away, overwhelmed by the inexplicable misery and confusion and depressed rage that stormed inside of her mind and body. She felt tears form in her eyes, but they refused to fall. She made no attempt to refrain them and was far too distraught and detracted to care if they slid down her cheek. Her body was paralyzed, as were the tears; almost as if the shocked state of denial she found herself in refused to believe that there was anything worth crying over- refused to believe that he was actually gone.

"What are you still doing here?" Havoc demanded, pained eyes darting up to the surrounding soldiers, who were undoubtedly the ones to find the body and bring him here. "Scar's still out there! We need to find this bastard!"

Only Riza was close and perceptive enough to see how his legs shook when he pulled himself to his feet, and only she knew him well enough to catch the subtle quiver of his voice. Unlike the spectators, she did not mistake his grieving sorrow for pure, motivated rage. Yes, he was furious, but the only thing keeping Havoc from crumbling and cursing the world was his desire to make the murderer pay.

As the others scattered off to follow the lieutenant's orders, Havoc remained and cast another glance at their downed commanding officer for a moment, fists curled tightly, teeth clenched together, eyes straining to see any signs of life all while knowing it was hopeless. He could only stand a second of it before forcing his attention back to Riza.

She knew he wouldn't urge her to leave Roy's side. Neither of them wanted him to be alone here- abandoned. But they both wanted to find the person who was guilty for this.

But the longer Riza remained there, solemnly by the colonel's side as she felt the pain in her chest build with every second, the idea of standing up grew to feel impossible.

Within the waves of sorrow, there was a burning desire for revenge- for justice. But with no target in front of her, only being able to see the victim- the sign of her failure- she couldn't bring herself to move. Not yet, anyway. And certainly not when doing so would include leaving him behind.

Somehow, Havoc got the message that she would remain there in a mournful vigil, and perhaps expected no less. He said something that might have been encouraging, had she heard it through the ringing in her ears, picked up his gun, and hesitantly left to track down Scar.

Managing to shake herself out of her trance to some degree, Riza held up her pistol to ensure that it was loaded simply out of habit, then slackened her shoulders as much as her military trained body would allow.

There was no accurate way to describe the torrent of emotions that spiraled endlessly as she knelt on the cold, stone ground, staring down at the body of her commanding officer- the amazing man who was supposed to accomplish so much; who was supposed to change their world for the better with his own hands.
It was her job to keep him safe and watch his back above all else.

One lapse of judgment and several minutes later, he was lying dead in an alley.

Even while she was in no condition to think clearly, part of her mind still had to wonder why this was allowed to happen.

She should have acted as soon as she saw the colonel running after Edward, but why did the young alchemist run off in the first place? Did he not realize how dangerous this area was?

Riza had no interest in blaming him for this, even as a small, shamefully cynical part of her wanted to. While it was easy to forget at times, there was no changing the fact that Ed was a kid who did not realize the possible consequences of his actions. Riza was not going to blame him for a burden that was entirely on her shoulders, and hers alone, simply because it would be convenient.

In fact, it suddenly occurred to her, he likely still did not know what had happened.

In a way, he was as guilty as Roy was, but both paled in comparison to how much Riza blamed herself. However, she doubted Edward would see it the same way.

But she chose not to think about who would be the unlucky one to break the news to Edward, Hughes, and the rest of the team, just as she chose not to think about what this meant for all of their futures. She saw the very same concern in Havoc's eyes before he left; that uncertainty that was bound to sprout, now that the one constant that held them all together had been killed.

He was their leader; the one that compiled a trustworthy team, the selected few, and planned to bring them all to the top along with him. He was the one with the plans and the will to act on them. The knowledge to know what to do, and how to do it. The one who they would all risk their lives for out of utmost certainty that he would succeed. If anyone could accomplish the insane goals that he aimed for, it was Roy. There was more to it than just that- more than anyone would ever understand.

All that mattered at that moment was that she would never see the assuring smirk or hear the confidence voice of her dear friend ever again. Without him and without the sense of purpose that he gave her, Riza wasn't sure how she could continue.

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Many hours later, the halls of Central Command were mostly deserted as the gray morning light crept through the great corridor windows.

Two members of the military's forensics department wheeled a long cart into the base's morgue, stopping only once they had positioned it directly next to one of the three examination tables in the room. Both taking a side, the two lifted the heavy black body bag from the cart and onto the table in one experienced motion.

They then both exited the room with the cart, likely to return within minutes.

After only a few seconds after their departure, the large bag began to shift with movement from inside until a finger poked out from the top of the zipper, running down the side until the bag was halfway unzipped.

"Finally," came an impatient huff as he sat up on the table in the voice of Roy Mustang. While the man went to work on fully freeing himself from the bag, red sparks flashed across his body, allowing the many self-inflicted wounds to heal within seconds.
It was surprisingly strenuous to keep his regenerative abilities from activating for a prolonged amount of time, after he was already so used to doing it instantly. Playing dead required much more work that one would expect.

Oh well.

All was going according to plan so the effort was worth it, he supposed as he slid from the table and onto his feet. As he stiffly rolled his neck and shoulders, the body of Colonel Mustang sparked again and shifted into the form of one of the forensic officers who had originally stuffed him into the body bag.

Now all he had to do was find another body to 'preform' the autopsy on, continue using that Ishvalan as a convenient scapegoat, and bury all evidence with the upcoming funeral.

Humans were so easy to fool.

Chuckling and congratulating himself for a job well done, Envy strolled out of the morgue to choose the lucky human who would help him proceed to the next part of the plan.

It took several minutes after waking up for Roy to realize through his lack of coherence that he was awake at all. In fact, he didn't feel anything for quite some time. He simply existed without thought or feeling, drifting endlessly in a void within his own subconscious.

That empty state would have been much preferred to what he eventually woke to.

When Roy finally managed to convince himself into prying his eyes open, he was poorly prepared for the nausea that suddenly hit him as his vision spun and the lines blurred together before he could understand what he was looking at.

He shut his eyes again, deciding to focus on what he knew without having to see.

For starters, he was laying down on something hard, but warm. It was a thin, almost unnoticeable blanket or sheet that divided him from a solid, uncomfortable surface that was only warmer than the noticeably chilly room because of how long he had been laying on it.

Secondly, there was a single blindingly bright light overheard that burned through his eyelids and made him want to cover his face with his arm. However, he found himself unable to persuade any movement into his body. Any and all attempts to return some life to his limbs was repayed with a stubborn, weary refusal to cooperate.

Which brought him to his last point: He knew that the effects of whatever drug had been injected into him were still lingering in his system, but fading.

*Oh yeah. I was attacked and drugged.*

*By Fullmetal.*

Except... somehow, someway, it wasn't really him.

At least, that was what he told himself as he reflected on just how unnatural and- dare he say- inhuman the kid appeared to him last night.

Roy wasn't one to believe in literal ghosts or demons, but it was not a stretch to say that Edward looked possessed. It was him, but the look he saw in his unique golden eyes clashed disturbingly
with the fiery little runt who he was arguing with only minutes before it happened.

Unless this was some buried part of the kid that he had never seen before.

…

No, that was stupid.

Roy dragged Edward up from his lowest point and gave him direction. They taunted each other on a daily basis and knew exactly which buttons to push, but no amount of banter could lead the blond to such drastic measures: to drug his boss and stick him here- wherever here was.

But there was no denying that Roy took it too far this time.

It was incredibly idiotic of him to bring the riots into it. He knew how touchy of a subject that would have been for the kid, but threw it right in his face anyway.

He was tired; stressed, maybe.

But he was never one for excuses. He was Roy Mustang, damn it! He didn't waste time covering up his mistakes. He'd much rather act to make them right.

Speaking of which...

Roy opened his eyes, glaring up at the light reluctantly until his vision adjusted. As soon as he was able, the colonel stiffly turned his head to the side, taking in the room he found himself in.

With cement walls on all sides, it was a small space, only slightly larger than a typical prison cell. It had a similar layout too with an old metal sink in the corner, as well as a another short wall, parallel with the perimeter, which he expected to be hiding a toilet or something like that. Though he couldn't see from where he was, Roy supposed it was too much to hope that hidden behind was an open exit instead.

There was only one visible door that he could see past his feet, which appeared to be made from an extremely sturdy metal, complete with a small, closed hatch at the bottom. The walls were completely blank and there was only a single vent in the ceiling that he had no hope in reaching, which was too small to fit through anyway.

And he was lying on the ground, he noticed afterwards with a small amount of surprise.

Even if the little hatch wasn't there to slid in food, Roy realized that he technically had everything he needed to stay alive. Whatever this was, something told him it wasn't meant to be temporary. Whoever had put him there expected him to stay awhile.

It just couldn't be Edward who set all of this up. Not only did it not make any sense, it wasn't his style. If Fullmetal was mad at someone, he would impulsively beat them to a pulp; not take the time to find an isolated cell and drag them there.

Mobility finally returned to Roy's body and allowed him to slowly pull himself to his feet, albeit unsteadily, which took several minutes to manage. With a few tentative steps while using the walls for balance, the colonel made his way over to the door and tested to see that it was, of course, firmly locked.

It only took him a few seconds to accept that the door was the only way out. Even the small hatch was locked from the outside.
Well, whoever put him here had a reason for keeping him alive when he could have easily been killed while unconscious. Wherever he was, he would have to wait to find out, and hopefully find an opening in the process.

Roy lost track of how much time had passed before he heard the faint sound of a distant door shutting from beyond the room, unable to accurately process the passing of time in that small, empty enclosure.

"Hey, you awake yet?" came a voice moments later through the metal door. The speaker had a rather annoying tone that somehow gave off the impression that it belonged to a lowlife.

"Who are you?!" Roy demanded as he glared at the door.

His question was met with a high pitched irritating fit of laughter, and then the speaker continued on as if he said nothing.

"So tell me, Mustang: how's it feel to be dead?" he asked in the same condescending, arrogant tone that Edward spoke to him with the night before.

_In a few minutes, you'll be dead._

Roy couldn't respond for several seconds as his mouth suddenly became too dry to speak and his voice was lost in his throat.

"... What are you talking about?" he eventually asked, his tone distinctly lacking the brazen attitude he had just moments ago.

Another amused chuckle came from behind the door. "Didn't manage to piece it together yet? Well, I came all the way down here just to tell you that all of your friends think you're dead! As far as they're aware, you were pathetically killed by Scar and left in an alleyway to rot!"

Roy's ears rang with his obnoxious, erupted laughter as it echoed off the cement walls, bouncing back at him again and again with every intake of breath.

_Dead..._

They all thought he was dead... Roy had to repeat the information in his head multiple times for him to comprehend what he was hearing.

"That's... You're lying," he accused as his head began to throb. "They wouldn't be fooled so easily."

"But how could they not believe what was right in front of them? Your dear subordinates stumbled upon your bloodied, lifeless body alone in an alleyway with Scar supposedly on the loose. They were completely fooled. You should have seen the girl's face when she saw!" He paused, breaking into more uncontrolled laughter.

Roy stared holes into the wall, his heart aching at the thought of Hawkeye and the others thinking he was killed. He knew they would be devastated, as he would be if he stumbled over any of their corpses.

"Supposedly?" he choked out after forcing the other thoughts from the front of his mind.

"Hmm?"

"You said Scar was supposedly on the loose. What did you mean by that?"
"Oh! That's the best part! I had you and your lackeys running in circles the entire time! Scar was
never here; hell, he's probably not even in Central! But you humans are always so eager to believe
spoon-fed lies if they seem convenient."

Without realizing, Roy drifted over to the wall, slumping his shoulder against it to keep himself
upright as he felt the little energy that he had recovered drain from him again.

They thought he was dead.

\textit{Dead!}

What would they do if they remained under that impression?

Hawkeye, Hughes, Havoc, Breda, Falman, Fuery, the Elric brothers, the people he called family...

He needed to contact them! He needed to get out of here and tell them that he's alive before... well,
he couldn't begin to guess what they would do if this went on, but he didn't want to wait and find
out.

"What's wrong, Mustang? Cat got your tongue?" the voice taunted sadistically. "Well, that's fine; I
gotta prepare for your funeral anyway."

Funeral? Now there was a thought that Roy did \textit{not} want to think about.

"I'll be sure to stop by again soon. Sleep tight," the captor sung just as the single light overhead
died, encasing Roy in complete darkness.

"Wait!" he ordered just as he heard footsteps distancing through the door. He was given no answer
and was left alone in an empty void, far less comfortable than the one he awoke from earlier. Not
the slightest shred of light managed to escape through the door, leaving his eyes with absolutely
nothing to adjust to. Roy felt the continued impulse to open his eyes in order to see, all while being
well aware that they were as open as they were going to get.

And the silence- it was deafening.

The utter lack of sound somehow left a subtle ringing in his ears, accompanied by the suddenly
louder pulsing of his own veins. He sighed loudly just so he could hear something besides this
nothingness that now surrounded him.

He had the impression that he was very far underground.

With a resigned huff, Roy blindly maneuvered himself in the darkness with only his fleeting
memories for help until he found the blanket that was pushed in the corner. Figuring that there was
nothing to do but try to think of a way out until he fell asleep, Roy straightened out the blanket to
the best of his ability and laid back down on the hard floor.

He would find a way out when the lights turned back on.

Chapter End Notes

I know what you're thinking: "Akarri needs to stop being mean to Roy, and how could
Envy pretend to be dead if they could just feel for a pulse?" Since death doesn't effect
him the same way it does us, I like to think he can take playing dead to a new, more convenient level. :)

Chapter 3

A cool breeze swept through the area, complementing the warmth from the sunshine that was occasionally blocked by gentle passing clouds. Birds chirped carelessly in the distance, oblivious to the world below them. The weather was perfect on that bright Friday afternoon, leaving nothing to be desired.

Maes, on the other hand, was convinced that the world did not deserve to be so pleasant on what was quite possibly the worst day of his life. Rain would have been more appropriate for the occasion. He wasn't sure about the others, but he at least did not have the heart to appreciate the warmth. None of it managed to reach him anyway.

As he looked down at the gravestone, Maes felt cold even while the summer sun slowly began to descend, casting a warm purple hue through the atmosphere. An array of color filled the horizon over the treetops, but it all appeared saturated and dark in his eyes, partially due to the hazy mist that had fogged his glasses, which he lacked the will to clear just yet.

The funeral had ended a while ago and he had not once left the cemetery since arriving earlier that day. Roy's entire team stayed awhile afterwards as well, but they eventually had to return to their homes and figure out what they were all going to do next. His family had also attended, dressed in black, but poor Elicia struggled to understand why. No one found any joy in explaining to a four year old girl that they were burying her surrogate uncle because he was murdered by a serial killer who was still out there somewhere.

God, how it had hurt... From the moment he came home the first day after learning what had happened, up to the funeral itself, he never had any idea how to properly explain it to her. Part of him wanted to lie and say that Roy had simply moved away, and that he wasn't coming back. It would have been easier in the moment, but he couldn't bear it if she ever asked when she'd get to see him again or if they could visit. She would have forgotten about him in time, but Maes could not have lived like that.

He eventually forced himself to tell her the truth as carefully as possible. Even then, it took a moment for her to grasp the gravity of the situation, but the reaction was everything he had feared. She cried for her deceased uncle, but the worst part of it was that she did not- could not understand. Comprehending how a human being could end the life of another was beyond the capability of such an innocent young girl who knew only of love and kindness. Murder and terrorism were concepts that Maes never wanted Elicia to experience.

Even during the funeral, she questioned it again through tears, unable to fully comprehend what was happening, or at least not wanting to face it. Feeling the need to ask, yet understanding deep, deep down that he was gone forever without needing to be told.

*Why?* Elicia had asked, her hand trembling within his. *Why are they burying Uncle Roy?*

*Why, indeed...*  

Maes still couldn't quite accept it either, even as he stared down at the engraving with his own eyes, standing over the ground where his friend was currently resting.

*Roy Mustang*  

*Colonel*
Loved by many

During the reception, it was his job to appear strong. He couldn't bring himself to give a damn about what his superiors or subordinates thought of him, but for the sake of his family, he did all he could to keep it together. Gracia had known Roy almost as long as he had, and of course knew how much his death had hurt. Meanwhile, Elicia needed an anchor to hold on to. Maes needed to stand tall even as his heart and soul wept; anything to ease his family, if only by a little. If it wasn't for them, he would have had no problem with completely falling apart the moment he laid eyes on the decorative, sturdy coffin with the Amestrian flag draped down the sides.

But now that he was alone, nothing stopped him from breaking down and cursing at the world. But even so, standing there with his head down was all he could bring himself to do. Even his tear ducts had long since dried out by that point, allowing him almost no form of expression.

It felt too surreal for him to grasp. Too cruel, too unfair to be true. And yet, the ache in his heart proved that it was all real and refused to let him forget for even a moment.

He yearned to return to that blissful state of unknowing before he walked into work one morning to learn the truth for himself, unaware, unprepared, unable to understand. He could not forget the denial that struck him when Hawkeye approached, frighteningly stoic and devoid of emotion, to tell him what occurred the night before. She had already endured the worst of it while Maes was too busy gaping, wanting to ask questions yet being too afraid to hear the answers. Who was too stunned to do anything until he locked himself in his office after that conversation and gave up on fighting back the tears.

Maes usually wasn't one to resort to drinking, but he could have drowned in the amount of alcohol he consumed that night.

He would have given anything for it to just not be true. Coming to terms with the fact that Roy had died for no reason while Maes was sleeping comfortably without a care in the world seemed impossible.

Now he had no choice but to accept it.

Maes clenched and slackened his fists by his sides, exhaling slowly through his nose as he contemplated what to say. There were so many things he had to tell his now-deceased friend, many in which he already said at least once, and yet he thought he would never have enough time to say it all no matter how long he stood there. In spite of that thought, he was somehow speechless.

It was no secret that Roy did not believe in an afterlife. There was no way to know if his words could reach the colonel but that didn't stop him or anyone else from trying. He even caught sight of the vocal atheist, Edward, muttering something to the closed casket before it was ceremoniously carried to the grave.

But even so, Maes knew he had spent enough time there for one evening. Gracia was surely beginning to worry about him at this rate. More so, anyway.

The decision was made for him as Maes removed his glasses, lifelessly rubbed his eyes, cleared the glass with the help of his sleeve, and re-positioned them over his nose. He spared one last moment to look down at the grave, grimly acknowledging the void that was left, and forced himself to turn around and walk away.
His feet were leaden as he stepped across the grass to the decorative black iron fence that bordered the cemetery. The lieutenant colonel could not afford to waste time, however. He had a killer to find and a friend's death to avenge.

There was no time to mourn when he had so much to do.

He had to keep moving.

He had too...

…

Damn it.

Just as Maes reached the gate and put a hand on the exit's frame, he hesitated.

Part of him still did not want to leave, as if doing so would be abandoning his friend. It was ridiculous and he would have to walk out the gate to continue his life one way or another. Perhaps it was the overly-sentimental part of his mind that did not want to leave Roy's body alone in the cold ground.

Sighing at how foolish he knew he was being, Maes turned his head to look back at the lone grave, but froze when he saw that it was not as alone as he had expected. A small blond figure had appeared further up the hill, standing directly in front of Roy's grave.

How did Edward pass by without me noticing?

He stared silently for many long seconds, contemplating whether it would be best to leave or stay now that he knew the teenager was there as well. He could only assume that Ed was laying low, waiting for Maes to leave so he could get a moment alone with the grave.

In that case, he shouldn't interfere.

The strength of that thought dwindled with every passing moment. The longer he watched from afar, the more something prodded him to move his feet. Eventually, Edward lowered himself into a sitting position on the grass, somberly staring in silence at the ground before him. Somehow, that single motion was enough to make the decision for him.

Maes sighed at himself and took a few uncertain steps back towards the grave. He wanted to say that it was because Edward looked like he could use some company, but he was well aware that it was primarily for selfish reasons. He just didn't want to leave yet and this gave him a good excuse to linger for a while longer. But as he contemplated his reasoning, he began to grow almost wary of disrupting the thoughts of the blond as he drew closer. Maes doubted Edward would sympathize with his reasons and people often had a tendency to not act themselves when they were in mourning. Ed in particular was always relatively unpredictable as well.

The lieutenant colonel continued up the small hill, the only sound being his shoes stepping through the cleanly mowed lawn and the soft breeze rustling through nearby trees. He stopped only feet away from the blond, who remained with his back facing the man, showing no sign that he had noticed his approach.

He gave the kid a moment to recognize his presence. Ed's shoulders were tense but his arms laid slackened in his lap, as if he was only pretending to appear relaxed. Maes couldn't begin to guess if that was to fool him, or if Ed was simply trying to fool himself.
Maes cleared his throat when his voice came out rougher than he had hoped. "Hey," he said at last and Edward started and swiveled his head to stare at him. He shifted his legs to stand, but the action was halted when Maes plopped down on the ground next to him, keeping his olive eyes transfixed on the grave without a second thought.

In the corner of his eye, he could see Ed open his mouth to speak, but remained silent and at a loss for words. He slowly willed himself to return to the feigned state of calm and shifted his gaze onto the gravestone as well.

"Sorry. I- … I thought you were done," the kid muttered at last, tone downcast and despondent.

"So did I," Maes breathed in response. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

"No, it's fine. I shouldn't be here anyway." Edward's muscled tensed subtly as he was torn between pulling himself to his feet or remaining still.

"What do you mean?" He turned his gaze towards the blond. Ed instinctively met his eyes for a fraction of a second before turning away, expression laced with guilt. Despite the short glance he was given, there was no hiding the lifeless air that hung around the kid like invisible weights. Roy's death had effected him more than Maes ever expected him to admit.

"Doesn't matter."

"Ed…" He continued to study the young alchemist for a moment longer, wondering where the desire to stress the matter came from. "What did you mean by that?"

The kid shook his head, refusing to take his eyes off the grave if only for a lack of anything else to look at. When Maes did not waver, he stifled a sigh and folded his arms stiffly. "I don't think Mustang would want me here."

The lieutenant colonel subconsciously bit at the inside of his lip. He knew the two alchemists were often at odds with each other, but he wasn't aware of what had caused Ed to settle on such a stance.

"I disagree," he said, forcing as much life into his tone as possible. Anything to keep himself from sounding as empty as sitting before his friend's grave truly made him feel. In spite of the sorrow he was experiencing, he wasn't the only one struggling to endure and couldn't allow himself to forget it. "I think Roy would be honored that you stayed this long."

Edward's expression did not change in the slightest. That subdued guilt remained, unfazed by his words, leading Maes to idly wonder if his statement was even heard at all.

"I know what you're trying to do, but…" he trailed off and pursed his lip, eyes narrowed and sounding none too convinced. "You don't understand."

"Understand what?"

Ed made no attempt to respond. He only hesitantly glanced over at Maes, afraid of what he would see. With what looked like an arduous effort, he held the gaze for a few long seconds. His brow furrowed slightly and the corner of his mouth hinting at a frown as he fought to keep his expression as natural as possible, holding back whatever was hidden behind like a dam threatening to break.

All Maes could do was watch him in return, allowing him to find whatever he was searching for. Once he was apparently satisfied, Edward dropped his eyes just as his comportment began to crack and give way to something else. He glared at the ground, fists clenching in front of him.
"I could have stopped it." The kid's voice was soft and almost too quiet to hear, but heavy with unspoken remorse.

While the lieutenant colonel was aware that Edward meant more than he was letting on, his heart ached as the familiar words rung in his head. He had said the same thing to himself multiple times since the news reached his ears, and yet he wasn't even present that night. He could only begin to imagine how those who were actually there when it happened felt.

Of course Ed would blame himself. While Maes didn't know what exactly happened the night of the murder, he knew Roy's entire team was there. Something went wrong, and everything fell apart. Hawkeye wasn't willing to give him much to work with when she first told him, and he was well aware that it wasn't the best moment to pry. Even in his confused lamentation, it was clear to see that she was just doing all she could to stay together. Forcing her to divulge more information would only bring her closer to the breaking point.

And again, as he watched Roy's youngest subordinate contemplate the night that truncated the colonel's life, he related with the pain that was visible there more than could be expressed, but knew he could not dig any deeper.

"We all feel that way, Edward." Only after the words escaped his mouth did Maes consider that it was perhaps not the best thing to say. He didn't mean to belittle what Ed was feeling, but rather communicate to him that he wasn't alone in feeling it.

"No-" he cut in vehemently, snapping his gaze up to the older man with a sudden intensity. "That's what you don't understand." Just as quickly as the life appeared, it vanished again to be replaced by the same deep-rooted regret from before. "Never mind," he added before Maes could form any words. He abruptly pulled himself to his feet, biting his lip and face contorted by a mix of emotions and thoughts that Maes had little to no insight into.

"I… I need to leave." Without another look at the surprised officer, Edward briskly turned away and started down the hill.

Maes simply watched him go, mouth ajar as he internally forced himself past the stunning confusion that stopped him from saying anything more to the kid.

That… could have gone better.

His muscles urged him to chase after the kid and- and do something to help him, but his mind was drawing a blank. Before he could make any decision, Edward had vanished from sight.

With a contrite sigh, Maes shifted his glasses with one hand and rubbed his face with the other as he turned back to face the grave.

"Who's going to look after those boys now that you're gone?" he whispered, receiving no answer.

Who else realized that Ed and Al still needed someone to watch their backs?

That single meeting with the oldest Elric gave Maes all he needed to know that the kid was struggling. He was far too young to know how to cope with loss, even as he had gone through it once before. Ed was floating aimlessly in an ocean with no sense of direction, besides the vague recollection that he was supposed to go up, yet lacking the strength to do so. And if he had fallen into that ocean, then chances were, Al was right behind him.

With Roy's team blockaded by grief and Edward turning everyone away, Maes doubted anyone else would come to the rescue. He wanted to help those boys if he could, but…
The lieutenant colonel scanned the engraving of the headstone again and pursed his lip in a feeble attempt to stifle the emotional ache that tore through his defenses like they were nonexistent. If he couldn't even keep himself together, how could he qualify to help anyone else?

But he didn't have the right to pretend he never noticed that that kid needed help. If there was something he could do, then he was obligated to try. The only question was how.

The moment Roy opened his eyes again, he was flooded with an alarming sense of regret before he so much as knew why. He took a moment to glance at his surroundings before the reasoning sunk in.

There were no surroundings to look at. With the lights out and no windows to speak of, he had no way of knowing how much time had passed. He could have been asleep for a few minutes or hours and wouldn't know the difference, if he was willing to trust his captor to keep the lights on a night/day schedule for him.

Which didn't seem to be the case.

Hours drifted by, consisting of staring openly at nothing, pacing nervously in circles, tracing a hand around each crack in the cement that surrounded in a withering hope that he'd stumble into a miracle. No such blessing came. It took far less time than Roy was willing to admit for him to feel desperation creeping up, chilling him to the bone. It became painfully clear that the lights were not going to be turned back on any time soon.

The only sounds to be heard at all in that prison were those that he made himself. No matter how much he banged on the door and yelled for a response, he was given only maddening silence in reply. The echoes of his calls died quickly, which was almost worse than being ignored by whoever had trapped him there.

The complete absence of all forms of stimulation was unbearable.

No light, no sound, no human interaction, nothing to touch besides the walls and a blanket, which he had lost at some point. All he did have was sink water that tasted of metal, and a stale piece of bread waiting for him by the small hatch in the door, which he almost stepped on not long after waking up. He had the basic necessities, but that was all: the very basics.

Or perhaps even less.

Roy managed to doze off again at some point, mostly just to kill time, and awoke later to see nothing had changed. He still couldn't find a way out, grab the attention of anyone from the outside, or even see his hand in front of his face. The colonel wanted to say that maybe a day or two had passed since he first found himself trapped here, but had more or less given up on keeping track. He considered scratching lines into the walls to keep count with touch alone, but using his fingernails did not seem like an effective idea.

Roy had somehow gotten it into his head within the past few empty hours that as long as he was trapped there, he wasn't alive. Not truly. The sheer boredom of being able to do nothing and stare at nothing was mind-numbing, not to mention the claustrophobia that began to take shape not long after he paced the small area a few times. Roy knew how much space he was confined to, and yet it seemed to shrink every time he rounded it. All the more reason to get out as soon as possible.

He demanded for answers once again, but the colonel was beginning to think that there was no life within miles of where he was. It was just too damn quiet! It was eerie and unnatural and had the
power to disconnect him from the rest of the world. Somehow during the night of his capture, he had slipped away from his reality and woke up in another.

Maybe he was dead.

But no- the logical part of his admittedly panicking brain told him that was ridiculous. All it took was for him to drop his head into his hands and close his eyes to remind himself that. It was not uncommon for Roy to become dizzy and disoriented within the past few hours; whenever that happened, simply being able to feel something was enough to ground him for a while longer. He just had to remind himself that it was all real- that he was fine. That he wasn't drifting aimlessly in space, but was still existing in this cellar somewhere.

Simple, he told himself. Don't overact. Don't let it get to you.

His arms tensed, fingers curling around his bangs as if his life depended on it, pressing his palms over his eyes in some ludicrous notion that he could block out the darkness. If he dared to open up and swallow all that surrounded him, he was sure his head would explode. Being down here without any light at all was downright unnatural. His body nor mind could handle this pressure.

It reminded him of what he could only imagine the ocean to be like, having never seen it in person. But he had heard the horror stories of an unimaginable darkness within those suffocating depths and enough pressure to crush a man's skull with ease. There was no better sensation to compare his current situation with.

All he could do to keep himself stable was to adamantly tell himself not to think about it. Think about something else; something productive. Figure this situation out while he had the time. He had plenty of time...

Easier said than done.

A common thought to circle through his head despite his aversion for it was to wonder just how long he was going to be there. How much of his life would be wasted between those four cement walls? It was an entirely empty existence that he had no desire to continue, to put it lightly. Would it be forever? Would he stumble from corner to corner for the rest of his life, thinking back on what could have been as if his life was nothing but a distant dream?

He was being over-dramatic; that much was obvious, but he couldn't help but indulge himself a little. Or rather, he was just incapable of keeping the dark thoughts at bay.

As the hours silently ticked on, the fearful, pessimistic voices in his head only grew louder. There was nothing else to think, besides ponder the possibility of being forgotten and left for dead, doomed to rot away until death. But the colonel had to constantly remind himself that people had to be searching for him just to keep himself sane, if not because he actually believed it.

Even though everyone thinks you're dead?

Right, he had almost forgotten about that little detail.

But still, it didn't make sense! He did not hire a group of oblivious idiots onto his team. No, they were trained professionals who would not be fooled so easily. Roy was told that they actually saw his dead body, but unless they were looking at him while he was unconscious, it couldn't have worked. Alchemy and proper tools could do wonders, but- but they would see through it! They had to!

Or at least, the autopsy would have... Was it possible that they didn't bother to examine whatever
fake body they found because they figured Scar had been the one to kill him? Just how quickly was
his corpse tossed onto the list of that Ishvalan's casualties, and then forgotten?

Even so, Roy had the unnerving feeling that he knew far less about this situation than he was
comfortable with. Hell, he still couldn't even fathom why he was here in the first place. Maybe he
never would. He could very well live the rest of his life without answers or explanations- forever
confused and left to wonder.

That last interaction with Fullmetal had to have some hidden significance behind it. Roy was sure
that all the answers were there if only he could find the pieces. There had to be some reason why
Edward acted as if he wasn't himself. Either something was terribly wrong with him, or it was on
purpose.

Who are you? His own words echoed in his head as he recalled the strange, inhumane gleam in
those golden eyes. The way he looked and spoke set off alarms right from the beginning, but he
foolishly ignored it. Ed said something- that night, he said something that didn't make sense. Roy
recalled his confusion, but the exact words struggled to return to him.

When Roy questioned who he was, the kid went along with it. He sounded as if he was truly
another person wearing the skin of his subordinate. He insinuated the impossible, which Roy could
only assume to be an effective attempt to confuse him, or something much more complicated was
taking place too far underneath the surface for him to see.

That wasn't the person he knew- thought he knew. But if not him, then who?

It didn't make sense. None of this made sense.

Roy wearily rubbed his eyes again as he fought off a migraine, doing all he could to ignore the
anxious jolt that he felt fester in his chest, threatening to suffocate him with uncertainty and
confusion.

Edward trapping him underground forever as revenge for insulting him was not possible. But
maybe this was actually all some kind of trick. Perhaps this situation was not truly as bad as he
envisioned it to be. Perhaps his mind was making it much worse out of panic?

It was possible, wasn't it?

While sitting cross-legged in one of the corners, head resting against the wall, his hands slipped
from his head lethargically and he folded his arms, scowling in thought. At this point, Roy wasn't
sure if it was an actual possibility, or if his mind was blindly hoping for the impossible. Anything
to find some hope in this hopeless situation.

It had to be all some twisted joke to get back at him. Maybe Fullmetal wasn't the ringleader, but
there was no way that anyone actually intended to just throw him down here without any
explication. A few more hours, and he'd be freed to give whoever thought it was funny the tongue-
lashing of a life time.

Because this could not be real. He couldn't be trapped here forever. Nothing but darkness for the
rest of his life- it was unimaginable.

He latched onto that denial and held it tightly out of sheer desperation, telling himself over and
over again that it would all be okay, ignoring the shallow pain in his chest, the strain in his eyes,
and the voice in his head that all told him it would be anything but.
Chapter 4

Edward stepped through the doorway and closed it behind him, blocking the orange evening sunlight that pooled in from the office windows from reaching him. He began walking down the hall that outstretched itself outward, light almost blindingly bright by the stark fluorescent bulbs above. His brother swiftly fell into a step besides him, having been waiting for him to finish the brief meeting.

He did not turn to look at Alphonse as they walked together, or anyone for that matter. Ed kept his eyes straight ahead, bouncing from each reflection on the glossy floor as he passed them, doing everything in his power to just keep moving without thinking too much about where he was or where he was going. He especially tried to avoid remembering that he was about to pass Mustang's office and that the entire team was likely still in there, packing up their things.

Mustang's staff, Edward included, were all to be transferred to new direct superior officers not long after the colonel's death was announced, but the process had been prolonged due to their valiant fight to stay together. Hawkeye in particular was determined to hang onto each member, but watching her keep up the battle added to the strain on everyone's hearts and minds. He got the sense that her fight was motivated by obligation rather than will, but that was an observation that he had no desire to acknowledge. She was still in mourning and no one would be surprised if she wanted nothing more than to stop fighting, seeing as they all felt the same.

That was exactly why Ed had just put in a request for some time off and was on his way out, hoping that he wouldn't need to return for a few weeks. This was one of the few times where he hoped his age would give him an advantage. The blond usually loathed to be treated differently because he was so young, but at this point, he didn't care.

He had no interest in hanging around with baited breath to see where he would end up. There was no other person out there who he would trust with his secrets regarding his search for the Philosopher's Stone, so it didn't matter who they stuck him under.

Edward tried to convince himself that he wasn't running away from anything. He was only taking a break away from the military to figure out what they were going to do now that the one person with the desire and the power to help them was gone.

He was about to pass the office door only to be stopped as Hawkeye stepped into view. As she caught sight of her, he definitely did not want to acknowledge the part of his brain that immediately wanted to turn and hide. Not because he was afraid, but because he couldn't stand looking at her to see the deep sorrow in her eyes. The regret, the blame, the self-loathing depression that she made a bold attempt to hide, that Edward could only see because he shared the same pain. Whether her attempts were convincing or not was irrelevant. There wasn't a single person in the building who would doubt her devotion and loyalty to Colonel Mustang. There wasn't a single person who knew she didn't blame herself and would willingly give up anything just to get him back.

If she was an alchemist, Edward would have been more wary of that fact. Luckily, the chances of her repeating his previous mistake was slim to none, even if she had the desire to do so.

Both Edward and Alphonse stopped when she stepped into their path. Hawkeye only stood in front of the doorway for a moment before she noticed their presence, appearing slightly distant. But upon seeing the Elrics, her gaze snapped back into focus and she pretended as if she wasn't dying on the inside.
"Hello," was all she said, giving the brothers a short nod.

"Hi."

"Hello, Mrs. Hawkeye."

Ed considered asking something along the lines of *how are you* just so he would have something to say, but he already knew the answer to that question, unfortunately. Right as he was about to spit something else out to avoid any stretch of awkward silence, she broke eye contact and allowed her gaze to divert away from them both and settle aimlessly on the ground in the distance.

Somehow, that simple, thoughtless act sent a bristling shiver down his spine as he contemplated how unnaturally damaged she looked beneath the guise of strength that was already crumbling. Just like everything else about this whole damn situation, it wasn't right. Ed always thought that no matter what happened, Riza Hawkeye would always be a static, unshakable source of stability, but the loss of Mustang had hurt her more than they could possibly imagine.

His chest tightened uncomfortably. He was hoping to avoid a confrontation with the team-especially Hawkeye.

The night of Mustang's death, he had chosen to walk away over a childish argument. He had left the colonel when his presence was actually needed. He selfishly put himself above finding Scar, and wasn't even the one to pay for it. When he thought back to why it didn't strike him as a terrible idea at the time, he was never able to find any decent excuses. Everyone knows that this was his fault. They wouldn't say it to his face, but he was certain it would come to light as soon as they reach that stage of the mourning. It was only a matter of time.

Until the day came where Hawkeye and the rest of them rightfully resented him for his idiotic actions, he couldn't bring himself to look them in the eyes.

"So, uh-" Edward cleared his tightening throat. "I'm taking some time off; already ran it by the higher-ups. Thought you should know," he explained, fighting the urge to shift his feet uncomfortably.

Hawkeye blinked slowly, nearly lost on her own train of thought. A moment passed where Ed began to wonder if he had been heard, until she looked up at him once more with something much more resolute in her eyes. He could tell that she was trying, and that was the part that worried him most. Looking at him with a straight face shouldn't require effort.

"I see. I will ensure you're notified when you are assigned your new commanding officer."

Even while Edward claimed that he didn't care where he ended up, the business-like, almost dismissive tone she spoke in bothered him. He had no idea why that was at first, but began to wonder if part of him had irrationally hoped that Hawkeye would somehow be able to solve all of their problem. Again, it went back to that unshakable image that she simply could not hold at the moment. And yet he had the gall to hope otherwise, even when it was she who had lost the most. She who had dedicated her entire life to keeping the man alive, only for him to get murdered.

Ed compared it to his own relationship with Al, in a way. Above all else, it was his goal to restore his brother's body. If he failed so terribly, he knew that no pain could possibly compete.

He may have understood, but he was not prepared to confront it. Edward only nodded and began searching for a way to leave the conversation. However, Alphonse besides him had an air around him that always became noticeable once he wanted to *fix* something.
"Um... Have you found any leads on Scar?" the suit of armor asked in an attempt to dissolve the tense atmosphere, despite knowing just as well as they did that it was futile.

"There have been rumors that he was seen back in the east already, but nothing has been confirmed."

Ed wasn't thinking about the Ishvalan until his brother mentioned the man's nickname, but his heart dropped upon hearing the news. Alphonse continued to idly chat with her as pleasantly as possible given the circumstances, while the older brother fell out of focus, stuck on the topic of Scar. There was no guarantee that whoever they were assigned to work under would allow the team to cross into the east in order to find Mustang's killer, not to mention that justice would be further postponed thanks to endless procedures.

Well, he was already getting some time off; perhaps he could take a trip and look for that murderer himself. What he would do once he found him was another matter entirely.

"I should get back to work," Hawkeye stated in a forced deadpan. "Take care of yourselves," she added, giving another nod to the two of them, which was swiftly responded with a farewell from Al, before she stepped around them to carry on down the hall, off to whatever currently required her attention.

The Elrics watched her go for a moment, but Ed was the first to turn and continue on their original path in the other direction. Alphonse was quick to follow.

"I wonder what will happen," the youngest mused quietly, uncertainty lacing his tone. Edward could only sympathize and had no encouraging words that he could say without feeling like a lair. Instead, he just shook his head and quickened his pace, eager to leave the building behind him.

Thankfully, Al got the hint that he wasn't quite in the mood to talk and left it at that. It wasn't a difficult task, seeing as both of the brothers were thinking more-or-less the same thing. It was comforting for Ed to know that Alphonse shared what he was going through for the most part, but at the same time, there were some things that he simply could not relate with.

Everyone who was present the night of Mustang's murder could find some way to blame themselves if they tried, but out of all of them, only Edward was directly involved. He was convinced that his actions led straight into the death, even if it was all done unintentionally. If he hadn't left- if he hadn't walked away...

Edward shook his head in an attempt to clear his mind. He pushed himself to keep walking, but he only made a couple of steps before stopping again, attention drawn into Mustang's office. From where he stood in the hallway, he glanced through the ajar door to see the remainder of the team inside.

Unlike how the office used to be- should have been-, it seemed strangely dark inside despite the setting sun's light flooding in, as though the very air was dimmed by the depressed aura of the inhabitants. He caught sight of Breda and Falman despondently shuffling loose papers into folders and cardboard boxes as Havoc sat at his desk with his head down. Fuery did not appear to be in the room whatsoever, which only served to point out how empty the room now was.

Ed stared at them silently, feeling like he was looking at a picture- so close, but the scene seemed to be occurring in the distance, far beyond his reach. His legs naturally moved out of the way the moment he noticed Breda begin to turn towards him. Ed dodged out of view and hastily turned to keep walking down the hall, fists clenched tightly by his sides.
He was just running away from them. These people who he regarded as good friends- who were in pain. He was turning his back to them whether they wanted him to or not, not bothering to stop and ask- too afraid to hear their answer.

Alphonse did not say anything, but Ed could sense that he wanted to.

As they progressed further down the hall, he saw a door open to reveal Fuery turning to walk back towards the office with his head down. Just as he was about to look up, the Elrics conveniently reached a crossroad in the hallway, and Ed made a sharp turn to the right to avoid another interaction. Alphonse hesitated but followed.

"Brother?" he inquired after a moment as Edward's pace quickened. That one word packed a strong punch and was filled to the brim with a thousand questions, none in with Ed was able to answer.

"It's nothing," he answered despite being well aware that Al could see through him like glass. "I think this way is faster."

His brother did not reply, silently telling him that they were both thinking the same thing. Edward's response to seeing yet another member of the team was a matter of his guilt and useless pride. He hadn't seen Fuery truly upset on many occasions, but he didn't need to to know that the master sergeant had the eyes of a kicked puppy.

So he did what he was beginning to get quite skilled at, and fled.

The Elrics stepped through a set of double doors, instinctively turning towards the dorms by walking across the military's precisely mowed lawn, paying little mind to the pathways nearby.

As they began in the direction of the dorms, Edward's attention was drawn away from them. He stared off distractedly as his stomach churned like it had been doing nonstop since all of this started. It took Alphonse only a few quiet seconds to notice, and then another few seconds until he decided to comment.

"Brother?" he asked again carefully almost as if he was afraid of startling Ed out of his trance, tone completely different to the last time he spoke. "Is it the... the cemetery? We can visit again, if you want."

Leave it to Al to figure out what was calling Ed's attention even before he could put his finger on it. He was gazing past the buildings in the direction of the grave site- in the direction of Colonel Mustang. Roughly a week had passed and yet he was still haunted by the man's death. With every passing day, he expected it to ease but the pit in his gut only grew larger and more painful.

He wanted to avoid seeing the grave as often as he had lately, if only out of a vain hope that it would help to put the tragedy out of his mind, but the idea was nothing more than hopeful thinking. Something kept calling him back.

Reluctantly, Ed agreed and the two brother's changed their course for the graveyard.

The short walk passed in silence as they traveled the familiar path, both of their minds spinning with different thoughts. Despite his sudden urge to go there, Ed never looked forward to it. In fact, he hated every moment spent staring down at Mustang's grave. At least when he was sitting by his mother's grave as a child, he could easily place some of the blame on Hohenheim rather than pouring all of it on himself. Blaming Scar for this helped, but still did very little to ease the piercing stabs of guilt he felt every time his eyes landed on the sleek marble slab with the name Roy Mustang smartly engraved into it.
Ed and Al stood side by side, eyes gazing down at the grave. The oldest brother felt inclined to say something, but no words formed. Spouting off another apology wasn't good enough. That annoying, pompous bastard deserved more; he deserved to be alive.

But nothing could be done about it. Nothing. In spite of all of his knowledge and skill in something as amazing as alchemy, he was still powerless. The dead could not be brought back to life; he had already learned that lesson the hard way, and now understood more than ever why Mustang hated being called useless.

Visiting the grave still caused a pinch of apprehension, as he had told Hughes the day of the funeral. He had a similar sensation after attempting to transmute his mother, but that never kept him away either. Mustang's death was affiliated with regret and self-blame, while his mom's had more to do with failure. Her first death was simply not his fault, but his attempt to revive her only caused more pain.

Why was he so unfortunate to have to carry this much on his shoulders?

Edward groaned, bellying his sorrow with frustration the only way he knew how. His brother's armor shifted as he looked over.

He opened his mouth and fractionally shook his head, taking a moment to decide on the words spinning around his mind. "I don't get it, Al. Something just... keeps bringing me back here."

"What do you mean?" he asked quickly, grateful for the conversation.

"I don't know." He folded his arms, eyes narrowing as he stared forward. "It feels like I have to- to do something, I guess." Ed paused, almost able to feel Al's frown in his stare. Ed was standing over a grave, saying he needed to do something about it; in every direction, it would look like human transmutation. Without having to look over to confirm it, his lips shifted into a wry smile. "I know what you're thinking, but it's not that. I don't know what it is, but..." He trailed off, expression falling once more.

"Maybe you're-"

"Wait."

Ed's gaze jumped up to the field before them as he held up a hand in signal for silence. Al hesitated but complied as Ed shifted his gaze across the cemetery, searching for something.

"I thought I heard something." It almost sounded like a voice, far off in the distance.

Hell, it probably was. There was no one in sight, but the cemetery hadn't closed yet. Hearing people nearby shouldn't be so surprising, but his eyes instinctively scanned the horizon in search of the source. Further up the grassy field was a small stone building- a mausoleum, apparently. He couldn't discern anything from it besides its old age.

The sound he heard seemed to echo; as if it came form inside a tunnel.

"Are you alright, Brother?" Alphonse asked carefully, clearly inquiring about more than just his general state.

"Hell- I'm probably just starting to lose it," he sighed deeply and rubbed his face, keeping his eyes off of the small building. "I've been having weird dreams lately, too. Probably just need more sleep." He tried to brush the matter aside, but Alphonse tilted his head in thought.
"Weird dreams...? Are they anything like... when Mom died?"

Ed shut his eyes for a moment as he felt the images of those haunting nightmares creep up on him and brushed them aside before he could visualize the blackened, demented monster that they had temporarily brought to life. "No. Almost, but they're not as bad... It's nothing, though. Just annoying."

"... Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

No.

He refused to further burden Al with his petty discomforts. Just because his brother was incapable of dreaming did not mean that he was handling the situation any better or was any better off. He couldn't allow himself to forget that.

And not just in regards to Alphonse; Hawkeye, Havoc, Breda, Falman, Fuery- and Hughes too, who he had not seen for several days- they were all trying to hide their pain, while Ed was out here, moping, running away from his problems like the child they all knew he was.

"Let me out!" Clenched fists collided into the metal door, sending a clanking echo to bounce off of the walls. Roy breathed harshly through bared teeth as he glared at the door, despite being unable to see it. He listened desperately for a response, but just as every other attempt, received nothing but silence. "I'll get out of here eventually," he growled balefully to whoever could hear him. "And when I do, I swear I will find you and burn you alive, god dammit!"

And still, nothing.

"I know you're listening! Answer me!" he hissed and struck his fists against the door once more before stepping away to bury his hands into his hair. Breathing became more and more difficult as his anger and frustration built and he was certain he wouldn't survive much longer of this. The room itself became smaller with every passing hour and the air seemed thinner with every intake of breath.

With a tremulous exhale, Roy turned around to face the door and thrashed his fists against it once more with all of the accumulated rage that pumped adrenaline into his veins. The collision did nothing but cause another loud bang to fill the chilling silence. In all honesty, he didn't expect anything else. He knew there was no hope of single-handedly breaking through his sturdy cage.

"Damn it," he cursed and unflinchingly rammed another coiled hand into the metal. "Damn it, damn it, damn it!" He continued the motion again and again and again, long after his hands were raw and arms begged for respite. He threw himself into the cold metal, slammed against it, cursed with every breath, but as the will to fight drained and his body refuses to cooperate any longer, Roy soon fell to his knees and allowed his forehead to drop to the door with much more force than necessary, even as doing so only added a spike of pain to his growing migraine. He then reeled back and banged his head against the door once again with twice the force, simply because his frustration demanded it.

Breathing raggedly through his torn throat, he eventually willed his fists to fall to his sides and unclench limply, slackening his shoulders in defeat.

He stared blankly at the space in front of him, trying to think back to how much time had passed since he first found himself trapped here, but the inability to understand it further added to his
irritation. He wanted to say that several days had passed by now. How many exactly, he couldn't say; it could have been weeks for all he knew. When even a minute was an eternity, it was impossible to say. In the back of his mind, Roy knew he was going to stop asking that question altogether soon enough.

Convincing himself that his imprisonment here was a temporary joke of some sort gave him only a small amount of relief that was ultimately short lived. Life seemed easier when he had something to hope for, but at the same time, he had to wonder if tricking himself into expecting something that would never come was actually much more cruel.

There was no denying it any longer: whoever put him here wanted him to stay and suffer.

Roy didn't know why, but he knew they were watching. Whoever "they" were, were undoubtedly getting a kick out of it.

As his luck would have it, they didn't even have the decency to let him know why.

Why...

Roy may never learn the answer to that question. He may never understand what happened to Fullmetal to cause all of this in the first place. It may not have been rational or made sense, but he wanted to think that if only Edward never walked away from him after that pointless argument, none of this could have happened. It was so much easier to blame it all on a single moment and decision. It was so much easier to blame someone that way.

Why did he have to leave in the first place? If Fullmetal had just toughened up and taken the words he threw at him and done his job instead of running away, maybe none of this would have happened. It was simpler to blame him for doing that, because at least that moment made sense, much unlike the interaction that followed.

He was furious. Furious at Edward for walking away, for potentially putting him here, but even more so, he was furious at himself for starting that damn argument in the first place.

Thinking back on it, it all seemed so irrelevant. It began because of Liore of all things; a small town that seemed insignificant to him now. Hell, Roy had to take a moment to recall why Liore even had any importance anyway.

It didn't matter. It never mattered. If the colonel could have just kept his mouth shut, then maybe-

But as time passed, constantly repeating every possible maybe and what-if became more tedious than the last. He had been cycling the same thoughts for possibly days now and never managed to come up with a new conclusion. There was nothing to conclude: he was trapped and could only guess why. It was quite simple, really.

Roy shifted and turned to sit back against the door, gazing lifelessly at the room. He could still not actually see a single thing, but the human brain was powerful. His mind filled in the gaps and drew lines in his vision where he believed the four corners to be, as well as the sink. He could even almost make out the discarded blanket sitting not too far from his outstretched legs.

He knew not to trust this image, however, especially considering how the room seemed to shrink since he was first placed inside. Either only his perception grew smaller, or the room was truly tightening around him and it was his mental image that was off. He even knew not to believe that the blanket was actually where he "saw" it, but it was difficult to ignore what his eyes told him.

Seeing was believing, after all.
Had his mental state been in better condition, he would have known right away not to think much of the signs of motion he saw in the corner of his vision at times or the voice he heard. Hallucinations— that was all it was. Roy told himself that primarily due to logic and deduction, but the false images became harder and harder to ignore.

Especially when they growled at him from across the room.

When he first noticed a darker blob among the pitch black of his surroundings, he found himself seriously questioning if he was seeing things or not for longer than he would like to admit. He stared long and hard into one corner for several minutes straight, wondering what is that?

And then it moved. It became not just a single form, but a living, breathing thing with legs, a head, and eyes that faintly gleamed when Roy looked at them in the right angle. It didn't make sense, and yet he saw it. He saw the white teeth, which appeared to him as only small lines of a slightly lighter shade of black.

Perhaps it always was, or perhaps his mind gave the final shape to it the moment he made the decision, but it was a dog. A large, angular, feral dog that had its sharp teeth constantly bared and vicious, savage eyes locked on him at all times.

The moment this realization struck him, Roy went still and held his breath, keeping his widened eyes on it for a long moment, waiting to see what it would do, all while wondering how it got there. Where did it come from? Is there a way out now?

But of course, he wasn't about to start moving around to search and risk triggering the animal. After switching to trying to ignore it despite the hungry growls that filled his ears, Roy had a brief and rare moment of clarity in which he realized that he was only hallucinating again. Being subjected to light deprivation could surely do that to a person. Nothing to worry about. In a way, it was natural.

He should have been more concerned, but honestly, he was more relieved that there wasn't actually a mindless beast trapped in a small room with him, posed to snap and bite his throat out at any given moment. That said a thing or two about his priorities, Roy supposed as he closed his eyes, or at least thought he did. It was surprisingly hard to tell without needing to gingerly touch his own face.

He took a deep breath in an attempt to calm himself, but the unbridled frustration continued to fester and buzz in his ears like angry wasps, refusing to leave him alone. A persistent urge to unleash all of his building rage rung in his head and with no end in sight, but he somehow managed to keep himself from screaming. Roy could feel himself stepping closer to a breaking point and he feared what would happen when he reached it. If this continued for much longer, he would find out eventually, one way or another.

He wanted to get out. He wanted to be able to see and feel sunlight again and the faces of his team and continue his life. He wanted anything but this.

Just as he buried his head in his hands, the low, hungry growl of the imaginary dog grew louder, as if it was annoyed that Roy was no longer returning its stare. When he did nothing in response to this in favor for threatening to rip his own hair out. It barked; its sharp, deep voice abrupt and loud. The colonel flinched as the piercing sound shocked him into raising his head.

The dog was standing in the immense void that was his cell, glaring at him, daring him to do something. Taunting him because it had power, while Roy had none. Almost as if it was sent here...
"Shut up!" he snapped back at the animal, his voice guttural and rugged. Perhaps it was a pointless battle, but it was one he was willing to fight, not because he thought he could win, but because he had nothing else to focus on; nothing else to throw his anger at. While he desperately wanted to break down the very walls of this place, find his captors, and melt their skin, this would have to do.

The growling stopped for a fraction of a second, before returning with a vengeance. The dog took a step closer and its muscled tensed in preparation to strike, but otherwise showed no signs that it was going to. Roy, fueled by an irrational, fearless vigor, shifted to a less defenseless sitting position against the wall.

"I said shut up, you damn mutt!" His commanding voice echoed off of the cement walls, but sounded different than every other noise he heard when it reached him again.

He then remembered that from the view of an outsider, the only sound to be heard was his own yelling.

And just like that, the energy to fight evaporated, leaving a hollowness in its place.

He was yelling at nothing- at his own mind.

Roy exhaled wearily and leaned back against the wall, keeping his eyes on the vision of the dog as it closed in on him. While it approached, he could almost smell its fetid breath and feel its warmth on his cold skin.

With only a small amount of hesitation, Roy reached forward and slowly moved his hand towards the dog's head. It opened its mouth to bite down, but as soon as his hand touched it, the image disappeared as if he had just opened his eyes. He stared at the spot where the dog was just standing, searching for something- anything.

But there was only nothing.

Nothing surrounded by more nothing.

Emptiness. Black. Devoid of all subsistence and value.

He almost preferred the hallucinations.

No, there was no almost; he absolutely did.

Roy's mind continued to fool his eyes into registering the walls around him, which was thankfully enough to keep him somewhat sane- as far as he could tell, anyway. Forcing his brain to create illusions had at some point become the better option. Pretending that he could see what was in front of him was greatly preferred over staring at the blank reality of his situation. He would much rather embrace a lie than deal with the truth.

What a pathetic existence, a voice whispered in the back of his head. He would have agreed, but what other choice did he have in this situation but to deceive himself for the sake of small comforts? This was survival. This wasn't a battle against imaginary beasts or the monsters who locked him in here; it was a battle against his own mind. He was fighting just to keep the pillars that helped hold himself together intact.

As soon as they collapsed, Roy wasn't sure if he would be able to rebuild them.
While he tried to defend himself, the truth was that he was beginning to hallucinate. It was one of the first and most obvious signs that something was wrong. He could only remind himself that what he saw and heard was not real for so long. And at some point, he had to wonder when he would no longer be able to tell the difference.

Roy turned and laid down on the hard, cold floor and wearily rubbed his face, unable to keep a soft chuckle from sounding past his lips.

"I'm really starting to lose it, aren't I?" he asked himself, if only just to hear something that he knew was real.

Yelling at dogs, talking to himself, contemplating his own sanity. Unless he found a way out soon, Roy knew it was only going to get worse.
Another long day at the office, another lonely night consumed by piling over countless reports and documents, all trying to vaguely point in the same direction but being too far off to be of any real help. Maes had been at it for about a week now and had made painfully little progress. Even now that the night drew on and the halls of Central Command became empty, he remained with the intent of dedicating every waking moment to achieving his goal.

The military had almost exhausted its' supply of hands available to work on the search for Scar long before Roy became another one of the Ishvalan's casualties. Maes knew it was only a matter of time before the higher-ups decided to give him more work to divide his attention.

There was yet to be any solid evidence that Scar was to blame for Roy's death, but there was no mistaking the alchemic explosion of the body's insides, based on the autopsy report. Of course, that was going purely off of what he had read and heard. Maes was never given an opportunity to see the body for himself, even during the funeral, which he supposed he should have taken as a blessing. He wished he could have seen his best friend one last time, but perhaps it was somehow for the best. He wasn't entirely sure how he would have taken to seeing the mangled body of Roy Mustang anyway.

Seeing what was left over was already proving to be too much for him. He had automatically offered to help Roy's adoptive family deal with his possessions and furniture and pretty much everything that he owned. The only problem was that every time he took the opportunity to go to the unoccupied house, the motivation to disrupt it was immediately swept out from under him and he ended up putting it off for another day.

Maes wanted nothing more than to block out every sign that his friend was dead and go back to a time where thinking about all the good times they had didn't aggravate the growing hole in his chest.

But he couldn't forget. He wouldn't allow himself to even if he was given the option. It hurt like hell every moment his deceased friend crossed his mind. Even while he was distracted, Maes could still feel the gaping hole that was left by the ingrain knowledge that something valuable was suddenly gone. But it was this pain that kept him focused on the goal. Finding a way to get to the man who did this while stepping through all of the overly complicated military procedures kept him from getting too depressed. At least he had a purpose.

However, Maes was sure he would have already lost his mind trying to find the allusive terrorist with so little to work with if it wasn't for Gracia and Elicia there to keep him on his feet. He had people to go home to. People to remind him that he could not slave away until he withered away, even if part of him secretly wanted to.

He knew they were very worried for him, growing more so with every late night spent at the office. It was that thought alone that convinced him to go back home before midnight struck for once. There wasn't much to be gained by staying any longer anyway; dwelling on the loss of his friend steadily chipped away at his productivity until too little remained to actually get anything done. Yet somehow, he found himself taking the longer route through the building, which just so happened to include walking past Colonel Mustang's office. But as Maes stopped in his tracks to stare at the door, a voice in the back of his head reminded him that it would soon belong to someone else. Roy only just got promoted, and yet someone would be filling in his shoes so quickly.
It was so tragically unfair.

Insisting to himself that he needed to get home, Maes forced his legs to keep moving, but was abruptly stopped once more as his eyes caught that the door was just slightly ajar. Without giving it much thought, he pushed it open and quickly scanned his eyes over the room, seeing nothing out of place. Well, to be exact, there was nothing there to be out of place. The office was almost empty, give or take the generic furniture that remained, which was a painful juxtaposition from the usual chaos that quickly became the norm not long ago. Every light was off, its contents left visible only by the moonlight that slipped in through the windows.

He exhaled slowly as he took in the sight of the desolate, lonely office that was once so filled with life, making a pathetic attempt to ignore the sharp pang he felt. Mindlessly, Maes stravaged further inside and quietly pushed open the door to the inner office, pausing in the doorway as he was mildly surprised to see he was not alone.

Riza sat on one of the sofas in the center of Roy's dark inner office with her back turned to him. Unsure if she noticed his presence or not, Maes remained still for a moment longer as he contemplated what to do. Several seconds of pondering passed before he decided to continue in and circle around the sofa to take a seat along with her. As he settled onto the other side of the couch, Riza did not look up at him; she only continued her downwards stare almost as if she believed herself to still be alone.

He knew Riza liked her alone time to collect her thoughts and wasn't too keen on interrupting, but as she sat there in the dark of her beloved superior officer's office, she looked more lost than he had ever seen her.

Maes had his family. Riza had no one.

"How ironic that we both ended up back here," he whispered solemnly, hesitant to break the crisp silence. When he received no response, Maes averted his gaze to Roy's cold, spotless desk, wondering if he should say something more or just shut up.

Riza exhaled slowly after a moment of silence. The lieutenant colonel glanced back over to her just in time for her to lift her head slightly, but just enough for him to catch a subtle glimmer in her eyes. His mouth gaped open for a moment, at a loss for words, stunned by the realization that he was looking at the shine of tears in her eyes, then ashamed of the fact he reacted in such a way.

"Of course she was crying. Riza wasn't invincible."

"I know I need to keep moving forward," she began quietly, voice steady and soft, yet brimming with sadness. Straight to the point as always. "It's what he would have wanted. But..." She trailed off for a moment and turned her head to look at Maes, allowing him to see the faint redness around her eyes. "...I wonder what Roy would have done, if it was one of us who had died- how long it would have taken him to get up and do something about it."

"We are doing something about it," Maes supplied almost instantly. They were all infuriated by the lack of progress, Riza included. But unlike him, she lacked the power to carry on the case, while others were more interested in assigning a new colonel to take over than to focus on finding the illusive serial killer, brushing the issue off because so many were already searching for him.

She only looked at him, unconvinced, before bowing her head once more to land her gaze aimlessly on the coffee table.

"I'm sorry," she whispered so quietly that Maes wasn't sure if he imagined it or not. As she slowly
moved to stand up, she continued in a marginally louder tone, bellying the suffering that wanted to show through. "I should go."

"Riza, wait."

She froze before she could fully stand and turned her head to watch him, expression completely stoic, skillfully obscuring the writhing pain underneath. Waiting for something in particular; something that he wasn't sure if he could supply. As she watched him, Maes hesitated for a moment, realizing that he didn't know what to say.

"... You can't keep doing this to yourself. You can't keep holding it all in. I can see what this is doing to you. I know we were never as close as you and Roy, but if you need someone to talk to, I'm here for you."

Maes and Hawkeye were only as close as they were because of Roy. He was the only person she would open up to about something like this, but with him gone, she was alone.

As he held her gaze, the lieutenant colonel could see the mute war raging in her sherry eyes. But as one side gave way to the other, she broke the stare to give the office a desultory look-over and lowered herself back onto the couch with a gentle sigh and more reluctance than he could see.

Without looking at him, she opened her mouth to speak but several seconds passed before any words were spoken.

"Roy had once said that if he ever died on his path to becoming Fuhrer, then someone else would need to continue in his place. That person would most likely have to be me, but we both believed it would never come to that." Her fingers coiled into fists and her eyes narrowed. "But I'm failing him. I don't have what it takes to change this country. I allowed this to happen when I dropped my guard that night."

"You can't think like that," Maes insisted without thought. He couldn't stand to let her take on the blame for his death. "He wouldn't want you to blame yourself for this."

"It doesn't matter what he would have wanted!" she exclaimed and looked up to stare him straight in the eye, exposing the fresh tears that dared to fall down her cheeks. Maes fought and failed to keep his expression neutral as Riza's composure slipped. "Roy is dead. There's no use in trying to continue on as if nothing changes."

Maes was ashamed to admit that all he could do in response was stare. As the seconds ticked on in silence, realization slipped into her eyes and she managed to look contrite even as she turned away from him.

Before he could bring himself to utter something, Riza quietly spoke. "I apologize. That was... unprofessional."

Perhaps he had no right to lecture her, but something snapped in that moment.

"Damn professionalism!" She did not react to his exclamation in the slightest, from what he could see. "I know you're hurting, Riza. I am too- we all are. But we're going to make it through this somehow." As he sat on one end of the couch, back as straight and stiff as a rod, she leaned back on the other as if she was physically incapable of remaining upward if it wasn't for the help of the sofa.

She just looked at him, expression unreadable in a way that reminded him of when Roy was in a bad state of mind long ago.
"I ran into Edward a few days ago," she said suddenly in a soft, wistful tone that Maes did not like at all. "When I saw him, I was reminded of when he and Alphonse attempted human transmutation."

The breath in his lungs became nonexistent as a cold chill ran down his spine at the very mention of the alchemic taboo. He had heard the horror storied from Roy. Hearing Riza talk about it now was the last thing he wanted.

"I've lost people before," she continued. "But only now can I truly understand what prompted them to take such a risk."

"... What are you saying?"

"You don't need to worry, Maes. I know it doesn't work. Besides, I couldn't even if I wanted to."

"But... are you saying you would if you could? If it did work?" he asked reluctantly, although he wasn't sure why. Maes was positive that he didn't want to hear the answer, but the words slipped out as the thought crossed through his mind.

"Not necessarily," she said quietly, only because she knew it was what he wanted to hear. "Although I'd have nothing to lose. Without Roy, I- I don't have anything else-" she stopped herself abruptly, but Maes was able to fill in the gap with a troubling amount of foreboding ease.

-to live for.

"... Riza."

This time, she rose to her feet, avoiding his eyes as she did so. "I need to leave," the first lieutenant announced quietly. "You should head home too, Maes." Without waiting for him to reply, she circled the couch and moved for the door without hesitation.

"Wait, Riza!" He jumped to his feet, but she had vanished behind the door before he had any chance of stopping her.

He had managed to fall asleep for what felt like minutes. Sleeping made him feel restless as his dreams heightened every fear that haunted him by tenfold. He told himself that sleep would give him clarity, but it only served to further confuse him as the lines between reality and nightmares wavered and blurred together with every passing hour spent in darkness.

One of the only clear benefits came from when he woke up in a panic, pumping with adrenaline and a revived determination to escape.

Roy had shuffled into the corner, tracing his hands over every detail of the walls until he found what he was looking for. He had sat there for hours, tightly pressing himself against the unseeable barriers as he waited, listened, and watched. He looked for the slightest shift within the hollow darkness, but at the same time, he knew it wouldn't come. And even if it did, it could not be trusted.

After an immeasurable amount of time had passed, the desire to give up, lay down, and allow sleep to kill time despite the consequences emerged, but he stubbornly persisted. All while remaining on high-alert, drifting into an empty state of subdued thought became an easy task after all of these days- weeks- whatever.

He had become desperate since his capture; more willing to resort to hastily prepared, almost
animalistic plans that would only work through sheer luck. If Roy was anything, it definitely was not lucky, but that fact would not stop him from trying.

Nothing else mattered now besides survival and escape.

Roy could now understand why a trapped coyote would chew its own leg off to be freed of a snare. If the only thing keeping the colonel there was a chain around his ankle, he would have seriously considered the option long ago. But unfortunately for him, his situation was not so simple. There was no foreseeable way out of his cage, but Roy could not yet bring himself to give up.

Muscles tense like a cat posed to strike, he waited tirelessly, compliantly falling into the illusions of his own mind as he stared down at where he knew the hatch to be as if simply doing so would cause an event to trigger.

The hatch that was the only opening into the outside world.

The small, covered slot in the bottom of the door that he knew had to open at some point. Roy had not once seen or heard it as of yet, certain that his captors only unlocked it when he was asleep, although he could not fathom how they would know.

Regardless, the small metal hatch whispered promises of freedom. How, exactly, Roy did not know nor care to consider. He could not think clearly enough to contemplate the possibilities as well as he once could, mind fogged and clouded by an incoherent train of thought that had long since detached itself from the tracks.

The colonel at least had enough sanity remaining to focus on his task, clinging onto it as though his life depended on it, because it very well did. That hatch was bound to open anytime now- it's been far too long since he has last been tossed one of those small, possibly moldy pieces of bread. They wouldn't want their captive to die from starvation, after all.

His primary source of motivation at this point was still to find a way out of there, but he couldn't lie and say he wasn't starving as well. His stomach constantly growled at the thought of that old, unsatisfying slice of food that he would eventually be given, serving as a helpful reminder of why exactly he was crouched in that corner. Roy certainly needed it, considering how often his mind would wander these days.

In fact, he had noticed a number of changes in his comportment as of late, such as adopting the habit of nail biting. Once a nervous tick and he got over during his childhood, the impulsion reappeared from both an uncontrollable string of paranoid thoughts as well as the unnerving desire to feel something against his skin besides rough concrete and cold air, even if it had to be his own teeth.

The ability to bite in general felt like a godsend. To be able to feel and taste was yet another reminder that he wasn't dead; he hoped, at least. Roy could only assume that having no physical body in Hell meant he couldn't taste the stale bread and rust-infused sink water, as well as the metallic blood he accidentally broke free from his fingers from time to time.

He knew it wasn't a normal thought- he knew that. Understanding that was supposedly a good sign, but it did nothing to make him feel better. At times, he was certain that he could feel his brain cells being corrupted by the empty void that surrounded him. The longer he remained trapped, the less that would remain of himself- his sanity.

Was it better to deny his deteriorating state, or accept it? Of course, that begged the question: was he actually losing his mind? Or was it all just paranoia that wanted him to think that he was? Roy
wanted to believe that answering that question before he ended up in this cell would have been a simple task, but at the same time, how could anyone actually know if they were going crazy out in the real world either? He had heard that an insane person could not comprehend that there was something wrong with them, instead of everyone around them. It was apparently the sane who questioned their own sanity, but that did little to comfort him. If he had probable cause to believe something was wrong with him, then where did that leave him?

How was Roy to ever know when people were pitying him, answering questions and playing along just to humor him? Was that how life would be if he were ever to escape? He could not trust his own perception. Just like the dog and the voices that whispered around him, if it seemed real, then it had to be, right? Who was to say any different? Who was he to reject certain things as real, while others not? A person could not simply pick and choose what they wanted to believe in, but then how could anyone know the truth?

A distant sound echoed down the halls beyond his cell, snapping Roy's attention back to the present. He welcomed the distraction, thankful to be brought out of his musing. Far too often now would he stumble onto a tangent of cycling contemplation that ultimately archived nothing besides giving him headaches.

Light footsteps neared him, accompanied by a stream of muttering. The alchemist pressed himself closer to the wall, hoping to make out some of the grumbles before he could decide if it was all another hallucination, or exactly what he was waiting for.

"Damn it," the familiar voice cursed as the source got closer. "That bitch..."

The sound of motion became louder until Roy was able to hear a soft shuffle just behind the metal door, replacing the muffled ranting as his captor fell silent. He held his breath as the sharp chime of metal rubbing against metal greeted his ears, which he assumed to be coming from the mechanism that locked the hatch on the other side. How he managed to sleep through that in the past, he would never know.

Hinges screeched with movement and he swore he could see a shift within the darkness. Contrary to what he expected, no light made it through the small rectangular hatch as it was opened; the hallway was left almost as dark. Whoever had the great idea of trapping him in a room devoid of light was clearly very careful.

Roy was still not entirely sure what he was going to do and had never been a huge fan of winging things, but desperate times called for desperate measures. Once he deemed the moment right, he lunged his arms forward, grabbing onto a hand just as the person on the other side was tossing in his meal for the day. A startled gasp came from beyond the wall as Roy shifted his grip and yanked backwards on the person's arm, satisfied when he heard their forehead collide into the steel that separated them, followed by a startled curse.

Once he knocked them unconscious, he could use the hatch to search their body for a key or something-

Cut off from his premature planning, the arm he was holding onto suddenly pulled back, moving Roy's hands through the hatch along with it, not allowing him to let go. Before he could continue the game of tug-o-war, a weight crushed down on his hands, shooting spikes of blaring pain up his arm from the incredible amount of force. The colonel cried out through bared teeth and relented his hold. The foot that threatened to snap his fingers like twigs remained for a moment longer before raising, allowing Roy to reel back, hands throbbing and possibly fractured.

"Ah, shit," a grating voice hissed. "What the hell?! Last I checked, dogs weren't supposed to bite
the hands that feed them," he growled venomously, likely nursing his bruised head as he kicked the door for good measure.

"I wouldn't have to bite if you didn't trap me in here like an animal!"

The voice scoffed venomously. "In that case, you won't be getting any more food from me, you ungrateful worm."

The threat went over his head as he held his pulsing hands in front of himself, almost glad that he couldn't see their sorry state. Roy could not keep himself from imagining bruised joints, twisting in unnatural angles. Besides pain, he couldn't feel them very well and wasn't about to start touching things to test them out.

"Listen," Roy began, shoving past the bubbling irritation to the best of his ability. "Just tell me what you want! What will it take to open that door? Why am I here?" He tried to keep the desperation out of his tone, certain that he was doing a poor job. One moment he was attacking his captor, and the next, he was trying to bargain.

When he heard no immediately response, Roy began to fear that he was imagining the conversation until a raspy, sharp fit of laughter abruptly bounced off of the walls, leading him to idly ponder if imagining it would have been better. There was something foreboding about the person standing behind the door- something he didn't like.

"Lust has been such a slave-driver lately, that I almost forgot you were down here. I've been hoping to find something to get my mind off of it, but here you are, Colonel Roy Mustang, waiting to entertain," he sung, his voice injecting Roy with unease. "You want to know why you're here? I'm not supposed to, but I'll tell ya."

Again, he heard laughter. Despite the colonel's desire for answers, he began to regret asking.

"You were getting a little too close to things that we don't want you knowing about. Any longer, and you might've figured out our plan. But since you're a potential sacrifice, we couldn't just kill you," he explained too casually for comfort. "Rather than letting you run around and causing chaos until the Promise Day, I figured that convincing the world you were dead would be easier in the long run." Another amused cackle grated against his ears.

Nearly everything that was said went straight over the alchemist's head, which he assumed was exactly why he was told in the first place. He was listening to someone rant about the Promise Day and sacrifices as if any of it would make any sense to him. It all sounded ridiculous and crazy. But then again, his entire situation would sound quite crazy to anyone else. From where he was, Roy had nothing to gain from hearing his absurd tale; his captor only wanted to further confuse him.

"Oh yeah; they think Scar killed me," Roy muttered under his breath as the despondent thought occurred to him, mildly unaware that the words were voiced outside of his own mind. "Wait- what makes me a sacrifice?" he asked, instead deciding to go along with it and grab as much information as he could, risking the possibility that it was all made up.

"Potential sacrifice," he corrected with a grin in his voice. "Ideally, we won't even need to use you. You're nothing more than a... safety measure."

"... Then why are the lights off?"

"The lights? Oh, that just makes it more interesting! I wanted to see how far I could push you- how
far you'll break if all I do it keep you in the dark. After all, your mind doesn't need to be fully intact when the time comes."

"What?!!" Roy exclaimed, fighting the urge to keep his damaged fingers from coiling in rage. He did not understand much of anything he was being told, but he had an unsteady grasp, which is more than what he had before. "You mean I've been sitting in the dark for no reason?!"

"Oh, don't be like that," he tsked, feigning sympathy. "You alchemists are scientists, right? And science is nothing without its experiments!"

"This is all for... for an experiment? For someone else's amusement?" Roy whispered to himself, glaring as the pain in his head grew stronger. By the sound of it, they wanted him to do something for them. Ordinarily, he would have considered cooperating if it meant freedom from this meaningless torture, but the word sacrifice made him less willing.

If his captor said anything at this point, Roy wasn't able to hear it underneath his own racing mind.

"No, no, no, this can't- this is all pointless," he breathed, winded by a realization. "You- they're doing this to me just for the hell of it? That- that can't-" His bruised fingers dug into his hair and he leaned back against the wall to keep from collapsing. They could use him for their schemes, but to needlessly torment him like this; force him to endure unnecessary torture-

It shouldn't have shook him as much as it did. That fact was no less inhumane than being locked in a barren room like a mindless beast. He doubted he would have felt much better if they had some sort of explanation for this torment, but to know that there was none at all...

"Are you actually talking to yourself now?" the voice laughed but the words never quite reached him.

"Yeah, you're really falling apart, Mustang."

Roy snapped his head up and spun around when the new voice reached his ears.

Ed?

The teenager's voice rung in his head but just as he knew to expect, saw nothing within the empty blackness. This wasn't the first time since his imprisonment that he had heard the distant voices of his team, Edward included.

"This is pretty pathetic," Fullmetal's voice said again, but Roy failed to pinpoint the exact source.

Roy shook his head, rattling the headache he already had, and shut his eyes. "Snap out of it," he scolded himself. "This isn't real. I'm just imagining. This isn't real. He's not real..."

"Oh, so I'm not real?" the voice of his captor beyond the door asked eagerly. "Is that so?"

Roy didn't have it in him to correct him and explain that it was Fullmetal who wasn't actually there, but how was he to really know if they both were not simple hallucinations?

"You deserve this for being such a bastard," Edward added condescendingly. Roy opened his eyes, convinced that he could just narrowly make out the outline of a short figure standing at the other end of the cell, watching him from within the darkness.

"No, I-"
"You basically brought this upon yourself."

"No! That's not why- shut up!"

Just as he turned his head away from the kid, he saw a red flash in the corner of his eyes. He turned to face it but as soon as he did, the red consumed his vision and burned his eyes, forcing him to shut them and turn away, fearing permanent damage. But long before he could question what the hell caused the flash, the first voice returned- right behind him, instead of on the other side of the wall.

"Tell me, Mustang:" he asked quietly. "Is this real?"

Roy flinched away when the voice manifested too closely for comfort, but he couldn't create a distance fast enough to avoid the sharp force colliding into the small of his back. A surprised gasp effortlessly broke through his lips as he stumbled forward, barely catching himself before he could lose balance. However, a second blow aimed for his legs toppled him onto the ground, too blind to keep himself from tumbling to his side. The colonel dragged himself to the nearest wall and shifted to press his back against it, eyes jumping from corner to corner, searching for any sigh of movement when it was impossible to do just that. He held his breath, wondering if whatever inexplicable force that had attacked him could see in the dark.

"How the hell-" he muttered, mind racing. Whoever that was- that person- he was on the outside; there was absolutely no way it that wouldn't cause noise, besides the overhead vent that only a rat could fit through. It didn't make sense.

None of it made any sense!

"What the hell are you?!" he demanded, eyes wide and alert, yet consumed by a relentless confusion that swelled and throbbed in his brain, threatening to burst and overflow.

The sixth sense that had kept him alive so far sprung to life, stilling him where he was, pressed against the wall like a frightened animal as it told him danger was nearby. He could almost feel disturbingly warm breath near his skin, but there was no denying the violent shiver it shot down his back.

"Envy," the voice said gleefully, far too close for comfort. "Do you think I'm real now, Mustang?" he asked rhetorically, chuckling as he distanced himself marginally. Far off in the back of his mind, Roy had to wonder if that was his name, a code name, or if he was trying to say he was the embodiment of envy.

Regardless, Roy found himself unable to give an honest answer easily. He still didn't know, too blinded by uncertainty. No person could manifest themselves into a sealed room so quickly, despite the proof that seemed to be staring back at him. If he couldn't trust what he saw and heard, then how could he trust what he felt? Roy's perception was eager to deceive him now that it was so pitifully easy.

"I'd know for sure if I could actually see," he muttered, not entirely intending to be heard. In the dark, his eyes were useless and only wanted to deceive him. If the lights were on, then he was willing to bet that his mind wouldn't have been playing as many tricks on him.

"Oh, so you want me to turn the light on? Why didn't you just say so?!" Before Roy could consider giving Envy an answer, another red flash seared his eyes, forcing him to shield himself with his arm until it dimmed and went out. While he still had no idea that that was, it certainly wasn't what he wanted.
"I'm always eager to please," Envy sung, his voice now coming from beyond the door once more. Roy straightened up and stared in that general direction, thoroughly confused once more.

"This has got to be a trick," the colonel mused under his breath. Either a trick, or a hallucination; both would be preferable to the utter inscrutability of it.

The response he was given was more amused, sadistic laughter at his expense. Roy opened his mouth to say something, but a blaring white suddenly assaulted him, yanking out a pained cry as his quickly bowed his head and covered his eyes with both arms, desperate to block out the light. It pierced through his very skull, somehow spreading a sharp, hellish fire through every limb and burning every nerve for only a fraction of a second, before sinking back to only his head. Even while covered, he could somehow still see the vengefully bright light seep through his skin and infecting his sight with an agonizing red.

"Turn it off!" he demanded, hesitant to open his eyes in order to test if the light was still on or not. Adjusting one's eyes to light usually only stung for a moment and then passed relatively quickly, but this was drastically different. It slowly dimmed after a moment until the familiar darkness returned thanks to his own protective arms, but every thought of opening his eyes again was reflected by a newly created fear of the light.

"Turn it off? But I thought you wanted to see," Envy inquired, lacing his voice with mock concern. "Turn the light off, damn it!"

A contemplative hum came from beyond the door as Envy took his sweet time considering the idea, before finally sighing wistfully. "Oh, alright." Before Roy could ear the subtle click of the light switch, another voice echoed down the hall, harsh and critical.

"Envy!" a female snapped.

He heard an irritated groan from his captor as the sharp click of heels trailed closer, but Roy was far too preoccupied by protecting his eyes to care. The lights were still on, judging by the bright burn that singed his eyes whenever he dared shift his arms away by a fraction of an inch.

"You don't have time to waste on playing with that human," she continued with a tone laced with judgment.

"Oh come on, Lust; I'm just having a little fun," Envy sneered from beyond the steel door.

"It's your own fault we have to take these extra precautions. Go do your job." Her voice was that of silk. Smooth, yet edged with blades, it was the a stark juxtaposition to every sound that had reached Roy's ears since his capture, yet it brought him no comfort whatsoever. Both her's and Envy's very presence made his skin crawl.

"My fault? I told you that this is better than your plan. As the humans say, we killed two birds with one stone," the first snide voice sung confidentially, only to be cut off by the other, Lust.

"You only gave us extra work when you decided to drag Mustang here. Things would have gone much smoother had we just killed the lieutenant colonel as planned."

Roy's head perked up, but his eyes remained firmly shut. The lieutenant colonel? Maes? Kill? What?

"He's too preoccupied with mourning to continue snooping," Envy lashed back with a bite in his voice.
"He's going to catch on, and when he does, you'll have to clean up the mess," Lust replied, her words final and leaving no room for argument. Roy got the impression that the two were glaring at each other as the silence stretched on uncomfortably until he heard her turn and walk away without another word.

While he struggled to ignore the pain in his head and the sharp jabs he felt every time a drop of light slipped past his protective arms, the colonel strained his ears to listen to their conversation. Hearing the mention of his best friend was the last thing he expected to encounter down in his hell hole. Knowing that these people had their sights set on him too forced him to reconsider his priorities, ever strengthening his motivation to escape.

If only it helped him to actually put that motivation to use.

Envy scoffed under his breath and soundlessly flipped the light switch off again.

"Fine by me," he huffed to himself as Lust's steps faded out of earshot.

Hesitantly, Roy shifted his arms and cracked his eyes open to see only black in front of him. He released a great sigh of relief as he realized he never thought he would be so thankful to see absolutely nothing. The colonel slackened against the wall and blinked away the spots in his vision that still remained. The mention of Hughes still floated at the top of his mind, but he decided to wait for his skull to stop stinging before he gave it much thought.

"Well?" Envy asked as if he were waiting for something, and elaborated when Roy remained silent. "Are you going to thank me or what?"

"... Go to hell."

Envy sighed and clicked his tongue. "You humans are so ungrateful. I, on the other hand, at least have to decency to thank you for being a nice distraction. Until Lust ruined it, anyway... I need to get going, but I'll be sure to visit again soon."

Footsteps trailed off along with quiet snickering, leaving Roy alone.

"Yep; pathetic," Edward's voice said besides him.

Well, as alone as he could be, anyway. He honestly did not know which way he would have preferred it.

"Be quiet, Fullmetal." He grumbled the command dismissively, and yet he could not pretend for even a moment that the teen was wrong. When he didn't hear another snarky response, Roy decided that the kid had finally left him alone as well, leaving him to his fate. But even with the insults, it only took him a moment to decide that yes, he would have preferred it if the illusionary kid had stayed a while longer.
Happy Thanksgiving, fellow Americans! And I hope everyone else had a wonderful Thursday. :D

Edward shot upwards, breathing heavily and fisting the sheets with trembling hands as his wide, panicked eyes tore holes into the dark wall in front of him.

"Brother?" Al's voice drew his attention back to reality, grounding him to the present. "Another nightmare?"

The blond glanced at him from across the small room, spotting his bulking figure even in the darkness as the gentle rays of moonlight drifted through the window and caught on his armor. As his breathing slowed to something more natural, he nodded and forced out a breathless "yeah" in response.

Edward then shifted his weight and dragged his pocket watch off of the side table and brought it close to his face until he could read that it was just past four in the morning. With a tired huff, he dropped it onto the table and turned to lean his back against the wall.

"Was it the same one as before?"

"Kinda. It was the same, but with more... detail."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Still primarily focused on his breathing, Edward made an indifferent grunt, lacking the energy to offer a real response. In light of how often it happened, Alphonse was always patient with him when he woke up from nightmares.

Another downside to Al's hollow body and inability to sleep was that hiding his night terrors from him was nearly impossible, but Ed's naturally prideful nature always urged him to try. Although it was also nice to have someone to talk to whenever he felt the desire.

He let a minute pass by, pondering whether or not he should explain the images that stained themselves into his brain, before shrugging weakly and deciding to just open his mouth and see what happens.

"It was very dark," he murmured at last, hearing the quiet squeak of Al's armor shifting to look at him. "I couldn't even see my own hands. Wherever I was, it felt vast, but somehow... suffocating."

Edward closed his eyes for a moment, revisiting that place in his mind. A tightness formed in his chest as he recalled the pressure that assaulted him, and immediately opened his eyes again to remind himself that it was just a vision.

"I heard someone sobbing- that was the only sound. It came from every angle, like it was just coming from inside my own head. Maybe it was," he trailed off, idly looking down at his own fingers intertwining in his lap as he twitched his shoulders in some resemblance of a shrug. "Then
I... saw Mustang. He was just standing there with his back turned to me, not even noticing me. I tried to get his attention, but it- it started to crumble after that."

Al didn't need to know the details that caused him to wake up with a heart attack in the first place. He didn't need to know that Ed was desperately fighting against an invisible torrent in the darkness to reach the colonel and he was apologizing and begging him not to leave again. He didn't need to know that tears were falling down his face as he tried to reach the man who was too far to hear his cries.

_Because he is dead_, a voice bitterly reminded him.

Al certainly didn't need to know that as soon as Edward got close to Mustang, almost close enough to speak to him, it was his own steps that made the ground crack. He watched in fear as the large tears in the black floor spread like bolts of lightning until it reached the colonel and collapsed, bringing him under as if he was standing on nothing more than a thin layer of ice. And for a split second on his way down, Ed could see the unmistakable terror on his face, just before he disappeared into the depths.

He was smart enough to see the symbolism that his own mind felt the need to include; it was his fault. If only he just followed orders for _once_ in his life, he could have been there to stop Scar from killing the colonel. Ed was entirely to blame and he didn't want to hear anyone tell him otherwise. He didn't deserve it. The only thing he deserved was to suffer the consequences for being such a spoiled shit with the gall to leave someone with a target on their back alone with a serial killer. He knew that if he stayed, everything could have been different- better.

_Or you would have gotten killed along with him._

Alphonse must have taken his silence to mean that he was done explaining.

"You keep having the same dream," Al mused quietly. "Maybe it means something?"

Edward folded his arms and shook his head. "Come on, you know that's not possible. Mustang's ghost isn't trying to tell me something." His halfhearted laugh would have sounded more humorous if he managed to crack the slightest of smiles- or do anything besides keep on the withering frown that stubbornly remained in place.

"...You still blame yourself, don't you?"

Edward looked up at the suit of armor, then turned away, finding himself unable to keep up the gaze longer than a few seconds. "We've already been over this." His tone was just barely above a whisper, having no desire to hear Alphonse continue to argue in his own defense. "I just need to distract myself."

"What do you mean?"

He ran a hand over his face, rubbing his heavy eyes. "I need to stop visiting his grave."

"... Are you sure that will help?"

"I don't know," Edward groaned, almost petulantly. "I thought going there often would help, but now I'm not so sure." He buried his head in his hands and exhaled deeply, reigning in his unruly, frayed nerves to the best of his ability. "I can't keep doing this, Al. First Mom, and now this-" a strained, tired grin stretched his lips. "I just want to get some rest for once."

It wasn't just the nightmares from both incidents that constantly perturbed him and kept him from
sleeping straight through the night. He didn't want to close his eyes and fear seeing the ghosts from his past. He didn't want to dread falling asleep. He wanted rest from this torment.

Edward lowered his arms and shifted his weight to lay down on the bed again, staring up at the ceiling with his arms folded behind his head.

"I just need to move on already."

"It hasn't been that long since... since the colonel passed away. It's okay to let it effect you, you know." Edward didn't reply, hoping Alphonse would leave it at that, yet knowing he wouldn't. "You don't have to be invincible, Brother."

Yes, I do.

"... I know that, Al." He failed to stifle a yawn and turned to face his back to the suit of armor. "I'm going back to sleep. Good night."

"Good night," he replied softly. If he had any idea that Edward was lying about falling asleep, he didn't give it away.

The blond stared lazily at the blank surface of the wall, eyelids heavy yet brain still racing from the startling dream.

Learning how to cope with loss was exhausting. His experience with it made nothing easier, only serving to remind him of his past mistakes that led up to each moment. At least when his mother first passed away, he had the drive to do something about it. Yes, what he did failed miserably, but he didn't have the lifeless lack of motivation that hit him after her second death. That case reminded him of how he currently felt, yet nowhere as severe.

He wanted so badly to make up for his mistake, but it was much easier said than done. He had been sitting around doing nothing, briefly considering going after Scar, but not having the will to do so just yet.

But one thing was clear: if something didn't change soon, Ed was sure he'd lose his mind.

The moment was blissful and serene; that seemed to be a rarity, but it was actually quite common. It was only noticing the sheer perfection of the surrounding setting that was rare. It was the beauty of a normal day- a day where no tragedy occurred to momentarily stop time, or a disaster that would be followed by interminable chaos. It wasn't exciting or particularly joyful either- just normal. Everything was as it should be.

Within their haven, Hawkeye stood guard by the window, as focused as always, but a close friend could see with one glance at the faint glimmer of humor in her eyes that she was at peace. Hughes leaned on the large desk with his hands in his pockets and a mildly mischievous smile in place as he planned to break into a rant about his family as soon as the opportunity arose, but equally enjoying the conversation as well.

Further off, Fuery and Falman watched with no lack of amusement as Havoc and Breda bickered like brothers in a way that made one wonder if they had already forgotten what they were arguing about, and where merely continuing for the sake of all of their entertainment. They would occasionally turn and demand their spectators pick sides to settle their trivial debate, but one wrong word would quickly spin the conversation onto another wild tangent.

It was all so simple, yet so vital. It was the little moments that always seemed to pass within the
blink of an eye that were, at times, all that were left to make life seem worth living. It was this bliss that made working such tedious hours with sometimes no reward at all tolerable. The people in his life, the way they interacted and effected his life without even realizing it...

Roy sat at his desk with his arms folded, leaning back and radiating leisure, hoping they understood what they meant to him. While he wasn't one to express such thoughts, he considered doing just that as he watched their usual antics with a sense of appreciation that he wished he acknowledged sooner.

Roy wanted to tell them all how much he valued them, cared about them—missed them.

But he refrained, not wanting to interrupt the abjectly perfect moment he was beholding, despite how routine it all actually was. The colonel also told himself that he just didn't want to deal with their reactions. He knew they'd ask if he hit his head and laugh about his sudden sincerity— which was fine. Hell, he'd enjoy that just as much. He'd give anything to continue hearing their voices and feeling their presence.

But just as every other good thing in his life, that moment of bliss was ripped away.

With a shattering bang, the door slammed open, effectively interrupting the peace as Edward Elric sauntered in with a customary scowl in place. The last member of the team had finally joined them, but there was a serious, incensed air around him that put the others at pause.

The team greeted him regardless, but Fullmetal paid them no mind as he marched up to the desk, also ignoring Hughes and Hawkeye as they stood guard.

"Hey bastard!" the teenager growled with an alarming amount of rage, stopping just short of running into the desk itself. "You really screwed up this time."

Roy narrowed his eyes, more annoyed at how he shamelessly barged in than the insult. "What are you talking about now, Fullmetal?" he asked, not taking a moment to think it out for himself. It was difficult to take him seriously, since this kind of behavior was nothing new from the kid.

"You know what I'm talking about, after you abandoned us like that!" he exclaimed, slamming his open palms onto the surface of the desk, leaning slightly to stare directly at his superior officer with a challenge in his golden eyes.

"Did you forget?!” Edward demanded, jabbing an accusing finger far too close to Roy's face for comfort. "You left us all behind! But you still have the nerve to sit back as if nothing happened. You always knew what would happen, but you don't care, do you? You're too caught up in what's around you to see past it.” His tone became progressively colder as he went on, expression narrowing in disgust.

To say that he was unsettled was putting it far too lightly. Roy glanced past the kid to see every pair of eyes watching him, humor gone, as they all waited for an explanation. But he didn't even know what he did.

"But you do know. You just tried to forget it.

"Ed- just calm down," Roy tried, at a loss for what else to say.
"Calm down? Calm down? How could you ask me to do that after you died!?"

Roy froze, eyes wide and blood running cold.

Edward glared at him, then turned to face the others. "Did you all forget? He's dead!" The blond pointed vehemently at him again with his eyes still turned away.

Roy, speechless and gaping, watched as the cogs in the minds of his team seemed to turn until they all came to a unanimous decision.

"Oh yeah," Hughes said beside him with a small frown, eyes turned away and distant. "Roy's dead."

Hawkeye nodded on his other side, looking downcast as if he completely disappeared from her view. "That's right," she sighed quietly as if she had just remembered something that had been forgotten.

From the other side of the room, Fuery laughed sadly and broken, looking down at his feet, distinctively making an effort to avoid eye contact as he hid his pained expression to the best of his ability. "Almost forgot about that," he spoke in a whisper.

"Kinda feels like he's still here," Havoc muttered at his desk, a fragile smile falling from his face completely.

"I am still here!" Roy insisted, trying to catch his- anyone's- eye. He tried to rise from his desk, but felt shackled to it by invisible binds.

"If only," Falman added wistfully under his breath as he began packing up his things. Breda glanced at him, then hesitantly began to do the same without a word, teeth clenching as an unspoken anguish burned within. Then at once, those sitting stood up and they all began migrating towards the exit without another glance in his direction.

"Wait-" Roy begged as he strained his muscled to push himself free of whatever force was holding him down, but to no avail. "Don't go!"

His plea fell on deaf ears as one by one, his team, his most trusted friends, turned their backs on him to leave him behind, bringing the light with them.

"No! I'm right here! I'm not dead! Why can't you see that?!"

His desperate words did not effect them in the slightest, as if he was suddenly nothing more than a voiceless spectator. He might as well had been a ghost. In the back of his mind, he partially wondered if that's what had actually happened- that was why they couldn't see him anymore.

Because he died.

"Wait! Maes! Riza! Guys- please!"

The colonel dug his nails into the hard wood of the desk, ignorant to his finger's numb, protesting cries. His misting eyes were set on the backs of his friends, but his surroundings began to crumble and fall away to be replaced only be a cold, familiar emptiness.

"Please-" He lost control of his breathing as each inhale became shallow gasps and each exhale was akin to a cough. A smothering fear jolted through his limbs, which he strained in order to break through whatever barrier was holding him back, failing with every attempt. Tears Roy was
not aware of welled up. "Please- don't go!"

The door closed as the last soldier left, locking out all source of light with it, encasing him in suffocating darkness once again.

Only vague outlines remained and Edward was the only other one present. The teen turned back towards him, arms folded as if he had accomplished his mission, but didn't look the least bit satisfied. He continued to glare at the distraught colonel as if he was looking at nothing but a disappointment.

"What did you expect?" he asked coldly. "Did you really think they wouldn't leave? But you just don't want them to move on with their lives now that you're gone. Selfish..."

Roy sniffed past the tightness in his throat out of pure desperation to reach the kid; his last source of contact. "No, that's not it. You're all being lied to! You- you need to-"

"Just save it!" Edward hissed, cutting Roy off. "I would say you need to accept that this is your life now, but this isn't much of a life, is it? That's why you're dead. And it's all your own damn fault."

With one last distasteful glare, Ed too turned his back and began to leave. Despite destroying his blissful reverie, Roy still didn't want him to go. He should have, after the kid sent everyone else away, but then he would be truly alone.

"Wait, Ed!" He lurched forward, curling his fingers around the kid's sleeve before he could get far. Fullmetal paused, standing there like a statue with his head still turned away. Roy opened his mouth with no idea of what he would say. "Please, not you too..." The pride in him grimaced at the thought of begging to Edward Elric of all people, but his desperation and fear was too powerful to ignore for any reason. Even though the blond had given him no reason to reach out to him, he put what little remained of his dignity at risk and said the only thing he could think of. "I- I don't want to be alone."

He garnered no reaction whatsoever for several excruciatingly long seconds, until the blond finally started to turn towards him. His eyes struck the colonel with so much loathing and distaste, that it felt like a physically blow that forced him to loosen his grip around his sleeve. The kid roughly shoved his arm away and walked out without another word.

And just like that, he went from being surrounded by everyone he cared about to being entirely and utterly alone.

Darkness- everywhere, just as it always was. It wanted him to be alone. It wanted him to suffer. Just like they did. And it was working.

He hated that it was working.

At some point that he failed to notice, the desk had vanished as well. Left with nothing else, Roy pulled up his knees and buried his head in his crossed arms, shivering under the frigid weight of emptiness that was building up against him. With nothing for support, a choked sob broke past his lips, causing a violent shudder to tremor his shoulders and he tightened his grip around his own arms.

He was alone.

Intolerably, painfully alone.

The realization felt like a punch to the gut, leaving him winded and empty as if his very soul had
been sucked dry.

He had never felt loneliness like this before. He was completely isolated from the world. He was a single grain of sand in an infinite ocean that was devoid of all life. It was dark and cold and he couldn't decide if he wanted to scream or cry until he died.

He could not survive like this. All sense of self-preservation went out the window. The only thing that kept him from smashing his head into the wall until he passed out was the knowledge that they were still out there. He needed to see them again. Not just because he missed his team and his old life so much it ached, but he needed to tell them everything he had learned. He needed to warn them, even if they had already moved on.

Part of him wished he had remembered to bring it up when they were there. Maybe they wouldn't have left. Perhaps the knowledge that there was a strange conspiracy occurring beneath the surface would have convinced to stay a while longer.

… But what would he tell them?

As he fought to keep his breathing controlled, he tried to recall all of the revelations that had hit him since this began, but they were distant and faded. Buried in his arms, Roy furrowed his brow, thankful to at least have something to focus on. His brain was cooperating for once, allowing him to concentrate.

Something about Liore? That was how all of this started, wasn't it? Something about Liore and Fullmetal. The riots. But what did that have to do with anything again? And somehow, Maes was involved as well. Hearing them discuss his potential murder was the one detail that shined through the fog like a beacon.

And these people- Envy- they were planning something. Something having to do with sacrifices and promises. And they needed Roy for something. Apparently. As he racked his brain to connect the dots, Roy growled at himself for his inability to remember clearly, trying to motivate himself with promises of seeing his team again.

For someone who had been locked up in a dark room all this time, he had been faced with a plethora of distractions. Of course, most of them came from his own subconscious, but the illusions along with other things made his mind foggy and slow.

The worst part was the hunger. The colonel hadn't eaten anything since his last interaction with Envy and while he wasn't concerned about it at the time, he had long since begun to feel the effects. Attacking his captor through the door's hatch had been a bad idea in hindsight, but Roy didn't really blame himself as much as he should have. He was desperate, but it only resulted in a starvation for food as well as freedom.

The thin sheet he had been given at the beginning was lost to the dark, he was freezing thanks to that one vent overhead, he couldn't think straight or see anything or comprehend what was real and fake. The only reason he was still alive was because of the sink water and his stubborn sense of denial that told him there was still a chance, no matter how minuscule, that he'll get out- that he'll be freed or escape or something. He just needed to warn them that something was going to happen, but when he couldn't even remember long enough to tell them-

Roy snapped his attention upwards, straightening his back as he stared off into the corner that he suspected the sink to be, stewing on the vague idea that began to form. It did him nothing in regards to breaking out of here, but it was something.
He turned and gingerly raised a bruised hand to place on the cool surface of the wall besides him, gliding across it slowly until he believed he found the thin scratch marks that he had halfheartedly clawed into in an attempt to keep count of the passing days. But really, it was just a count of how many times he had fallen asleep- or thought he had. If the cement was old enough for him to scratch lines into with nothing more than his fingernails, then...

With an undignified huff, the colonel unsteadily pulled himself to feet and he approached the opposing corner, hands held out in front of him to guide and balance him in his blindness, still shaken from the previous events. After colliding into the chilling metal of the sink, he maneuvered his hands up to one of the handles, testing to see if they were just as unstable as he remembered.

With a foot on the wall beneath the sink for leverage and both hands tightly wrapped around the handle, he pulled back and fell, sprawling onto his back when it gave way with more ease than he anticipated. Ignoring the throbbing in his back and hands, Roy quickly sat up and admired his handiwork with touch alone, failing to noticing the grin on his face.

The handle was small and rectangular with sharp edges, rusted by years of abuse and lack of use. It was a rather pathetic tool, but a tool all the same.

Roy shuffled over to the other corner once more and glided his free hand over the surface again, picturing the almost blank canvas in his mind. For a moment, he considered attempting to scratch in a transmutation circle, but the failure of his past attempts halted the thought. Not only was it nearly impossible to draw a perfect circle without the help of vision, he found that accurately adding the details were even more impossible. And to make matters worse, Roy was disgraced to learn that as time passed, he struggled to even remember the arrays that he had once drilled into his mind. Another telltale sign of deterioration.

Brushing the memory of that heavy blow to his pride aside, Roy decisively struck the wall with the edge of the sink handle, satisfied by the sound of chipping cement that kindly met his ears. Maneuvering it like a pencil, he scratched in the word *Liore* into the wall, using his other hand to ensure the letters were not overlapping.

If he couldn't see or trust his memory, then he could at least trust his sense of touch, to some degree. Roy had no idea how long he would be down in that room, but he needed to ensure he wouldn't forget anything important, considering the rate in which he felt his own brain deteriorate.

Next to it, he wrote *Riots* with harsh letters that were large enough for him to make out with his hands.

"Okay," he muttered gruffly. "Think, Mustang. What else was there?"

Someone wanted the incident in Liore to end in bloodshed, if his failing memory served. This wasn't the first time a massacre had occurred, intentional or not. Surely they couldn't be connected... But even if they were, he struggled to find any connection to that and what he had heard recently.

He recalled Envy's words again and made some space on the wall before marking them in as well, figuring he might as well write it all down in hoped of creating some lines between them. Something about a promise... Promise day? And sacrifices. Roy was a sacrifice.

"How do those relate..?"

Images of Edward standing over him in that alley- the last night he had any freedom- invaded his mind. Somehow, Fullmetal was involved in all of this. But something was wrong then- something
was wrong with him. Fullmetal didn't seem himself, but was that really relevant? It had to be, but Roy had no way of knowing how.

In the center of all of his markings, Roy took the handle back to the wall and wrote Ed, complete with a few rushed underlines simply to emphasize to himself that the kid was somehow deeply involved. While he was at it, he might as well add Maes as well.

In the back of his head, he heard a voice question what he was doing. Making him rethink himself-everything- but he wouldn't let it get to him. Roy toned it out, concentrating solely on recovering the memories that were hopefully not entirely lost in the crevices of his broken mind.

It was all just a hallucination anyway. These voices and sights- all of his friends- none of it was real. And yet, he still found himself responding and looking at the illusions as if they were just as real as he was. It was something that he couldn't quite explain to himself. Roy was at least able to acknowledge the fact that it didn't make sense, but that was all. He needed to respond as if everything he saw and heard was reality, or else he would truly have nothing else to hold on to. Even if these hallucinations insulted him and turned him away- creating a visual manifestation of his worst fears. Fear was better than nothing, wasn't it? Something was always better than nothing.

Of course, that wasn't to say that he frequently cursed and demanded they leave him be, not just because they were haunting, but because sometimes they were just so damn annoying.

A low, rough bark erupted from behind him, shocking him violently out of concentration. He flinched in reaction, scratching a long line through the wall and possibly through some of his notes. With a deep frown in place, Roy turned around to face the open room, seeing a faint outline of a figure in the darkness and sensing eyes on him.

"Leave me alone, dammit," he growled as he might have caught the red glint of the dog's feral eyes. His new animal friend had a habit of appearing and reappearing at the most opportune times, as if to judge him whether he was doing absolutely nothing, or in another attempt to somehow escape. As always, it growled in response, baring its teeth threatening. Or at least, he assumed by the familiar sound of it.

The dog took a short step forward, as it so often did once it chose to appear; always doing the same old thing to frighten him.

"You're not real," he said as a reminder to himself. "Stop wasting my time, you mutt. Or are you finally going to actually bite me this time?"

He was far beyond the point of questioning why he was talking to not only a dog, but an imaginary dog.

More growling. Roy turned around to return to his task, pretending to completely ignore the distraction and willing himself to go back to writing out his fading memories. As his back was turned, the colonel heard another strange noise that he couldn't put a name to, but such a thing wasn't very rare to him these days, and it was easily dismissed.

Perhaps angered by his blatant disregard, the beast barked again- loud and sudden, causing him to flinch. The very fact that he reacted caused him to stop once more and turn around, aiming a glare to where he suspected the imaginary animal to be.

"Enough with your damn barking!"

Before he could see if the dog would vanish by then, as it often did, a silent warning triggered his
senses. Roy froze stiffly, eyes searching uselessly in the darkness. He felt another presence in the room. Not just the animal that was still growling, but someone else had suddenly appeared.

He felt a gentle, hot air reach his arms, which he shifted further away from, but it was familiar somehow. He listened carefully for any signs of movement, but only heard the same heavy, hungry breathing.

There were... two dogs now?

That's what it sounded like anyway, but this new one somehow felt more dangerous than the other. As for how and why, he could only speculate.

"... Neither of you are real."

But no matter how many times he told himself that, the feeling of having two mindless animals stare at him was unnerving. Only one thing seemed to guarantee that they would leave him be.

Roy slowly reached his hand outward to simply brush this hallucination away, as he had done so many times in the past. But as his hand neared it and was met with a disturbingly warm breath of air, he hesitated as a strange sound came from the beast- one that could only be described as laughter. As if sensing his hesitation, the dog rushed closer in an instant, giving him no time to react even if he was able to see it happen.

A long row of sharp teeth sunk into his forearm, shocking all fearless confidence out of him with a heavy blow. The teeth ripped through his skin with ease and fresh blood began to drip down his stunned hand. An agonizing scream muddled with surprise shattered the silence as Roy tried in vain to pull back while using his unharmed hand to yank his arm free from under the unwavering hold of its jaw.

A surplus of colorful insults festered just behind his teeth, but simply trying not to scream his own throat out took priority. Fumbling in the darkness, Roy quickly resorted to blindly kicking and attacking the dog in any way he could think of until it finally let go, but not without ripping further down his arm as it did so.

Nerves on fire and mind scrambles in a spiraling haze while laughter rung in his ears, the little strength he had disappeared and Roy fell to his knees, clutching onto his bloodied arm as he inched closer to the wall. As convinced as he was that the dogs were nothing but empty visions, he could feel the blood oozing out from the new holes in his arm.

"... H-how?" Roy stuttered through bared teeth and huddled around his damaged arm in a hopeless attempt to ease his own suffering. His bangs fell over his eyes as he was hunched over, interfering with his ability to open them, assuming he wanted to. "How did you... You're not real!"

Unless he was imagining not just the dog, but the bite and the pain and the blood as well, anyway.

But surely he hadn't fallen so far already. No, it couldn't be; he had gotten bit, but how? As he already debated with himself earlier, there was no way for an animal of that size to get into the small enclosed cell, especially without him noticing. It didn't make sense...

As the static in his ears began to fade, Roy became more aware of the hysterical laughter that was coming from the beast. "You're not real," he says," A strangely familiar, distorted voice taunted gleefully. "Does that mean the pain you feel isn't real either?"

Roy had no intention of replying. As his head was bowed, a subtle flicker of light hit his eyelids, but when he looked up, it was gone.
"And what about me?"

Fullmetal. *Back so soon?*

The animalistic growls from before had ceased, replaced only by mirthful, sadistic chuckling as the kid's large soled shoes stepped closer on the concrete.

"If only I could see the look on your face," Edward's voice mused calmly. He had the same arrogant tone he often used, but something was off. His voice was the same, but it was wrong at the same time. Roy had noticed this since he ran into the kid in the alleyway, but still could not get used to it. The version of Ed that stormed into his imaginary office and sent the others away sounded more real than this one, and yet Roy knew for a fact that that one was false.

He couldn't wrap is mind around this.

"Come on, Colonel; aren't you gonna say anything? What's wrong? Keep talking to yourself like the delusional mess you've become," Fullmetal laughed just as Roy felt the toe of a heavy shoe collide into the side of his ribs, pulling a surprised, pained gasp from behind his teeth.

Delusional mess? Perhaps he was, but even as he felt his mind and body fading with every passing hour, he was still Colonel Roy Mustang and he wasn't going to put up with being tormented like this by Edward Elric; even if it was all just a vivid dream or a hallucination or- or whatever else could fool him like this.

With a deep, unsteady breath, Roy steadied himself and began to rise to his feet, using the wall as leverage as he ignored the ache in his side and the burning pain in his arm. His nails chipped on the cement wall as he clawed himself up.

Edward *hmmed* curiously, listening to the colonel's apparent struggle with idle interest. "So you haven't completely fallen apart just yet? I'll be sure to take care of that."

Roy glared in the direction of his voice, unable to pick just one of the many things he wanted to savagely exclaim. But instead of wasting his time with words, Roy pushed himself off the wall and toppled into Fullmetal, catching him off guard in the darkness and pulling him down to the ground, tumbling with him. Ignoring the complains of his body, Roy twisted and lashed out blindly, striking his opponent with both his uninjured hand and feet. Despite the adrenaline that pumped through him, the time he had spent in that dark room had noticeably weakened him. It only took a few short seconds for Ed to make a solid blow to his gut, knocking the wind out of him. Far before he could recover, he was shoved off balance and landed on his stomach. Roy made a weak attempt to roll to his side, but a heavy weight landed on his back, keeping him pinned to the ground.

"Well isn't this familiar," Edward laughed after ensuring that Roy was properly trapped. His weight was far beyond what should have been normal for a kid his size, further ensuring the colonel that from the very beginning, this was very wrong. "I would have been upset if that wasn't so hilariously pathetic! You humans never learn, do you?"

Memories of that night came flooding back. Roy on the ground with Fullmetal sitting smugly on his back as if he was nothing more than an object. The blond spoke as if he, Ed, was someone else, referencing his "argument with the pipsqueak" and talking about humans as if he wasn't one of them. This person- this *thing*- whatever the hell had trapped in him- it wasn't Ed. He had always told himself that, but the lack of sight and understanding made doubt impossible to avoid, not to mention that half the time he thought he was imagining it all. Even now that he felt more assured in that decision, that did not explain who or what was taunting him in the voice of his subordinate. At what point did they trade places?
He had no way of knowing and it was infuriating.

"Just what are you?" Roy growled as his bruised ribs cried under the weight.

"You're getting closer," Ed sung just as Roy felt a hand grab onto his hair, craning his neck back at an unnatural angle. "But I'm not going to tell you. It's much more fun to listen to you question everything."

Roy's head was forced down against his will. He managed to turn his neck just marginally enough to spare his nose from getting broken by the concrete, but his cheek was not so lucky. A rough, pained grunt shot through his throat at the contact as he bit into his tongue, grimacing at the new taste of blood in his mouth.

"I've loved listening to you ramble on about what's real and what's not, who I am, and even who you are. You're not sure anymore, are you? You don't know anything for sure anymore. So lost, so hopeless--"

He who sounded like Fullmetal drew far too close to Roy's ear as he spoke, causing the trapped colonel to shudder from revulsion.

"-or could it be that you still have some hope left?" he asked whimsically, followed by a cruel laugh. "The sooner you accept that no one is coming for you, the better. Don't you remember what I told you before? You're already dead."

"N-no, I'm-" A series of coughs cut him off, his body convulsing as his lungs tightened in his constricting rib cage.

"How can you be so sure?" Edward asked sardonically, at least having the decency to wait until Roy's coughing settled down. "Does any of this seem real? This could all be your own personalized Hell for all you know."

"Shut up! Shut up!" Roy growled as he tried to get his arms underneath him to shake the kid off, but the blood that had coated his right arm by then made it impossible without slipping on the concrete. He knew his struggle was in vain, but fought regardless out of pure stubbornness if nothing else.

Without any warning, Ed's hand returned to the back of his head, smashing his face down on the cold, bloodied concrete once more. A rough grunt was pulled from behind his clenched teeth and his limbs froze as he grimaced to endure the pain. When the hand didn't let up, Roy heard a baleful snarl, which he soon realized to be coming from himself.

The kid snickered at his expense. "You poor, confused human," Edward taunted. "You're sitting in a grave and you don't even realize it!"

"T- that can't..." He trailed off as the remaining air in his lungs felt to be exhausted. The fight drained out of him, both physically and mentally.

What right did he have to question anything when he could no longer trust any of his senses?

"Hmm? What was that?" Fullmetal asked arrogantly as he shifted his weight and leaned in closer. When Roy made no attempt to reply or do anything besides continuing his gasping breaths, he clicked his tongue, sounding all too satisfied. "That's all it takes to shut you up, huh?"

The colonel didn't answer or move, even when the hand was moved from his head. In fact, he had blocked out Ed's presence almost entirely as the cogs in his head turned slowly, yet deliberately.
He couldn't trust what he saw or heard. Now he couldn't so much as trust what he felt. He could feel every injury on his body, but how much of it was purely in his head? How much of this was real? How much of this was life? How could he know if he was even conscious or not? If he was in a coma and all of this was entirely in his head, could that be considered life? He may have been breathing, but he felt far from being alive. Questions of how to prove such a thing swarmed his mind, but fear prevented him from finding a solution, unsure if he really wanted to know the truth.

At the end of the day, what did it matter? Everything around him- his entire existence was all perceptive. Alive or dead, floating in some torturing limbo; none of it made any difference. He was trapped here either way.

"Well," Edward began as he finally stood up, removing the absurd weight from Roy's chest at last. "I'll give you some time to think about that," the snide alchemist announced, but his voice sounded distant, muffled by Roy's thoughts.

He remained for a while longer, waiting for a response, but the colonel had none to give him. Roy wasn't sure if his silence was worth it or not when he felt another boot collide into his stomach, lurching him into another violent coughing fit. Paying little attention to anything besides the ache in his body, he failed to notice at what point the kid vanished, but only realized he was gone after far too much time had passed without him adding another injury to the list.

Once he felt relatively safe, Roy took a long, deep breath that irritated his bruised ribs against his lungs, and curled up on himself, mind completely blank besides the undiluted question of his very existence.
Edward didn't understand what the problem was. Well, no; to be exact, he was aware of many problems—far too many problems—but this one in particular seemed impossible to grasp.

These damn nightmares.

He was getting absolutely sick of waking up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat, heart lodged somewhere in his throat, lungs screaming for air, and hands shaking like leaves. He had always been plagued by terrifying dreams that returned frequently to remind him of his mistakes, but it at least didn't occur every single night like they had recently.

When his mother died and then again after the failed human transmutation attempt, they were at their worst. It was as if demons had infested the part of his brain that created dreams and wanted to make him completely miserable. But after some time had passed, they began to haunt him less, granting him respite at last.

It was just as it was back then: night after night, Edward feared falling asleep, knowing what awaited him as soon as he closed his eyes. He hated it. He hated that it bothered him this much. But he was at a loss of what to do about it. There was nothing he could do.

It has only been a few days since he decided to stay away from the cemetery, and nothing had changed. He wasn't sure what he had expected. There was still something he needed to do before he could put all of this behind him.

Perhaps the only thing that could put these demons at rest was to find Mustang's murderer and pay him back for what he took away. Get revenge on the man who had not shown his face in public once since the incident. The thought of it was enticing enough, but he found himself lacking the will to do anything at the moment. Regardless, how was he supposed to manage that much when the one person who could pull enough strings to permit such an act was dead? He ignored the fact that Mustang would never actually allow him to run after Scar in the first place, of course.

For being an insufferable bastard who was impossible to work with, Mustang was pretty easy to work with. Something told the blond that few colonels would allow someone like Ed to get away with as much as the Flame Alchemist did. He sure did a good job at showing his gratitude towards the man; by letting him die.

Edward pulled himself to a sitting position and rubbed his bleary eyes before glancing to his side. Alphonse was sitting against the side of the second bed, reading as he almost always did at this hour. If the younger brother noticed that Ed was awake, he didn't show it. He was probably expecting it at least, since this had almost become a nightly occurrence.

Not wanting to interrupt his concentration just yet, Ed turned his attention around to gaze out the window. The sun was still hours away from rising and dark clouds morphed and shifted quickly, telling of an impending rainstorm. A soft breeze rustled the trees and carried the distinctive scent of moisture.

A soundless sigh escaped his lips as his eyes scanned the empty yard outside their dorm's window. He was never able to get more sleep after a nightmare like this, and tonight was no exception.

Maybe thinking so much about the murder of Colonel Mustang was only feeding his subconscious imagination. It has been weeks since the death, and yet the memory was still so fresh in his mind,
as if he was standing in the empty streets of Central with Mustang just the other night. Edward thought that making frequent visits to the grave would somehow ease the regret and pain, and make it easier for him to accept what happened, but that had clearly not been the case.

If going to the cemetery less or not at all would put an end to these haunting dreams, then that's what he would have to do. But even when he decided that, something was missing. The desire to return at least one more time persisted, telling him that he needed to do one last thing before he could finally move on.

"Hey Al." His voice came out as a whisper, but it was enough to slice through the silence and grab his brother's attention. Al looked up at him as Ed slid his legs over the side of the bed and gripped the sheets besides him tighter than he had intended. "I'm going to walk around for a bit."

"Oh, I'll come too," he offered and moved to close his book, eager to do anything to cheer the older Elric up.

"No, that's alright," Ed cut in solemnly. "I want to go alone; just to get some air."

Alphonse paused, then reluctantly settled, his book subconsciously falling open again in his lap. ",...Okay. Just don't take too long, alright? I think it's going to rain soon."

Edward nodded and rose from his bed, stretching his arms as he did so. After he threw on better suited clothes and shoes, and grabbed his watch, he was out the door minutes later without bothering to do any more with his hair besides tie it back.

More minutes passed by the time he finally made it out of the building. The humid breeze greeted him as soon as he stepped outside, making his way towards the main street. Summer was almost in full swing, but the monsoon was thankfully keeping the air from getting too hot for the time being.

Given the circumstances, it was perfect weather for visiting a graveyard.

One last time.

He would go to that depressing field and look down at the dull slab of marble one last time, and then he would turn his back to it and move on. He was given no other choice, because continuing on as he was could not be an option.

One last time.

Roy sat in the corner with his knees pressed against his chest and arms tightly cradled around them, lulling himself into an empty trance as he gently rocked forward and back. He felt neither alive nor dead, simply existing, wishing for one or the other. Anything to bring an end to this monotone, colorless existence. But no relief would come. He was trapped, and was beginning to accept it.

That in and of itself was perhaps the most frightening part; as soon as Roy accepted that he would be trapped here forever, all of his chances of escaping verged closer to death. That tiny flame of hope was the only thing that kept this vast darkness from suffocating him, but keeping it lit was appearing to be a wasted effort.

No one was coming for him. No one knew he wasn't buried under the gravestone they undoubtedly set up for him. No one would ever know.

They wanted to keep Roy there until he was needed, and intended to make him suffer throughout the duration of his stay. He didn't need to be told that he would not survive whatever they had
planned. The word *sacrifice* echoed in his head more often than others, reminding him of why he was there, and reminding him that he was powerless. The last time Ed visited him- or whoever that was- he tried to convince Roy that he was actually dead, but running his hands over the scratched up walls and reading the notes he left for himself reminded him that they still had a purpose left for him.

Roy tried to fight back on multiple occasions. He was stubborn by nature and the very thought of cooperating made him sick to his stomach. Of course, that didn't stop him from considering it, until he remembered that it did not matter either way. *They* would do whatever the hell they wanted and nothing he did could slow them down.

Earlier, the one that called himself Envy came down to grace Roy with his presence again, taunting him with the food that he would have been getting if he hadn't decided to attack him. Envy laughed through the colonel's silence, mistaking his lack of a response for regret when it was actually nothing of the sort. Roy hadn't felt the same starvation as before since then. He supposed he just got used to the feeling until it was moved to the back of his mind. Always there, pesterling, but now much easier to ignore.

Envy was entertained by this for only a few short seconds before boredom quickly caught up with him and he decided to appear inside of his cell again as if by magic. Either he had the power to shift through walls like a ghost, or shrink in size until he could squeeze through the cracks; Roy wasn't sure which, but both were beyond comprehension. Alchemy had to be out of the question as well. It has been a while, but Roy could not mistake the familiar sounds of an alchemic reaction large enough for someone to enter a new room, and none of these sounds were heard. There was always *something*, however. A crack of alchemic lightening perhaps, but he simply did not understand what it came from.

Whatever it was, it had something to do with Envy's ability to reanimate inside of the nearly airtight room. He came there several times for no reason besides seeking entertainment in the form of Roy's pain. It was very similar to how he would hallucinate certain people that enjoyed cornering him. They all spoke with the same, if not a very similar, condescending tone made specifically to make him feel inferior.

At least, more often than not.

He also remembered seeing his friends, his staff, his team- laughing together. Happy. He remembered them suddenly averting their gazes as if he was invisible, then turning away to leave. They left. *They left.* Contemplating whether or not it was real or not no longer felt important to him. Perhaps it was all a fabrication, but he saw it. What really mattered was that he watched as they turned away and left him behind, in the dark, alone. He didn't blame them for it. It wasn't their fault, but it had hurt. Thinking back on it, he knew it was at that moment that all hope of being saved crumbled away. That was the final straw. And it was in that realization that he became truly alone.

He began to understand exactly what was happening here: Roy was not just trapped in a room somewhere underground, but he was in his own little bubble, detached from the world as it moved on, leaving him behind. He stayed static in this pocket of darkness, interminably trapped forever. The only change he experienced here was the buildup of injuries and the steady decay of his mind and body. He felt himself growing weaker in more ways than one.

Roy's arms stiffened, then fell to his sides. Breaking out of his huddle, his head fell back against the wall and he stared upwards where the ceiling was supposed to be.

"Is this what you wanted?" He asked the empty room, almost as if he was speaking to himself. But
he wasn't. He wasn't quite sure who he was talking to. His own hallucinations- the dogs- God, perhaps. None of them would listen to him anyway.

But *they* were listening. He was certain. *They* were always nearby, but always silent- watching him fall apart without any sympathy or regard. Perhaps *they* had him here for a reason, but to continue this torture- this agonizing nothingness had pushed him far beyond his limit.

"Are you happy now!?" he growled, voice guttural and tired. "I've given up! So just- just get on with it!"

His hoarse vice bounced from wall to wall, reaching no one's ears except his own. But *they* still heard him.

*They* heard everything.

*They* saw everything.

*They* didn't care.

Nothing happened. He wasn't sure what he was expecting. Nothing, he supposed, but still, he was disappointed. He didn't want to keep suffering like this as whoever put him here only watched for reasons unknown. If they were planning something, then an end to this would come eventually, right? One way or another.

But he didn't want to wait. He couldn't- Roy was sure that if he had to spend another minute in this condition, he'd try again to rip his hair out, refusing to yield even after the pain became too much to bear.

"Hey!" An angry, snappish voice barked from further down the corridor before Roy could hear their footsteps. He jumped in alarm, instinctively pressing himself closer to the wall and further from the door. "The hell is wrong with you!? I can hear your whining from across the hall!"

Roy didn't respond. He didn't want to risk doing anything that would lead to another cracked rib.

"After all of that screaming, you finally got my attention. What do you want? Or are you just wasting my time?" Envy asked sardonically. Something told Roy that he was more than happy to abandon whatever he was doing to come here, considering how eager he always sounds to torment him. He considered none of it a few moments ago.

"I'm a very busy person, you know. I can't afford to come running here every time you begin to lose your mind. How are you going to make it up to me?"

Without thought, Roy raised his arms over his head defensively, expecting to be struck at any moment. Envy's voice echoed in the small room, but sounded distant and distorted all the same. It was impossible to tell if he was speaking from inside or outside, or even within Roy's own mind.

When the strike didn't immediately come, he slowly moved his hands to cover his ears, bowing his head as he fought to block everything out. The voices were so familiar at this point; hearing one of them would remind him of the others, crashing over him in an overwhelming wave.

He could already hear those damn dogs growing at him for existing in the same air as them. Envy had apparently said something else and whether it was Roy's silence or something else unknown to him, his captor began to laugh. The scraping sound merged distractedly with the barking and whispers of other voices from far away, out of grasp.
He heard them- felt them- spiral around his head, adding to the already suffocating pressure that came with the claustrophobia of being trapped for so long. It burned inside his brain, persistent and intolerable; impossible to ignore no matter how often he banged his head against the wall, hoping, praying, begging for it to just stop.

But it never stopped. The torment continued interminably and it made him want to scream.

In fact, he did scream, but it took a moment for Roy to realize one of the many voices that viciously swarmed together was his own. It was as though every sound grew a physical form so they could crush the life out of him under their weight.

By the time his tortured, hysterical screams came to an end, it wasn't because his throat had been run ragged and raw, but because a foot collided into his face from his hunched position. The colonel fell to his side with a hand already nursing his bruised cheek and bleeding nose as the other kept him from collapsing completely. The arm that had previously been torn apart by a rabid dog begged for respite as the open wound was pressed against the concrete, failing to give him much support as the clotting wounds reopened.

Roy heard someone yelling in a hostile tone, but the ringing in his ears made him incapable of understanding the words. However, he did not need words to sense the murderous intent of the monster leering above him, staring down with an aura that promised agony.

He was through with questioning whether or not the threat that loomed overhead was real. It didn't matter. He felt the danger in the air and didn't hesitate to shift further away from it, back pressed up against the wall, despite how pathetic he knew it made him deeply underneath the front of his mind.

Just as he expected, his efforts were in vain. The scraping voice continued, oblivious to the fact that Roy wasn't in any condition to make out a word of it, and its source shoved him off balance again with a poorly aimed foot to his shoulder.

He laid on the cold floor with no reason to sit himself up again, vaguely recognizing that he was being asked questions now. Multiple questions from multiple voices, all coming from different angles. Just as before- just as always- he couldn't keep track of any of them.

Without any warning that he was able to heed, two hands latched onto the collar of his shirt and heaved him upwards. If he had the strength, Roy would have fought against it, but he instead hung limply in the grip of his captor, not entirely present as muffled words were viciously spat at him.

When he couldn't see what was attacking him, it was easier to block it out and cling onto the hope that it would eventually go away if he gave it no reason to stay. Of course, his silence only further enraged his attacker. Envy snarled something again and shoved him towards the side and released his grip, allowing him to collapse into the wall, head first. His brain spun as he slumped onto the ground, nausea building with every passing second.

And then a shoe slammed into his stomach. He choked as the air was knocked out of him and lost all sense of balance even as he lay on the ground. Roy thoughtlessly pulled a hand up to cover his mouth as tremors ran through his body and what little was in his stomach inched up his throat. An irate voice echoed through the small room, but he paid it no mind as he choked and gagged on the floor.

With all focus trapped in the daze that was his mind, Roy almost forgot that there was someone else there with him, becoming accustomed to other presences shifting in and out of his space so frequently. He coughed on the sickening bile that he tasted in his mouth and eventually rolled onto
his back when he could finally breath again.

Without the need to consider it, he continued to block out his surroundings as best he could, focusing solely on his breathing as the many voices muffled behind him. Just block it out, and it will go away. Doing so became the only coping mechanism that was accessible to him.

The realization that Envy had eventually left him alone came and passed, just as the voices muted as well. He couldn't bring himself to feel grateful, far too busy focusing on each shallow inhale and exhale, simultaneously trying to ignore the rancid taste in his mouth. He knew this respite was only temporary anyway.

He laid there for a while- hours, maybe- just hoping for the pain to go away, even though it never had in the past.

Without thought, Roy managed to drag himself closer to the nearest corner once he recollected enough energy. His mind and body protested the movement, but something pulled him forward. His bloodied arms stretched out in search for the rusty sink handle that he had been using as a pencil to scratch multiple words into the walls, and rewritten others for when he had lost sense of where everything was written. When he found it, he gripped the broken handle tightly in fear of it evaporating into thin air, uncaring when the sharp edged pressed unforgivingly into his skin. But now that he had it, he wasn't sure what he was going to do with it. Whenever Roy was etching something into the walls, that was when he felt most content. Or rather, the most sane- the furthest away from completely falling apart.

Because then, at least he had something to focus on besides the constant painful throb that cycled through his body. He could feel the vibrations of the metal rubbing against cement and the dust that fell onto his arms from each mark, and he savored every moment of it. It was the only thing he could actually do. It got to the point where he would just write words over and over again for no reason at all besides the fact that he enjoyed it until it became a habit.

Of course, that's not to say that doing this actually lessened any pain or made his situation look not so bleak. Doing something was better than nothing, but anything was better than being here.

With one hand tightly clutching the old sink handle, he slowly brushed the other over the nearest wall, silently reading the large, jagged words that were written there. His hand burned in objection, the skin already raw from the constant contact it's had with the rough cement walls, but Roy easily ignored it as he had every time before.

As he fought to keep himself balanced, his body weighed him down and his mind was drawing a blank, both too distracted by his own physical agony to do what he wanted. Roy aimed to preoccupy himself from the pain, but his will to even do that much was steadily fading. His arms lowered to his sides in defeat and he once again slumped against the wall.

What was the point?

Minor comforts meant nothing to him when he knew this torture was never going to end.

But... it could end, couldn't it?

They stripped everything away from him, but he still had one way out.

Roy held the rusty old handle in his hand and gently pressed his thumb onto the underside, studying the X shaped piece that was designed to turn whatever mechanism opened the water flow within sinks. Rusted and ragged, he knew it was more than capable of cutting through skin with
enough force.

He further pushed the metal into his thumb, too numb to notice when it drew blood, contemplating to himself. *Why not,* Roy asked over and over again, some small part of him hoping to find an answer, yet failing miserably to do so.

No one was coming for him.

There was no way out.

He would be trapped here until *they* finally decided to kill him.

Why give them to satisfaction, when he could just as easily take it away? Just as *they* had taken everything away from him.
Edward had long since lost track of how many times he found himself at Colonel Mustang's grave, whether it was alongside Al or by himself. There were times when he had seen other members of the team making visits as well, but he had always tried his best to avoid them.

On the night of the funeral, Hughes had approached him when Ed thought he was the last one remaining, insisting that Mustang would have actually appreciated his visit or even wanted him to stay longer, ignorant to the fact that it was Ed's idiotic choices that caused this. He would have scoffed at the memory if it didn't hurt like hell. But regardless of what the colonel may have thought, he did what he could to keep the others from seeing him there, afraid that they would one day decide that this was all his fault. They had every right to think so. The more cynical part of him assumed it was only a matter of time.

That at least wasn't a fear when he came to the cemetery in the middle of the night, especially as a dark blanket of clouds began to roll in. He hadn't passed a single person besides the guards who patrolled the grounds around the dorms and the graveyard itself. Despite it being far past closing, they usually don't put up much of a fight after he flashed them his silver pocket watch.

When he first approached the grave that night, his eyes lingered on the array of flowers that cluttered below the marble. The proof that multiple people had visited recently to show their respects left a dull pang that Ed struggled to ignore. He knelt down besides the headstone, inspecting the different bouquets without much thought, until he noticed a small folded piece of paper almost obscured by the arrangements. A closer look revealed that it was a letter addressed to Uncle Roy. He remained still, having no intention to read it. Despite his natural curiosity, doing so would feel like intruding, and he was certain he didn't want to know how the author of said note was taking this.

Edward noticed Elicia's reaction during the funeral. Her heartbreaking cries were hard to miss as they buried her father's best friend into the ground. She kept asking questions that no one wanted to answer, or even acknowledge. She was the only one who spoke as they lowered the casket into the ground. He wondered how much she had been told about the details of his murder.

The alchemist swallowed a lump in his throat and shifted into a more comfortable position on the ground, prying his eyes away from the note to look up at the sky instead. Just as Al had told him before he left, it was most certainly going to rain soon. The angry clouds stretched on into the distance, covering the majority of the night sky as they loomed closer.

Even though the dead couldn't read letters, Edward couldn't help but feel concerned for the fragile piece of paper as the storm drew near. Sentimentality prodded at his mind until he sighed and clapped his hands together. Leading forward, he lightly touched the ground by the thoughtful arrangement and created a protective dome to emerge from the ground to shield the letter from the rain, dense enough to keep the water from soaking through. It looked odd, but he mentally promised to take it down afterwards.

Elicia probably poured her heart and soul into the note that she hoped would somehow reach her surrogate uncle. Before seeing it, Ed wasn't aware that the colonel had such a relationship, although it made sense in hindsight. Despite the logical voice in his head, he wanted the letter to survive for as long as possible. For it to be destroyed in the rain would just be too... sad.

Edward leaned back and solemnly looked over his handiwork, ignoring the burst of thunder he heard not too far in the distance.
"Alright, Mustang," he spoke quietly, trailing his eyes up to the engraving and continued as his tone lacked any real malice or annoyance. "I've had enough of your bullshit. Look at all of the people who've been visiting; you don't need to keep dragging me back here too."

Edward dropped his left hand onto the ground and aimlessly pulled out a few blades of grass. A humid breeze swept through the field.

"I know you can't actually hear me. I guess I only came here to talk to myself; to tell myself to just... get over it.

"Someone's going to find Scar eventually, and make him pay for all the people he's killed. Not sure who will get to him first though. I'm pretty sure your entire team has already doubled their efforts. Or at least they will, once things start to calm down."

He wanted to say that he would stop at nothing to find the Ishvalen, but his last attempt to take him on didn't end too well. If Scar was able to take down Mustang without giving him any time to use alchemy, what did that say about Ed's chances? He usually wouldn't let something like that get in his way, but knowing that the person who pulled him out of tight situations in the past was now buried six feet under forced him to hesitate.

Damn Scar for doing this to him...

"I'll make this right somehow," he promised quietly.

As he looked down at the grave, Ed hoped to feel different somehow- lighter. But no such sensation came. He just felt the same hollowness, the same guilty tightness in his chest, and the same sense of loss that he always had. He knew at this point that he was only trying to fool himself. He tried to make this last visit something more than it was. He wanted it to be meaningful and somehow have the power to change something. But it was nothing more than a failed attempt. Nothing was different and nothing had changed.

Getting over the death of someone could be surprisingly easy. Someone less cynical than he wouldn't want to admit it, but humans naturally desired to return to normalcy as quickly as possible. Subconsciously, people choose for this to happen. Even after traumatic events, they want to move on. Not just within the military where death was not uncommon, but in schools and neighborhoods and any other community of people, it would only take a matter of days at most for a death to fade into the past.

But this wasn't just another person he was acquainted with. This was Colonel Mustang, the man who had dragged him back to the world of the living after Ed failed the human transmutation and had jumped through hoops to help him. Even though he was an arrogant bastard, he was also dependable and always there. He was constantly a steady figure to look to when obstacles and questions arose. He had unknowingly made it onto Ed's list of people he cared about.

The vast majority of those acquainted with the colonel had long since moved on, and of no fault of their own. Edward, Hughes, Hawkeye, and the rest of the team, however, were the minority who would continue to mourn with no respite in sight.

He had been distraught over his mother's death, almost paralyzed with grief after it first happened. That loss was leagues worse than this, but that's not to say how much Mustang's death had effected him. The two incidents shouldn't be comparable. One was his own flesh and blood; the woman who raised him. The other was his boss; the man who taunted him on a daily basis but also went great lengths to help him. And yet both deaths had him feeling lost and looking to the future with fear and uncertainty, wondering what the hell are we going to do now?
He asked himself that every time he time he let his guard down low enough for the thought to sneak up on him. He had put off facing the reality of their future by taking time off work, but he would soon have to deal with it again. Ed tried asking himself what the point was; whether he ran away for as long as he could or charged straight at it, the problem wouldn't fix itself. Mustang's grave wasn't going anywhere and the date of his death would forever be engraved in stone, reminding the world of what can never change. Even now, he sat on the grassy field of the cemetery instead of trying to sleep in an attempt to savor each moment as if he wasn't drawing closer to the unavoidable with every passing second.

There was no use in promising himself five more minutes, and then I'll leave. The result would be the same. He wouldn't find the closure he craved in those five minutes, or five days, or maybe five years. For all he knew, he could never make peace on the matter, just as his mother's death still haunted him to this day.

Ed knew he had to just rip the bandage off and leave, if he knew what was best for himself.

And yet, he couldn't bring himself to stand up.

Alright... I'll leave once it starts to rain. If he set some sort of uncontrollable deadline for himself, then perhaps it would be easier. And with one look at the sky, it was clear it would rain very soon. Dark clouds had engulfed the sky, stretching far beyond the horizon in every direction, and the smell of the storm was thick in the air.

The blond pulled his flesh leg up and rested his chin on his knee as he ignored the ache in his automail, gazing down at the headstone with weary, lidded eyes. But just as he settled into the new position, he felt a raindrop land on his head. Then a second one, and a third.

Still, he did not move to stand up.

Edward glared down at the grave, mildly annoyed that he couldn't follow through with what he told himself.

"This is all your fault," he whispered voicelessly. "Colonel Bastard... Always making things difficult for me. Why can't you just... let me go?" His arms wrapped around his leg and he laid his forehead onto his knee, shutting his eyes as the rain steady grew stronger. It was still nothing worse than a drizzle, but he knew it would grow stronger within minutes. A low grumble was heard in the distance, followed by a sharp crack of thunder as a bolt of lightening briefly illuminated the field.

But there was something else too.

Something that didn't belong.

Ed's head shot up, eyes wide as they scanned his surroundings. His body was still and his heart abruptly began to pound as he strained his ears to listen.

He could have sworn he heard something underneath the thunder. It almost sounded like a voice, coming from a million miles away- the slightest indication of something that would have been missed if he wasn't listening. It was too soft for him to know if it was real or not. He could have easily been imagining things. That was the most likely possibility, he told himself.

Before the burst of adrenaline could settle, his eyes were drawn to the mausoleum further up the hill by a hint of movement. As he squint his eyes, he could make out a figure walking away from it and towards the exit gates. But as the person was briefly obscured by a tree, they disappeared. Edward waited for what felt like several minutes, but there was no more movement except the
wind rustling the trees, and a lone bird flying away.

A harsh shiver ran down his spine, injecting a sense of foreboding into every one of his nerves. Much against his will, all thoughts of Mustang were temporarily swept away and forcefully replaced with curiosity and what he didn't want to acknowledge as fear.

But there was nothing to be afraid of. Telling himself that felt not so much like he was trying to convince himself, but that he was just stating a fact. Sure, cemeteries could be creepy places, especially at night when it was raining, but it was perfectly safe. He knew for a fact that there were no axe murderers or ghosts running around. As for what he just saw, the person walking from the mausoleum probably turned and began moving away in the other direction, hidden from sight by the tree. Nothing to get freaked out over, but he couldn't shake the feeling that something was suddenly very wrong.

How long had that person been inside of the tomb? Ed had been here for a decent amount of time and would have noticed anyone walking around. Why were they there in the first place? What was so interesting about that small stone building?

Complying to the subliminal pull without much thought, Edward rose to his feet and carefully crossed the field, shifting his eyes across the cemetery for any signs of life as he drew closer to the mausoleum. The rain started to come down harder, and he pulled up his hood as he approached the building, then circled it until he reached the entrance.

The small gray building had four pillars on each side, supporting the roof in perfect symmetry. Each wall was blank, besides the black, steel double doors that covered the front. After a quick test proved it to be locked, Ed took a step back to look for any engravings of the deceased that the building had been erected to honor, but gave up after a short moment. Whoever he saw walking away from there must have had a key, unless they were just standing outside of it, which he highly doubted.

There was nothing unusual about someone visiting a grave. Common sense told him to turn around and leave, but then again, who besides him would come to a cemetery on the night of a storm? He certainly had no right to break in and see if there was anything of interest inside, but with no one telling him not to, curiosity won and he stealthily unlocked the doors with alchemy.

Edward pulled the heavy metal doors open with surprisingly little resistance or noise and let the minuscule light of night reach inside. He took a step in and squint his eyes to reveal two large stone coffins sitting side by side in the center of the small, claustrophobic room. There was just barely enough room around them for a single person to walk. Besides that, nothing else immediately grabbed his attention.

Just before his interest could begin to fade, Ed spotted a thin black vertical line on the back wall within the tomb. After inching his way around the coffins, his mind turned as he registered the line to not be a mark in the stone, but a gap- an opening. He ran a hand alongside it, allowing him just enough room to stick his fingers in. With a gentle tug, he felt the stone shift, then looked down to see the ground worn by continuous friction.

The inside of the mausoleum was smaller than the outside, and what appeared to be the back wall could be pushed to the side. His curiosity skyrocketed at this discovery, and his trepidation was easily replaced by excitement as if he was on a verge of a historic discovery.

The small voice that told him to leave at that moment was hastily overpowered by the other voice that eagerly told him to press on. With both hands on the edge of the stone slab, Ed heaved it to the side, eyeing the hidden space behind which revealed to concealing a thin spiral staircase going
With his blood pumping and heart racing, Ed realized that he needed this. A little distraction would do him some good, and he could walk away with an interesting story to tell.

With one last look behind him, Edward began down the staircase that lead him far below ground level, guided by a faint light further below. The air became colder and stale the further he went, until he reached the bottom. The sight that awaited him left him gaping in amazement.

It wasn't just a mausoleum, but an entire crypt.

Ed stepped off at the bottom of the staircase to be welcomed by a lengthy hall, lit only by a long stretch of dim light bulbs. Some of the lights flickered or had gone out completely, encasing select sections of the underground tunnel in darkness.

At first glance, finding a crypt under a cemetery wouldn't be terribly alarming, but despite the hour, Edward was alert and aware enough to realize that several details didn't quite match up. These halls looked almost too industrial to be apart of a gravesite, not to mention that he didn't see any spaces to store bodies as he walked further down.

The main corridor seemed to extend endlessly, the far end obscured by shadows. Every few strides, he would near another hall, all in which were lined with metal doors. Once he noticed this, Edward paused and stared at the nearest door in a contemplative, nervous silence, again questioning his own motives.

He was only curious, but the underground tunnel gave off the impression that he stepped into something he wanted no part in. But whatever apprehension he may have felt was overpowered by his unruly stubbornness to see through whatever the hell this was.

Ed clenched his fists and approached the nearest door. He tried the handle, mildly surprised to see that it was unlocked, and pushed the heavy door open, grimacing as its hinges whined from the movement. The dim light from the hall stretched into the room, revealing nothing but dust and a single long chain glinting in the corner. Edward was willing to guess it was once a storage room or something, not at all willing to consider any other reason as to why a chain would have been left there. Uninterested, he closed the door again and went onto the next one.

The second door down the hall was locked, but he wasted no time in turning it's inner mechanisms with alchemy to open it up. What he saw inside was more satisfying than the last room, but not by much. This actually was a storage room with boxes and crates pressed up against the far wall, surrounded by various debris and a thick layer of dust.

The unnerving sense of danger still clung tightly onto the alchemist, but he was admittedly beginning to lose interest. He didn't bother to investigate further before he closed the door and locked it again, then turned to look down the hall. If every door he passed ended up being filled with junk, then this would have been a waste of time.

A soft skittering sound echoed down the walls pulled Ed's attention further down the hall. He started down it for several seconds, but saw no movement whatsoever.

Something was alive down here.

Ed's pulse began to beat slightly faster and he took a deep breath in an attempt to calm himself, then began to move forward once again.

The foreboding air that filled the tunnels steadily grew thicker the further he got, giving him the
sense of walking out into an open field. The further he went, the less safe he was. Part of him yearned to return to the direction in which he came, but still pressed on, pulled by a force unknown to him.

Edward passed several of the metal doors but didn't make any attempt to see beyond them as he continued walking. Instead, he kept moving, even as the overhead lights began to dim. Once he reached what he thought to be the end of the hall, Edward realized it was merely a turn. He slowed his pace and looked in the new direction, but was unable to make anything out beyond the first few feet.

This is the part where most people would have decided enough was enough; it was time to turn back. Ed was about to do just that, but his feet refused to move. Invisible strings pulled him towards the dark hall, insisting with a silent urgency he found impossible to ignore. Something was in there, waiting to be found.

He took a deep breath, mentally agreeing to see this through. Why, he didn't bother wondering, knowing it was far too soon to find an answer. It was much easier to do what he always did in times of uncertainty: wing it.

And so he did.

Edward pressed on, hands up and ready for anything that was to come. He strained his eyes to see the path ahead as the light became fainter with every step forward, until he could just barely make out the space between him and the two walls. He did notice in his semi-blindness, however, that the walls were no longer lined with door after door. In fact, he didn't see anything-

That is, until he noticed a large discoloration in the dark shade of the wall. Ed gingerly pressed his hand against it to confirm that it was indeed another door, but twice the size as the others from before. It was difficult to tell by touch alone, but it also seemed thicker somehow- more impenetrable.

But for whatever reason, he wasn't too keen on opening it. Something about that door in particular gave him a very daunting vibe and eventually prompted him to keep moving. But as he began to pass it, his hand brushed up against what he assumed to be a light switch. He flipped it without thought, disappointed to see that the hallway did not immediately light up in response. In fact, he noticed no difference in his surrounds whatsoever, and instinctual flipped it back to how it was. But before he could continue onward, his legs stopped cooperating, leaving him stranded there as a shiver ran down his spine. His eyes were drawn back to the large, daunting door.

It was highly probably that the switch was for whatever was hiding behind the barrier, but what made this room different than all the rest?

There was something about that door... He didn't want to know what was behind it, but the urging pull would bother him all night if he didn't at least check. With one more pointless look around him, Ed clapped his hands after testing the lock, and pressed them against the handles.

As soon as the satisfying click hit his ears, Ed pulled with his body weight to slowly swing the door outwards. As soon as the heavy metal door opened, the first thing that hit him was the smell. The overwhelming scent of absolute misery struck him with enough strength to send him reeling back. Ed was immediately convinced that whoever was using this space had thrown the corpses of animals into that room and shut them in to rot. But regardless of what the reality was, as he stared into the darkness, he knew something was in there. Dread manifested with a vengeance and the voice that told him to go back grew twice as strong.
It was somehow even darker in the room then it was at the furthest end of the hall, almost as if it too went on forever. He took a hesitant step into the doorway, now breathing primarily through his mouth as he moved his automail hand up to hopefully turn the lights on. When his fingers found the small switch, he paused as a jolt of hesitation paralyzed his limbs.

If the fetid smell wasn't enough of a red flag, there was something abjectly not right about this underground tunnel, and even more so about this room that had been so heavily sealed away. Something that tingled against his skin and warned him to leave while he still could. And yet for reasons unbeknownst to him, Edward flipped the switch and allowed the dim, cold light to shine on the horrors that were awaiting him.

"Wha- what the hell...?"

A bright conglomeration of red on the side wall was the first of many sights for Ed's eyes to dash to within that single moment. Jagged lines of dried blood littered the scratched, abused cement in concise, yet sloppy patterns. He recognized them as words but none were legible to him, as if they were in another language entirely. The letters varied in size drastically and had no sense of organization with a manic quality to them that gave off a painfully disquieting air to the entire room. To make matters worse, there was a collection of what looked like uncompleted transmutation circles drawn in blood as well. His eyes followed them down, watching as they arrays steadily become more and more distorted, until he was barely able to recognize the general shape as a circle.

But all of this was forgotten when his focus strayed further away from the corner thickest with the accumulated bloody writing to land on a limp body lying on the cold ground. Seeing the adult male with his back turned to the door somehow caused Edward's head to pound. It wasn't just the abysmal shock of seeing a human being down in this pit, but something familiar that made his brain throb.

He recognized that feeling, and immediately hated it. He callously told it to go away and mind its own business. He didn't want to so much as acknowledge the familiarity, sickened by the idea of pointlessly getting his hopes up. But it might have been too late, because he definitely felt nauseous.

Ed remained paraplegic in the doorway with all feeling drained from his body, staring wide eyed at the man all while trying to ignore the bloody scrawls in his peripheral vision. It wasn't until he noticed the slowly growing pool of blood streaming from the man and the alarm in Ed's head turned up several notches that the stiffness in his limbs loosened enough for him to move closer.

Ed held his breath, partly because he couldn't bear the scent and partly because his lungs refused to cooperate. Impossibly slow and cautious, he moved one foot after another, staring at the back of the unresponsive person. Even the clothes he wore packed a mental punch as he recognized the military's navy blue on his pants and the common white shirt that clung to his body, stained by a repulsive amount of blood. And of course, the black hair, matted from lack of care and slightly longer than it should have been.

Somehow, the fact that the man was lying in what could only be assumed to be his own blood did not seem as important as figuring out who he was. Or rather, confirming it. As Ed's view of him changed with every movement, gaining a clearer perspective with every second, his heart pounded as he feared it would burst out of his chest at any moment.

Because it could not be him.

It could not be the man whom he had only recently accepted to be dead. He knew that speculation
was why his pulse was racing so quickly and his mind spun until he nearly lost balance, but Ed absolutely refused to admit it. It should be impossible. It was impossible. He wasn't going to get his hopes up for something so nonsensical.

It wasn't Mustang.

But before he knew it, Ed was standing over the body, arms and legs quivering until he finally gave in and fell to his knees to get a closer look. He rose a hand to place on the man's shoulder to turn him over, but he froze, unable to make contact as if an invisible shield divided them.

Even the angle of his face was unmistakable.

Laying on his side, unconscious, was undoubtedly Roy Mustang.

Edward inhaled a gasp of cold, stale air through his teeth as if he had been physically punched in the gut.

It was him. It was actually him.

His pale skin had paled further, clearly from malnutrition as well as blood loss. He was covered in old, smeared blood; it was impossible to determine where it all came from. Multiple cuts and bruises discolored the little skin that shown and his shirt was splotched with countless red stains. Before Ed could examine further, his eyes fell on the colonel's face, which put him at an immediate pause. His expression looked so... empty. No pain or even calmness. If it wasn't for the shallow rise and fall of his chest, Edward would have thought him to be dead.

It almost wasn't fair. So many people have been agonizing over his death only for him to be alive. And as for Mustang himself, Ed had no idea how he ended up here, but something told him death would have been easier for him.

But no amount of unfairness could distract Edward from the sheer amazement that washed over him as he started at the man, gaping as if to say something yet feeling a million miles away.

Edward heard himself question if this was all a dream or not. It was all too unbelievable to be real.

But it was truly him.

And he was bleeding out from the neck.

No. Absolute not. Edward would not go through the experience of discovering Mustang to be alive, only for him to die right in front of him.

Having no choice but to toss his countless questions to the side for now, Ed finally rolled him onto his back, grimacing at the complete lack of response at the action.

He refused to go through that again. Ed didn't know what in the hell happened, but this was no time to be pondering the past.

The alchemist shook himself out of his trance and grabbed hold of the end of his coat as he briefly searched the room, gaze falling on a discarded cloth in the corner. He swiftly lunged for the old, battered piece of gray fabric and further tore the thin sheet into strips. He would have been more than willing to use his own clothing to cover the wound, but he'd rather use something more dry.

With the makeshift bandage in hand, Edward leaned over his unconscious boss again. The gash in his neck was thankfully not particularly deep from what he could see. Judging by the blood flow,
nothing vital had been hurt. Mustang's greatest obstacle at the moment would be dying from loss of
blood.

As dire as the situation was, Ed could hardly contain his relief. It could have been so much worse.
For a moment, he had even considered attempting to sew the wound closed himself, but was now
willing to bet that it wasn't yet necessary.

It all came down to whether or not Ed could get Mustang to someone more trained.

But one thing at a time.

The blond swiftly wrapped the cloth around the man's neck, tying it as tightly as he dared without
choking him. As much as he wanted to keep a hand on it to help staunch the bleeding, his priority
fell to heaving Mustang up and over his shoulders. He had no choice but to let the colonel's legs
drag on the ground, seeing as Ed wasn't exactly... big enough to carry him in any other way. But as
he began to lift him, the sensation of the foreign blood soaking into his coat put him at pause, and
he was unable to withhold the tremulous shiver that raced through his limbs when he questioned
just how long Mustang had been down here, bleeding out. But he told himself he didn't have time
to hesitate, and did his best to ignore it.

"Don't worry, Mustang," he breathed quietly. "I'm not gonna let you die. Not again." Edward
ground his teeth as he took on the man's weight, both because he was heavy, and because he wasn't
as heavy as he expected. He swore to find whoever had done this. Scar wouldn't have gone to such
lengths, would he...?

He shook his head and pulled the unconscious man closer to him, dead set on getting him out. But
as he turned to face the exit, his eyes were drawn to the red scrawl in the corner, finding himself
unable to look away from the manic, bloody writing that dug a gaping hole in his stomach. With
the new perspective, he was able to make out at least one word in the center, which froze his veins,
leaving him motionless.

Ed

His own name at the core of the madness, intently underlined multiple times. He could now make
out a few more around it, such as Maes and sacrifice but none were written in such a way as his
name was. As unfathomably unsettling as it was, he was given no choice but to swallow the dread
that winded him to the point of nausea, and pry his eyes away.

Again, tossing aside all distracting tangents, Edward firmly gripped the colonel's arms as they hung
limp over his shoulders and lumbered out of the daunting cell, albeit unsteadily on languid legs.

Before he could get far, he looked over his shoulder and cursed under his breath as he decided to
take the time to pull the door closed and lock it again, which was quite the arduous task as he
simultaneously supported a grown man's weight. He gave the room one more abhorred glance
before the doors shut it away, the image of the small, bloody, scratched up space staining itself to
his eyelids.

It was probably too much to hope that Mustang hadn't been locked in there since his reported
death. If whoever had put Mustang there was still walking around, he didn't want them to figure out
what had happened too quickly. He swiftly switched the light back off and readjusted the limp
colonel on his shoulders.

With a deep breath, Ed trudged through the cold, menacing halls underneath the cemetery, lurching
with every step. His nerves were alight with fear of being found, and for Mustang's unstable state.
Every faint breath he felt on his shoulders as he moved on felt like a great weight lifted, only to be
returned until the next one came. He was constantly fretting about the wrapping around the man's
neck as well, hoping the blood wouldn't soak through by the time they reached the outside.

But all of these concerns seemed trivial when he heard movement behind him. The same sound of
claw's clicking against metal but more than before. Rats, he tried to tell himself, but he could almost
hear something heavy, hungry breathes echoing down the hall, insinuating that whatever down
there was far more dangerous than a few rodents. Ed kicked himself into gear, stumbling down the
hall as he sacrificed caution for speed. Each step risked him falling onto his face, but steadily
increasing in speed. Ed couldn't even bring himself to look behind him in fear of tripping.

He turned a corner, nearly slipping as Mustang's body dragged behind. He saw the staircase at the
end of the poorly lit hall and ran as quickly as the extra weight would allow, despite the burn in his
chest. Breathing became a chore as he raced, hunched over and nervous.

Edward scrambled up the staircase, still unable to look behind himself. He swore he could feel
eyes piercing at him from behind as he nearly clawed his way up each step, eventually heaving
himself out of view of whatever was following. The warm, sticky air of the storm felt like a
blessing as he toppled out of the crypt, his legs finally giving out from under.

The two alchemists collapsed. But as Mustang stayed where he had landed like a rag doll, Edward
had no such luxury. He rose to his knees and turned around, then tugged the concrete slab that
original hid the beginning of the staircase with every bit of strength left in his body. His entire
body quivered from adrenaline with every breath as he stared at the now sealed wall, unable to
shake the persistent feeling of danger.

Acting on the desire to get further away, Edward pulled himself to his feet and took hold of the
colonel from under his arms. As his muscles protested, the blond dragged him out of the
mausoleum, caught off guard by the rain. It had grown stronger, but somehow thinned at the same
time. The wind blew across the field, carrying a mist that filled the air as it caught on his hood. He
couldn't breath without feeling the almost fog-like rain in his mouth and he could barely see further
than a few feet past him.

Turned around and brain spinning, Edward settled for carrying the other alchemist to the nearest
grouping of trees, just down the hill and a little off to the side of where the grave resided. He
moved as quickly as his aching legs could carry, half-expecting someone or something to burst out
of the small building in any moment.

The air remained humid and warm, yet the powerful wind chilled every part of exposed skin it
could touch, as he was already drenched. When the light spray gusted into him, he could only
brace himself for the chill as he trudged through the sodden field.

The rain fell like ocean waves, shifting and flowing, raging along with the gale. The undulating,
heavy mist sprayed loudly against the ground and trees danced in the distance, branches bashing
against each other in a constant war.

But at last, he managed to successfully reach the safety of the trees without interruption. Pulling
the colonel behind the widest of the trees, he fell to his knees and propped the limp man against the
stump, giving himself a moment to breath.

Ed wiped the rainwater from his eyes and peered past the tree, up at the mausoleum, sitting back
only when he saw nothing for several seconds. Though he was given a moment of respite, his heart
continued to race and his hands would not stop shaking. He looked up at the colonel, who's head
lolled to the side, eyes still closed, remaining entirely motionless besides his soft breathing. Blood
streamed down his head from where the water met with what was already shed, emphasizing how pale and sickly he now appeared to be. The bandage held decently well, but Edward adjusted the tightness regardless, also confirming that the blood had not yet made its' way through the multiple layers, although it was close.

His gaze traveled downwards, seeing new wounds now that he had a better view and a moment to think. He didn't get far, however, when he noticed how much the man's right arm had been bleeding. His entire sleeve was stained red long ago, the fabric already dry, excluding the rain. Upon closer inspection, Ed could see the tearing in the sleeve over his forearm. It looked like something sunk into his skin and tore out, creating a single long rip. He couldn't see very well in the darkness and with the obstruction of the fabric, but as long as it wasn't still bleeding, he didn't really want to know.

To make matters worse, his hands looked almost as bad. He hadn't noticed their state earlier, but the nearest streetlamp allowed him just enough light to make out the discoloration. His hands had become two giant bruises with several fingers bent out of shape. The skin itself also had many cuts, but none worse than his palms and fingertips, once Ed looked more closely. The underside of his hands were scrubbed raw, bleeding even now in the worst areas. His fingers were in the same state, red and steadily oozing.

The sight pulled at something within Ed's chest and his expression hardened as more questions circulated. He may had dragged the man out, but there was still no time to stop and think. But despite that, the desire to wrap his hands snagged a tight hold of him, refusing to let go. Though nothing about the sorry state of Mustang's hands was life threatening, the urge persisted until he finally gave in.

Thankfully, the time it took him to tear off a few strips of fabric from his coat and tie them around the abused hands allowed him to figure out where to go from there.

Mustang was bleeding out and believed to be dead and was in no state to spend much time outside. Someone put him down there for a reason; someone with enough power to orchestrate his death and even stage a funeral. Someone who he couldn't help but doubt was Scar.

Edward needed to be careful, but he couldn't handle this alone. He wouldn't know where to begin. Going to Hawkeye was the first idea that came to mind, but if memory served, she didn't exactly live right around the corner. Going to anyone who lived in the dorms was out of the question as well.

There was only one person he could trust who lived close enough.

Now the only problem was dragging an unconscious man through the streets of Central in order to get there before it was too late.
Maes was lucky to get a full nights' sleep these days. It wasn't nightmares that were jerking him awake, but rather he was never able to drift off in the first place, staring into space for hours on end after his head hit the pillow. No matter how late he worked or how little rest he got the day before, his mind was always whirling, refusing him the peace required to truly rest.

Weeks had passed now, but he couldn't stop thinking about the night Roy was killed. He couldn't stop reminding himself of how oblivious he was. What he could have done if only things were different. What would have changed if he didn't leave the office when Roy pushed him to? What if he stayed? Could he have saved him somehow?

Unlikely, he would somberly remind himself. Scar got to him in the field, where Maes would have little reason to follow. He wasn't sure if that made it better or worse; to know that no matter what happened, nothing would have changed.

On the his worst nights, he'd keep his back to Gracia as she slept with a hand over his mouth, trying to keep in the miserable sobs that wanted to break free, occasionally needing to leave the room altogether. He knew she already worried about him, but he refused to let it get any worse. She and Elicia were struggling too. And while something told him a large part of it was because they had to watch him mourn, he continued to tell himself that he needed to be strong for them. Even more so now that he was fairly certain Gracia had once feigned sleep when he was like that and realized how much he fought to hold in his pain.

But luckily, tonight was one of his better nights; meaning that he had been able to silently gaze at the inside of his eyelids for several hours without the fear of losing his composure besides his wife, who as far as he could tell, was sleeping soundly.

And that was why he clearly heard the abrupt rasp of a fist pounding into their front door, jolting him out of his stupor in an instant, heart suddenly working on overdrive as all thoughts of Roy temporarily vanished. He sat up straight and strained his ears after it stopped, knowing all hope of falling sleep now had efficiently disappeared. As he began to shift off of the bed and reach for his glasses, the fist rapped against the door once more, causing Gracia to stir. She murmured something and her eyes fluttered for a moment.

"I'll see what it is," he whispered just in case she was aware enough to hear, and quickly stepped into the hall, already picking out some choice words for whoever thought it would be a good idea to disturb his family's' sleep at such an hour.

What hour was it, anyway...?

Maes glanced at a clock on the wall as he approached the door, confirming it to be just after three in the morning. Whoever was bothering him better have had a damn good reason.

Just as the knocking began to continue, he swiftly unlocked the door and yanked it open with an appropriately irritated glare in place, more than ready to chew out the offender. However, any and all signs of discontent were wiped away and replaced by an unintelligent, nonplussed gape when he saw Edward Elric standing in front of his door, metal first still curled in the air, drenched, missing his favorite coat, and pale as a ghost.

The kid only stared back, looking just as shocked as he was, but something told him that it wasn't Maes answering the door that had him so astound. Edward opened his mouth but he was stunned
"Ed?" he inquired carefully after a few uncomfortable seconds passed, all thoughts of the rude door-banging gone from his mind. "... What's wrong?" Despite his earlier offers, he never expected the young blond to show up at his home, especially in the middle of the night. Whatever brought him here, it could not be good, based on the foreboding air that followed the kid like a shadow.

"I... I found him."

Maes blinked, unsure how to respond. He looked at the blond twice-over when the vague explanation— if it could even be called that— gave him nothing to work with. Ed's arms were shaking, although he couldn't guess if it was from being coated with rain water, or from whatever had him so worked up.

"What are you talking about?"

"I found him," he repeated in an urgent whisper. "I found Mustang!"

The mention of his deceased best friend drained his concern somewhat as another painful throb struck his heart, although did nothing to sate his confusion or curiosity. Ed, noticing the lieutenant colonel's fallen expression, insisted. "No, really! He's alive!"

The mere suggestion that Roy might have been alive threw Maes off balance. If he hadn't kept his hand on the door, it was a very real possibility that he would have staggered to the side, although his lack of sleep could have easily been to blame. As much as he hated to admit it, Ed's words reignited the tiniest, most minuscule flame of hope, that he swiftly stomped on before he could allow himself to become too foolishly optimistic. Both Hawkeye and Havoc had seen Roy's corpse in that alley, along with countless other soldiers. It wasn't possible, and he almost wanted to resent Ed for wanting him to think otherwise. But the kid was struggling just as much as he was, and probably just confused a dream for reality.

His expression betrayed nothing besides the general weariness that had been stalking him as of late. "He's not alive, Ed," he sighed, trying and failing from keeping the disappointment from his tone.

Edward shook his head vehemently as water dropped from his bangs and further down his face. "Yes, he is! I found him! You- you have to believe me."

"What do you mean?" Maes asked sharply, as each exchange stabbed into the existing hole in his chest. Ed was not making this easy. "What- where did you find him?" he asked at last, hoping humoring the kid would help him make more sense of whatever he was going on about.

"Underground!"

"Under- what?" he asked, taken aback as he began to seriously concern for Edward's mental well being.

"Yeah, under the cemetery," he confirmed zealously, as if he believed he and Maes were on the same page.

"Ed," he drawled, nearing a loss for words as he looked down at the disgruntled teenager, unable to keep the disquiet from his voice. "You're saying you found Roy in the cemetery. Did you-" he cut himself off with a deep, shocked intake of breath. "You didn't dig up his grave, did you?"

"Wha-" Ed reeled back slightly as if had been offended. "Of course I didn't!" Maes was almost relieved, until the kid continued. "He was in a crypt. Except it wasn't really a crypt... It was..." He
trailed off, noting the man's painfully perturbed expression.

The blond groaned into his hands, infuriated by whatever barrier was keeping them from properly communicating. In an instant, he shot his hands back down to his sides, targeting Maes with a new set of decisive eyes. "Come on, I'll show you!" Without waiting for a response, the alchemist began to hasten down the hall.

"Show me what?" Maes asked almost fearfully, already knowing he wasn't going to get a clear answer.

True to his expectation, Edward only waved him down to follow. "Come on, it'll only take a minute!"

Somehow, Maes had a feeling the kid was only telling him that in order to make him follow. With a deep sigh, he cast one last glance into his empty living room and grabbed his keys from the nearby side table. He then stepped out into the apartment hallway, closing the door quietly behind him, locking it just to be safe, and silently apologized to his family for the racket.

He unwillingly followed the blond down the hall, realizing without any surprise but with much reluctance that he was meant to go outside. The rain could be heard from anywhere in the building as the storm raged on, although it had lightened up from the slew of water that was falling minutes ago. As they neared the exit, Ed, who was walking several paced ahead of him and twice as quickly, steadily grew twitchier and more restless, unnerving the lieutenant colonel to new heights.

"Ed," Maes began again as they reached the exit, allowing him to look out the window towards the dark, wet street. "Is this really necessary?"

"Yes!" Without giving him a moment to respond, Edward pushed the door open and held it open, inviting in the sound of rain hitting the pavement. The blond waved him over again, switching his gaze from Maes, to something outside with every passing second, acting as if he was working on a pressed time limit.

With a soundless exhale, Maes figured the only way to get this over with was to cooperate. Besides, he didn't have it in him to just tell the kid to knock it off and be done with it.

Reluctantly, he followed outside, biting at the inside of his mouth as the rain fell down on him, drenching him almost immediately. At least the wind had calmed and the monsoon wasn't particularly cold, but he wished he at least thought to bring an umbrella or a jacket. In fact, the idea hadn't occurred to him until that moment, and he idly wondered if the past few restless nights were starting to effect his brain.

"Hurry up!" Edward insisted, shaking him out of his mundane thoughts. The blond prompted him to the side of the building, where he had gone often to throw out the trash. If it was anyone else, Maes might have thought he was being led into a robbery by the looks of it. On that happy thought, he followed the young alchemist into the thin alley, with no idea what to expect. He claimed it to be Roy, but that was too impossible to indulge. But if Ed had found whatever this was in a cemetery, he wasn't looking forward to it. He tried to brace himself for the worst case scenario, but anything he could have imagined came nowhere near what the reality was.

He turned the corner, eyes immediately drawn to the figure sitting up against the wall, features obscured by Edward's red coat, which clearly wasn't placed there to fend off the rain, since the end of the roof above the building did a good enough job at keeping the water away.

Nope, he didn't like this at all. He opened his mouth to voice his concerns once again, but was
silenced when Edward reached down and removed his coat.

It was...

No. No, no, no, no, no.

That was not possible. He was looking at an illusion. This was all a dream. Another damn dream that would turn into a wistful nightmare. Or it was a trick. Someone was messing with him. Literally any other explanation would have made more sense than what he looked down at, slumped by his feet.

Roy.

He stared in a mute, bewildered silence, unable to speak or think or feel because he was no longer present. Maes’ mind had been turned off and he could not understand what he was looking at. But what else could this mean? Maybe once in his life he could just take what was in front of him without ripping it to shreds with a million speculative questions.

Even in the darkness of night and through the storm of a summer monsoon, he would never mistake that messy hair and pale skin. But there was no time to be washed over by an enormous, overwhelming sense of pure joyful astonishment, thanks to the deep, red stains that coated him.

Roy, who he thought he would never see again besides in aging photographs, was sitting against the wall with his head lowered, long drenched bangs covering his face, wearing a dirty white shirt, stained with splotches of dark red. He had no idea if he should have been ecstatic and drunk with happiness, or hysterical and downright overwrought at the sight of his friend- who was alive- but apparently missing a lot of blood.

He slowly reached his quivering hand forward, unable to decide if his eyes were just playing a trick on him, until he paused upon realizing that Edward was still talking to him. In fact, he had completely forgotten about the kid's presence for a moment until then, and was forced into wondering how the two alchemists both managed to show up here. His outstretched hand curled into a fist as a thought chilled his bones to the core.

"Edward," he breathed, yet was somehow loud enough for the blond to hear. He stopped in the middle of whatever he was saying, drawing his golden eyes away from the motionless colonel, over to Maes. "You- you said you found him in the cemetery?" he asked carefully, voice frighteningly hollow as a series of terrifying possibilities crossed through his mind, all paling in comparison to one in particular.

"Yeah," he confirmed with in questioning lilt.

"And all of this blood..." He watched the kid carefully, who still seemed clueless as to what he was getting at. "Please tell me that you- you didn't try human transmutation again."

Ed stared at him as if time had frozen around him. It took several, painstakingly long seconds for his words to process, until his still expression erupted into one of disgust, rage, and a hint of fear. "What!? No! I didn't!"

A great sigh of relief slumped his shoulders as the tension barreled out. There wasn't an ounce of deceit in the kid's face, and he wasn't eager to make the same accusation again. Maes let his eyes fall back onto Roy, who hadn't moved in the slightest. But when he saw the faint rise of his chest, his heart leaped so high with joy, he thought he would choke on.

"Then... then how is this..." His mouth had long since gone dry, and Maes found himself unable to
finish the sentence, too entranced by the sight of his friend.

"Someone was hiding him. His death was staged."

Maes registered the words that were spoken to him, but he couldn't comment as all of his focus was stolen by the unconscious man. He took a step closer, but the weights of the world that had been holding him down thus far lifted with enough force to bring him to his knees, oblivious to the splash of grimy rainwater that had soaked into his clothes, or the spike of pain that shot through his limbs.

Roy was alive.

He didn't care how. He didn't care why.

Maes shifted closer on concrete and stiffly grabbed his friend by the shoulders, yet carefully enough that one would think he was made of glass. For a moment, he was certain the man would vanish into thin air the moment he made contact, and almost gasped when that didn't happen. Instead, Roy's head lulled to the side by the movement, allowing him a better view of the dark circles under his eyes, the malnutrition that shown through his skin, and the misery that was etched into his features. He was sure he couldn't begin to imagine what his friend had been doing these past few weeks, and almost didn't want to know. But at that moment, none of it mattered.

All that mattered was the slow rise and fall of his shoulders. It was faint- worryingly so, but it was there. Proof that Roy Mustang was alive. The one thing he wanted over all else- the one thing he knew to be impossible had happened. Staged or not, Roy came back from the dead.

It was impossible.

Unfathomable.

Amazing.

His grip tightened around the fabric of Roy's shirt. His arms were tense, thoroughly overwhelmed by the onslaught of emotion and confusion that tossed his brain upside down. A tremor ran up his spine as he hunched his shoulders and fought back tears, still struggling to understand that his best friend was not dead and gone from his life forever. He was right in front of him. Maybe not in the best state, but alive and now safe.

Maes abruptly pulled Roy towards him, mindful not to give him whiplash as he tightly wrapped his arms around him, as if he feared lightening up even slightly would allow him to disappear again. The tears were freely falling at this point, mixing with the rain that had previously soaked him. Maes absolutely refused to release his hold, believing for a few blissful seconds that nothing would make him as his head lowered until his chin touched the bloodstained fabric of Roy's shoulder.

"I- I can't believe it. It- it's really-" the words died on his tongue, his voice too crippled to continue. He settled for shutting his eyes and straining the tense muscles in his jaw until he thought his teeth would crack, unaware of how his body reacted. As Maes tried to comprehend the fact that Roy was here, breathing safely in his arms, he paid no mind to how his own limbs shivered and breathing became arduous through his sniveling.

He focused solely on Roy rather than himself or his surroundings, recognizing how cold the man was with a painful ease. There was still the slight resemblance of body heat in there somewhere, but it was fading. Along with the telltale stickiness of the blood that smeared his clothing and skin, it told him that Roy desperately needed help. Whether his dropping temperature was due to the
lack of blood or the whether, Maes swore to restore it. His protective nature kicked in with a vengeance, but before doing anything, he couldn't deny himself a moment to simply enjoy this miracle.

"T-thank you," he choked, voice hoarse and muffled as he pressed himself into his friend's shoulder. He wasn't sure if he was thanking Roy for being alive, or Ed for bringing him here.

Ed. He had almost forgotten about the kids' part in this, distracted by the mind boggling discovery, but it was only because of him that Maes could see his best friend again.

He looked over his shoulder to the kid as his grip around Roy subconsciously tightened, examining the blond who stood a few feet off, shifting his feet on the sodden cement as an uncomfortable, nervous air surrounded him. If he was anything like Maes, then Edward's mind was still having a hard time believing what was right in front of them, and given no choice but to redirect his focus.

"Uh. I didn't see anyone else down there when I found him, but um..." he trailed off, assuming Maes was waiting for an explanation when he turned to watch him. Maes, however, knew there would be plenty of time for him to explain his experience. For the moment at least, the lieutenant colonel couldn't bring himself to care about any of it. Maes still had no idea what Edward went through in order to find Roy or what had gotten him so shaken up, but he knew it couldn't thank him enough.

He hesitated for only a moment, then temporarily detached himself from his friend and forced his unsteady legs to support his weight. He then whirled around to pull Ed into an equally tight hug before his golden eyes could so much as turn to see it coming. The kids' shock was evident in the way he stiffened rigidly and hesitated to make a sound.

"Thank you," Maes repeated himself, now knowing full-well who it was aimed towards.

Ed's mouth opened to spit out some default answer, but remained silent when the weight of those two words sunk in. His shoulders slackened within the sudden embrace and his expression became unreadable.

Maes let him go after a moment, pulling back to get a good look at him, unsure what kind of look was he giving the kid. Edward was staring blankly at the ground, but rose his gaze to match the man's eye contact. He held it for a moment longer with a thoughtful look on his face, before a slight, yet incredibly tired smile graced his visage for just a moment. Maes could only return the small, wry smile, feeling equally weary, then gave him an assuring pat on his shoulder, which meant so much more to him than the blond could possibly realize. Edward just stood there, avoiding eye contact once more. Maes wasn't sure if it was because he found the hug to be strange and uncomfortable, or it was something else that was keeping him subdued. But unfortunately, he couldn't spare the brainpower to think about it at the moment.

He half expected Edward to say something, but when there was no suggestion that he planned to, Maes turned back to Roy and knelt down in front of him, taking a moment to examine his state before the desire to start sobbing from joy took over. However, he did not get very far before he caught sight of the wrapping around Roy's neck, and the dark red stain that he could see soaking through.

Abject shock forced him to reel back, returning his hold on the unconscious man's shoulders as he looked him over.

"That's what I was trying to tell you," Edward finally chimed in from behind, clearing his throat. "As I said earlier, I brought him here because he needs help, and you were the closest person I
could think of."

Maes shoved his surprise to the side and forced himself to focus on the task at hand, rather than the worry that would have otherwise flooded his mind. His eyes bounced around the area, quickly weighing his options. He would suggest to bring Roy inside and out of the rain, but he couldn't very well carry in a bleeding, reported dead man into his apartment, even at this hour. Taking him to a hospital was currently out of the question as well- not until they figured out who was behind this, and how much danger Roy was still in.

"We need to get him out of the rain," he announced, stating the obvious as he stared at the crude wrap that sealed whatever wound was inflicted on Roy's neck. "Can you think of anywhere?"

"I was hoping you would have an idea," Edward muttered, making an admirable attempt to keep his voice from sounding despondent. "The dorms are probably the last place we want to take him."

Maes nodded slowly, steady gaze unwavering. He'd rather avoid getting anyone else involved at this point. He would tell Riza and the rest of the team about Roy's survival as soon as possible, but showing up to their homes with the colonel in tow at this hour would be... incredibly shocking, to say the absolute least. If only there was some place that was away from curious eyes, and safe.

Then most obvious solution struck him in the head with the force of a sack of bricks, forcing him to flinch from the impact. "Of course!" he exclaimed, looking to Ed over his shoulder. "Roy's house!"

Edward didn't share his optimism, however, and instead challenged him with a dubious, quirked brow. "It's not... empty? Or sold to someone else?"

Had Maes not been overflowing with indescribable happiness and an unstoppable drive to get Roy somewhere safe, he would have felt embarrassed to admit that he had been procrastinating dealing with the house. "No. All of the furniture should be there too."

"But why-"

"No time for questions. Come on, let's get him up," interrupted as he rose to his feet.

Edward silently agreed and threw his stained coat over his shoulder as they both took a side and heaved Roy up into a position that could almost resemble standing.

"Let's get him to my car," Maes ordered and nodded to his vehicle, which was parked against the sidewalk. He was immensely glad he decided to bring his keys as they shuffled down the sidewalk until they reached his car which was, like them, dripping wet. With one arm supporting Roy, he dug into his pocket and unlocked the back door and Ed helped him pull Roy inside, laying him down on his back.

As soon as he was situated, Maes cast another hesitant glance to his friend's neck, then turned to Edward, who was watching him anxiously, fists clenching and unclenching by his sides.

"How bad is his neck?"

"I didn't get a great look at it, but since he's not already dead, I assume it's not very deep."

"Right," he drawled drearily before making a decision and tossing Edward his key ring after unhooking a single key from it. "Alright, start up the car and get it warming up, and I'll go grab whatever medical supplies I can find. I need to look at his neck wound before we do anything. After that, we'll go to his house."
"Ah—right," Edward stammered as he fumbled to grab hold of the correct key on the ring.

Without waiting to see if he followed through, Maes sprinted back inside the apartment building and to his front door, nearly tumbling into it with the key in hand. He unlocked it and stepped inside as quickly yet quietly as physically possible, then proceeded to dash to their home equivalent of a first aid kit.

Opening the correct drawer in the kitchen, he shuffled around the collection of flower-print bandages and began piling anything he thought might be useful into his hands, including every role of gauze he could find, painkillers, and antibiotics.

With a free hand, he dropped everything in a plastic bag he found under the sink and abandoned it all on the counter in favor for stealthily racing down the hallway and into his bedroom. He paused in the door frame as his eyes caught sight of Gracia, sleeping peacefully. With a deep breath, he willed the adrenaline that pumped through his bloodstream to calm down as he carefully stepped over to her side of the bed and knelt down.

"Gracia," he whispered and lightly nudged her shoulder, hoping to wake her as softly as possible.

Thankfully, having a child made one a light sleeper. Her eyes flickered open until they softly landed on Maes. She hummed quizzically at him, eyes bleary from sleep.

"I..." He hadn't really thought about how he was going to word this. "I'm sorry for waking you, but Edward needs my help with something and I have to go for a bit. I'll be back later tomorrow. Please tell Elicia that I'm sorry I couldn't make breakfast for her like I promised." She thought him making pancakes for her would make him feel better.

Gracia nodded sideways, blinking more awareness into her eyes. "Is everything alright?"

"Yeah, he's fine. Its just—its about Roy," he conceded at least, noting the mournful understanding that slid onto her face. "I'll explain everything when I get back."

"Alright, dear. Be careful," she smiled. In a way that he would never get tired of no matter how often it happened, his heart swelled.

"Promise," he replied as he rose to his feet again and walked backwards to the door, wishing her to sleep well as he slipped out, quietly closing the door behind him. As much as he wanted to visit Elicia before he left, Roy needed him right now, and Gracia would pass on his message.

Being so vague to his loving wife ate away at him, but dropping a bomb as big as "Roy's alive" and then disappearing would just be cruel.

Maes grabbed the bag of supplies and hurried out of the apartment again, breaking into a mad dash to the car.
Maes stared distantly ahead, aimlessly gazing at the red gleam of the raindrops that slid down his car's window, reflecting the red light that kept him from moving forward. His hands gripped the steering wheel tight enough for his knuckles to turn white, but they had long since gone numb, making him oblivious to the strain.

He had properly bandaged the shallow yet terrifying wound on Roy's neck to the best of his ability, which looked worse than it was, as far as he could tell. He couldn't even begin to imagine why the wound was so shallow; nothing major in the neck had been struck but there was more than enough blood to leave a terrifying first glance. But leaving such thoughts for later, he then began the nerve-wracking drive to his supposedly deceased friend's house as Edward tried to explain everything that had led up to this moment. He was certain that the things he had been told, the mental images that had been placed in his mind, would likely haunt him for the rest of his life, remaining long after this was behind him.

To think that Roy had been trapped underground in some sort of re-purposed crypt all this time... He was, quite literally, right under their noses but they were all too busy mourning to see it. But how could they? It seemed like Ed had stumbled across this secret by pure luck.

The coincidence nauseated him, but he couldn't stop himself from over-analyzing it. He was so close. He could have been standing directly above Roy as he suffered underground, and he had no idea. Logically, there was no way for him to have known any better, but the current state of his mind left little room for logic.

Based on Ed's reluctant description, finding Roy before he bled out appeared to be nothing short of a miracle. He had already been unconscious, lying in his own blood, covered in a plethora of injuries that the blond was unable to count. Locked in a small, cell-like room that was completely empty besides the maddening sprawl of bloody scribbles congesting in one corner of the room. When asked, Edward said he didn't have time to read much of it, besides a few choice words, which just so happen to include both of their names. Based on that, something told Maes that he didn't even want to know what the rest of it said. He couldn't understand why any of that was there when the only person capable of answering was out of commission at the moment, but none of it bode well.

The light turned green and Maes removed his foot from the brake as he simultaneously took a deep breath. The car steadily began to accelerate as the rain continued to drizzle.

He honestly wasn't sure how much more of this he could hear.

"What happened next?" he willed himself to ask, ignoring the vengeful twists in his stomach and the reluctance he heard in his own voice.

Edward, in the passenger seat besides him, was leaning against the door with his arms folded limply around himself, watching the scenery pass by as if he expected something to jump out at any given moment.

"I started to drag him out, but something was following me. It sounded like some kind of animal, but I never actually saw it. I just kept running until I climbed out and closed the passage behind me." His tone was fairly calm, but Maes could still pick out the unsettled whisper that hung behind each word. "And then I somehow managed to drag him to your place."
"... I see," he muttered, unable to say any more. His throat tightened with every word the kid spoke and his mouth had long since gone dry despite the moisture in the air. A moment of silence passed as the car drove onward down a thankfully empty street.

Maes spared a glance in the rear-view mirror, catching only a glimpse of Roy's unconscious form laying in the back seat.

"How's he doing?" the lieutenant colonel asked as his eyes shifted back to the road, slowing down to make a turn.

Edward shifted to look at Roy, then back at Maes. "That's the fifth time you've asked since we got in the car. Just like last time, he's still alive." Something in his voice suggested he was making an effort to keep a snappish undertone out of his words. Maes didn't hold it against him, knowing that the kid had been through far too much that night, and was still incredibly on-edge in spite of his efforts to swallow it. Edward settled back into his seat as he did before, his examining eyes remained on Maes. He looked as if he wanted to say something more, but remained quiet.

The lieutenant colonel sighed as he slowed down for another red light. The tapping of water falling onto the exterior of the car was the only sound to fill the air for another few seconds, lulling his straying thought into the rhythmic drum, somehow helping him to organize them to the slightest degree.

"I know," he replied at last, at a loss for what else to say. "I- I can't wrap my head around this. It's a lot to take in," he finished with a wry chuckle, then allowed the dour smile to fall from his face with little resistance. "He's sitting in the back seat of my car- alive- but I still can hardly believe it."

"Yeah," Ed agreed tersely, staring out the front window, mind turning in directions that Maes could only guess.

"Did you... see anything that could tell us anything about who did this to him?" he asked at last, mostly out of a desire to fill the silence than feeling like there was any chance of getting a positive response.

"No, not really." Just as he had expected. "But whoever it is, they would need to have some authority to get away with hiding people in a crypt underneath the military's cemetery."

Maes nodded somberly as the car began to continue towards their objective. "It's possible that whoever was responsible is within the military, but I can't imagine anyone going to such lengths. Or why, for that matter. Any of Roy's enemies would much rather see him dead, then locked away underground." There were many heartless people in the higher rankings of the military, but it was difficult to picture any of them do something so sadistic and inhumane. But then again, he would keep the possibility on the table in case he was giving them too much credit.

"I guess the only way to find out is to wait for Mustang to wake up," Edward muttered, twisting his body to look back at the quiescent man once again. "I wonder how long that'll take," he added in a quieter tone, seemingly unaware that he had spoken aloud at all.

Maes wanted to assure the kid that Roy was tough and he would wake up by morning and they'd be able to solve this quickly, but he honestly didn't know. Being hopeful was one thing, but it was an entirely different matter to lie to Edward, as well as himself.

He couldn't decide if it was better to state his uncertainty, focus on his confidence that Roy would pull through, or express his fear that he wouldn't. Maes settled for keeping his mouth shut.
Edward's recounting of his story took up the majority of the short drive, somehow still allowing it to feel like an eternity. Maes pulled his car alongside the sidewalk in front of Roy's small city home as he had countless times before, noting that he hadn't gone there with as much fear in his heart since the end of the civil war when he had to watch as Roy slowly deteriorated as the guilt chewed away at him. He never knew when he would walk in to see his friend holding a gun to his head or seconds away from snapping everything he owned to a crisp.

This was… better than that, but still miles worse than what he'd prefer.

He shifted the car's gear into park and leaned back into his seat. He gazed past the blond towards the cold, empty house, feeling heavy and resigned despite knowing that he should have been happy.

He was happy, of course. He was overjoyed to discover his best friend was alive, but the longer he was given to think about it, the more uncertainties plagued his mind. Roy was breathing, but faintly. Maes had done all he could for his wounds and had no idea what kind of pain he had been enduring thus far; there was still the possibility that he wouldn't pull through thanks to an unseen infection or blood loss, seeing as they had no medical assistance besides the basics that he had learned at the academy, but he seemed stable. The matter of Roy's survival aside, the entire situation was incredibly grim and he had absolutely no idea what they were going to do once Roy woke up.

And of course, that wasn't to mention that if he didn't wake soon, they'd have a whole new set of problems on their hands, seeing as the man was already malnourished. Going to a hospital would draw too much attention. He considered approaching a doctor personally to get some assistance if needed, assuming they could find one who would keep a secret. Knox, maybe...

But one thing at a time, he supposed. Telling himself to focus only on the present was at least slightly reassuring, but the many obstacles that stood dauntingly in his path were difficult to ignore for very long.

Edward undid his seat belt and gazed up at the dark sky, cogs turning. With one silent glance towards Maes, he climbed out of the car, prompting the lieutenant colonel to do the same.

The rain had calmed down considerably and the air was still thick with humidity despite the cool breeze that simultaneously swept through the area. He wasn't wearing anything more than sweatpants and a t-shirt, but had already been drenched from his first walk out into the rain earlier that night.

Ed was in a similar state, having given his coat to Roy. While he was in his usual outfit for the most part despite the early hour, he hadn't thought to bring his black jacket and now only had the sleeveless shirt to protect him from the poor weather.

Maes walked around to the other side of the car as Ed opened the door to the back seat, both staring down at the motionless man. The red coat looked odd on him; a strange burst of color to his otherwise pale and sullen comportment. It only managed to further drown out his appearance and remind Maes of the blood that had coated him earlier, which he had only partially been able to clean away. His brow furrowed at the thought as he exhaled deeply.

"Alright, let's get him inside," he breathed and began to shift through his key ring to find the one that belonged to Roy's house, that had somehow found itself in his possession. "I'll carry him; you open the door." Maes handed the kid the correct key, which he grabbed without a moment of hesitation and ran up to the house.
With Ed occupied, Maes turned back towards his car and leaned down to reach inside. He slid his arms underneath Roy's and began to pull him out, flinching at the lack of resistance, certain that the man had not eaten a full meal in weeks. He then shifted his position and put another arm under his friend's knees as the other remained behind his back. He heaved Roy up bridal-style, knowing that he would have thrown a fit if he was actually conscious to see what was happening. The lack of a response only further upset him, but he quickly reminded himself that it at least was not permanent.

Hopefully.

Maes turned and followed Edward up towards the house, who had just pulled the door open and stood out of the way so he could carry Roy out of the rain. As he walked inside, it struck Maes just how surreal the situation was. By then, it was clear to him that it would take more than an hour or two for him to accept that this was reality.

Just as it had the last time he entered the abandoned home, he was hit with the scent of dust and lack of care. He stood just beyond the doorway for a moment, allowing his eyes to shift over the dark, familiar living room. Edward flipped on a light switch as he followed the man inside, closing the door behind him.

Maes squint his eyes as the light filled the room with a single flicker. There were a few cardboard boxes laying around the corners, filled with various keepsakes- which Roy never had many of- while the large pieces of furniture had been cocooned in many layers of plastic wrap. The master bedroom was given the same treatment if memory served, and the mattress of the bed had been removed and leaned against one of the walls. With that in mind, Maes asked Ed to remove the plastic wrap from the couch instead of dealing with the bed.

Edward swiftly transmuted his arm and sliced the wrapping in half with the blade, throwing the remains of the thin plastic into a bundle behind the couch. Maes slowly lowered Roy down and stepped back, taking one look, then shifted a pillow behind his friend's head, only now considering the possibility of staining the couch with blood. Perhaps he should have left the plastic on, but he had bigger priorities at the moment.

He and Ed stood back and examined the man, both slacking their shoulders as the worst part of their journey was officially over.

"… Now what?" the young alchemist asked at last.

"Now-" he began, realizing once he started that he wasn't sure what to do now. It was still some ungodly hour of the morning, so the best thing to do would be to let Roy get as much sleep as possible, not like it would have been possible to wake him anyway. "Now we wait." He collapsed into an armchair that faced the couch, lacking the strength to remove the plastic wrapping just yet.

It occurred to him just as he collapsed that he needed to get Roy some clean clothes. But long before he could get anywhere near convincing his languid legs to stand, his gaze drifted over to the blond.

Edward remained where he stood in the middle of the living room, eyes shifting between the two older men. The way he pursed his lip and absently curled his hands into loose fists were clear signs that something was bothering him.

"What's wrong?"

The blond hesitated, allowing his eyes to remain on the colonel for several moments as he organized his thoughts. "I gotta get back to Al soon. He doesn't know any of this happened and will
start to worry if I take too long."

Maes immediately accepted that he would be spending night alone with Roy, relieved that he had already covered his bases by telling Gracia he wouldn't be back until the next day. "Alright, I understand."

"How long are you going to stay here?" Ed asked without hiding his concern.

"I'm not sure," he admitted slowly. "It could be a while before Roy wakes up. We may have to take turns watching him."

"I figured," Edward sighed and ran a weary hand through his bangs. "Man, I have no idea how I'm going to bring this up to Al..."

"Ah, speaking of that," Maes began as he sat up straighter in the armchair, the plastic squeaking as he did so. "We need to be careful about who we tell until we know what the story is. We don't know who we can trust."

"Except Al."

A small, wry smile tugged at Maes' lips, but he lacked the strength to complete it. "Right."

"And what about the rest of the team?"

There wasn't a fiber in his body that suspected any of them could have taken part in Roy's imprisonment, but letting that many people in on this could prove to be dangerous. "The walls have ears," he explained plainly, then slowly shook his head. "I'm not sure how many people we should tell just yet. I'll think about it though. No need to rush into anything before Roy even wakes up. We need to be careful."

Unfortunately, he still had to go to work on Monday and pretend as if the answer to all of his problems didn't appear as if by magic. He had one day to figure out what to do.

"How long until you're expected to show up at HQ again?" Maes asked after a thoughtful moment passed between the two.

"I should still have about a week before I use up all of my vacation time."

"You think you could stay here Sunday night?"

"Yeah. But what about Al?"

Maes leaned forward and intertwined his fingers in thought as he stared through them at the ground. He knew that Alphonse would want to see Roy as soon as he learned that the colonel was alive, but he wasn't exactly the most discrete person in the world. "We need to lay as low as possible just in case. Let's just see if anything changes before we bring more people here."

But even as he said that, Maes was already thinking about when the best time to call Riza was. It wouldn't be right to keep it from her or the rest of the team for long, but he wasn't yet sure how to go about it. If he called, he'd have to communicate through code, but waiting until he saw her in person strung a cord of impatience. But then again, he had the whole night to think about it, seeing as it was unlikely that he would be getting any sleep any time soon.

Edward nodded slowly as he turned to watch Roy for a moment longer. The silence stretched on as he absorbed the sight before he forcefully uncurled his fists and looked away as if the single
motion required a tremendous amount of effort.

"Okay. I'm going to go back to the dorms."

"Alright," he breathed in response, watching as the kid turned towards the door. "Good night."

Edward was only able to respond with a wry chuckle and a tired "yeah" before he opened and door, casting one last thoughtful glance at Roy's unconscious form, then closed the door behind him, leaving the two alone in the dark, dusty house.

With a great exhale, Maes readjusted his position in the armchair, setting his heavy eyes on his best friend, mind already churning with thoughts of the uncertain future.

Only an hour ago, he was laying in his bed thinking about how he would never see his friend again, and now he was staring at the very same man. It was amazing; too amazing for words. But due to the circumstances, he was unable to properly enjoy this would-be happiness.

He thought back to the disturbing room Edward had reluctantly described to him. The place that judging by the kid's observations, Roy had spent the past few weeks in. The mental picture that had been painted was horrific enough; Maes could only imagine how shocked Ed was when he turned on the light to see scribbled, bloody words and distorted transmutation circles littering the walls.

Maes would be lying to himself if he said he wasn't afraid to even wonder what Roy was thinking when he was in there. What drove him to that? The circles made sense, as he was probably trying desperately to escape, but what was so important that he had to harm his own hands to write down their names, as well as other seemingly random words? And why had none of the transformations worked? Sure, it was doubtful that Roy had much recent practice with drawing them by hand, but someone as skilled as he should have been able to escape with ease.

His eyes automatically fell onto his friend's hands, which fell limply at his side as he remained motionless on the couch. Maes then stood from his armchair only to kneel down besides the sofa to examine his hands more closely.

He noticed the rushed bandaging earlier, but within the flurry of chaos, he wasn't able to really think about any of Roy's wounds besides the one on his neck. Pulling over the collection of household medical supplies he had gathered, he then began to untie the damp, red fabric and discard it on the coffee table.

It was worse than he had hoped.

Every finger on his right hand was swollen and discolored as if it had been crushed, and his knuckles were covered with scabbing blood from old wounds. Edward said there was nothing else in the room, so the next likely answer was that someone had purposefully done this to Roy. As he held the damaged hand gently in his own, he fought to keep his grip from tightening in rage at the thought of his friend being beaten and abused. He only stared into space for a moment, realizing that he finally had a new direction to look into to find whoever was responsible for this.

He almost wanted to laugh.

Whatever vile monster who decided to imprison Roy and feign his death was no longer in the lead. Not only had Roy been rescued, but as soon as he woke up, he would be able to give him something that would help the search. Learning that they had not chosen to murder Roy did nothing to lessen his desire to find the guilty party and make them pay.
But all in a matter of time, Maes reminded himself. Roy still needed his attention.

Shaking himself out of his trance, the lieutenant colonel slowly turned his friend's hand over to examine his palm, and physically paused at the sight of it. Ed told him that Roy's hands were worn down, but he hadn't realized it was to this extent.

Almost none of the outer layer of skin remained. His palm and fingers were highly irritated and red, and scrubbed to the point that they oozed with blood in some areas. The makeshift bandage had stopped the flow for the time being, but he could see it was eager to continue unless he covered the wounds again. The skin on his fingertips almost looked torn, as though they had been mercilessly been clawing against a rough surface for days on end, which was probably much closer to the truth than he wanted to accept.

And now that he thought to check, Roy's fingernails were worn down and ragged with blood drying underneath. It was difficult to say if he was trying to scratch into the walls with his nails even when his fingers began to bleed, or if he cut up his hands specifically to make markings with blood, but he supposed such dismal thoughts didn't matter at this point.

Keeping his own hands steady was an arduous task as he unrolled the gauze and tightly wrapped it around Roy's right hand, hoping his fingers weren't broken. When he proceeded to replace the wrapping around his left hand, he discovered with no surprise that it was just as bad as the right. His body unwillingly trembled with every new injury he found as his mind buzzed uselessly with both anger and fear. Maes was unable to do much for the majority of it besides dab on some antibiotics.

That was, until his eyes fell Roy's right arm. The blood had stuck the fabric of his sleeve to his skin, masking the true severity of the wound. But as Maes carefully pulled back the tears, he could clearly make out what distinctly looked to be a large bite mark. It appeared that the injury had not been touched in several days, unlike Roy's hands, so the worst of the bleeding was thankfully over. The torn holes in his forearm had not healed, but they were attempting to. The scabbing hadn't gotten far thanks to the lack of treatment, but at least that meant it wasn't infected- yet.

Before finding this, he had given up on guessing the origins of each individual wound. But now a bite? Was he being locked up with wild animals? Surely Ed would have noticed if there were any clues in that room to assume that. If Roy really was alone in that room, then did they ever drag him out or temporarily throw a feral dog in there with him? And why?

Were they torturing him for information?

But for what reason?

God, the uncertainty was killing him.

For the millionth time that night, Meas desperately hoped that Roy would wake up soon as he continued to tend to the countless injuries.

By the time he believed he had covered everything, the colonel still had not moved a muscle, even when coated with antibiotics that would have had a veteran hissing in pain. He just continued to lay there as if he really was dead.

Exhausted and drained, Maes leaned his back on the armrest of the couch as he remained seated on the floor, neck turned to watch his friend. He knew not to expect any movement, but he still couldn't look away. After everything he had just done and gone through, his eyes could still not believe what he was looking at.
One of his bandaged hands hung off the side of the couch, almost as if he was inviting Maes to take it once again. Hesitant to touch the man when he looked so painfully fragile, he eventually grabbed hold of Roy's wrist and searched for a pulse. It was still faint, but he could feel the blood pumping through his veins. It was the confirmation he needed to release a great breath of air that he had not realized he was holding.

But even after confirming it, Maes couldn't bring himself to let go. He felt like a child who was starved of comfort. It was as if everything would fall apart if he dared to let go. It was silly, he told himself, but his grip refused to weaken.

He was terrified.

As much as Maes just wanted to be happy and enjoy this overwhelming relief, discovering Roy's survival had brought along many more concerns that now weighed heavily on his mind, but at least not as heavily as his death once did.

One of his few comforting thoughts was that he did not have to figure this all out alone. He would call Riza as soon as morning broke, Ed would return later the next night, they would eventually include Alphonse and the rest of the team, and of course, the help that Roy himself would surely provide as soon as he opened his eyes.

Until then, Maes only had to focus on ensuring that his friend could function properly.

He shifted his weight on the floor and lightly held Roy's beaten hand in both of his own, praying for some movement- something that said he was fighting to regain consciousness. Anything that would promise that it would get better.

But there was nothing.

Maes lowered the side of his head to the edge of the couch, leaning against it lethargically as his energy was sapped, dubious thoughts racing through his mind, injecting a mute terror into his heart. He couldn't help but think of how unprepared he was for this and was too trapped by the situation to resolve it.

The line he toed was far too thin for comfort.

If Roy didn't wake up soon or if one of his many gashes got infected, Maes had no idea what they would do. There were powerful people who would be looking for him as soon as they discovered he was missing, if they hadn't already. If Roy would be at risk, then he had to remain hidden. But he couldn't justify sacrificing his health or even his very life in order to do that.

Maes closed his eyes and exhaled slowly through his nose, hands unyielding around Roy's. He willed his brain to push these thoughts aside for the time being in a vain hope that he could find comfort in the pulse of his best friend, and finally get some rest.

As soon as the clock hit six in the morning, Maes had to restrain himself from immediately picking up the phone to call Riza. Surely even she would sleep in on a Sunday, especially with all that has happened.

Somehow, he managed to kill another two hours by staring at Roy, the empty fridge, and his own eyelids. When eight struck, he finally allowed himself to dial in her number.

No answer.
He impatiently waited another hour, feeling the effects of getting so little sleep plow into him at full force. The lieutenant colonel still knew that there was little hope of him getting anymore rest, especially now that he automatically felt concerned for Riza as well.

Nothing to worry about; she was just getting some extra sleep. Good for her.

A quarter past nine, he called again with no answer.

He was feeling genuinely worried now but lacking the power to do much about it. Before he could consider starting a full-blown search party, he had to remind himself that she was fine, and Roy was not. Whatever was keeping her away from her phone could not possibly be more alarming than the surprise that awaited him outside of his apartment building earlier that morning.

The idea of calling someone else to check in on her occurred to him, but at the same time, he was well aware that the recent events were probably getting to his head, causing him to overreact. He needed to calm down. Roy was still stable, but he couldn't shake the worry that the man's heart would stop beating the moment he took his eyes off of him.

So he willed himself to sit back down after pacing for an unknown amount of time, and he began to think about what to do next yet again.

"Idiot," Lust muttered as Envy ground his teeth together, glaring at the empty room.

"Shut up," he growled, mind churning to figure out how in the hell Mustang managed to escape. There was absolutely no way for anyone but himself to make it out of that sealed room, and yet that human was nowhere to be seen.

It took Envy longer than he would admit to realize what had happened. He passed by a few hours ago and figured Mustang was still too afraid of him to make a sound. He didn't have the time to antagonize him further, but later decided to go in just to make sure he was still alive, only to see that he was gone. Envy wasn't even able to admire the maddening scribbles that were etched into the walls with blood thanks to this setback. Otherwise, he would have loved to mock Mustang for whatever he deemed worthy to write down.

But instead, he had to go out and hunt that pathetic human down.

What an amazing waste of time. He would be sure to pay him back for this setback by doubling or maybe even tripling the agony he planned to cause.

First things first.

Ignoring Lust's judgmental glower, he stepped into the harshly lit cell as she stayed back with her arms folded. He approached the thin, drying puddle of blood that was left in the center, noticing a small object caked in the red liquid. Kneeling down, the homunculus picked it up and recognized it to be one of the handles to the dirty old sink, of all things. He glanced past it to confirm his suspicions, seeing that the sink was indeed missing a handle.

Well, that explained his penmanship, he thought as he glanced over to the bloodstained wall and the various words and names that were hastily written there. Based on Mustang's failure to draw proper transmutation circles, it was difficult to believe that alchemy was his method of escape. As much as Envy hated to admit it, the only other solution was that someone from the outside had let him out. Although there were no signs of a circle, the lock would have been nearly impossible to undo without it. However, there was an answer to that as well.
"How the hell did he get past the chimeras?" he grumbled to himself, unfortunately loudly enough for Lust to hear.

"Don't be dense; you know exactly how," she commented from behind, her voice vexingly calculated as she quietly blamed him for this. Because she was right; he did know how.

His only response was a baleful grumble from the back of his throat as he leered down at the handle before dropping it back into the blood.

The chimeras that guarded their elaborate tunnel system were primary congested near the center, closest to the middle of Central, and closest to Father. The crypt that he had sectioned off for his little pet projects were further towards the outer layer of tunnels, where there weren't nearly as many chimeras to keep outsiders out. Perhaps one or two of the closest animals noticed the intruders presence, but they didn't make enough of an uproar for Envy to notice at the time. He assumed that no one with any sense would force their way into the hidden entrance in the mausoleum. An oversight on his part, but Envy wasn't about to give Lust the satisfaction of hearing him admit it.

"You remember what I told you before?" Lust asked, though her voice lacked any questioning lilt as she broke through his thoughts. His scowl deepened. "Clean up the mess you've caused."

"Yeah, you don't have to remind me," he snapped before deciding to take a different approach. Envy stood up and looked over his shoulder, slapping on a confident smirk. "I have it taken care of. I think I already know who's to blame, and I'll be sure to let him know why it's a bad idea to get in our way."

The vengeful grin that occupied his visage widened when she turned away from him, as he immediately began to entertain the many different ways he could go about this. And if it was really that Fullmetal kid that had interfered as he assumed, then Envy was sure to have a wonderful time making them *both* suffer for the inconvenience.
Chapter 11

He felt himself gliding aimlessly through something murky that resisted his movement, and yet had no physical form. He was moving, he was sure of it, but had no hope of understanding where he was going, or even in which direction. Drowning came to mind, and Roy immediately thought to follow the bubbles. The understanding that he still could not see came a moment later, and without any sense of surprise, but rather a mute acceptance that reminded him of the weight he felt on his chest.

Awareness slid into Roy's mind fluidly and without him realizing as he floated in that empty space, until the throbbing pain began to sink in. It started out as a dull ache in the back of his mind, then steadily spread like wildfire through the body that he did not feel connected to. It was a familiar pain, but it took him a moment of uncomfortable peace to realize why something about it felt odd to him.

He wasn't supposed to be in pain anymore.

Wasn't that the point? It was supposed to end. It was all finally supposed to end!

And yet his skin burned and his bones cried out.

Was this Hell?

But somehow, that didn't feel right either. He couldn't differentiate life and death, or reality and dreams. Being dead would explain why he didn't feel the hard, cold ground that he had become so accustomed to beneath him, or taste the iron of his own blood that had long since stained his mouth. He instead felt like he was floating, but surely being dead wouldn't come with this much physical pain, or awareness for that matter. But if this was a dream, then how could he wake up? Did he even want to? If the abysmal conditions that he remembered were awaiting him as the sinking dread in his gut suggested, then the answer to that question was clear.

As if by habit, Roy weakly brought his hand up his mouth, hoping that the metallic taste of the blood that often dripped down his fingers would help him to solve this dilemma, but a soft cushion gently collided with his face instead of his own mangled skin. He flinched away from the unexpected texture, breath stuck in his throat. Mind reeling in confusion, Roy eye's shot open only for him to get hit with yet another sense of alarm with enough impact to lurch his stomach.

The space around him seemed as dark as he expected, but he could still make out many shapes within that simply did not belong- or rather, they belonged too well. The sight of what he almost dared to call furniture was such a drastic juxtaposition to the emptiness he was used to, but the layout he was beholding held a powerful sense of familiarity. But it made so little sense to him, it hurt to look at or even consider for more than half a second. The lines were blurred and unclear, as if they too couldn't decide if they existed or not. The nudge of discomfort he felt in the back of his eyes was another reminder that something- or maybe everything- was different, and he needed to understand why.

Despite the ache in his body and the spinning of his mind, Roy thoughtlessly moved to stand up, hoping that getting a better view would help him figure out the picture his mind was trying to paint for him. But as he shifted his weight, the sense of falling suddenly overtook him until his shoulder met with a hard surface and a sharp gasp fled when his head made contact. His body may had been stopped, but his mind kept falling, plummeting into a pit he could see no end to. These new, unexpected sensations after spending so long feeling nothing left him winded, and he remained on
the floor for a moment longer until the shock dulled into something more manageable.

As the spike of pain in his shoulder and forehead faded, he eventually cajoled his body to roll onto his back, grimacing as a pressure was momentarily put on his bruised shoulder.

He blinked- or thought he did- at he ceiling, which was suddenly much more visible than he remembered.

Was it possible that his failed attempt to die had kicked the part of his mind that handled hallucinations into overdrive? Was this some sort of twisted punishment for trying to escape? His brain had tried to trick him into seeing a wide verity of people, objects, animals- but now even his sense of touch was actively trying to deceive him, as well as smell. Which now that he thought about it, the scent that filled his nose with each inhale was so painfully reminiscent that it almost felt like a palpable thing that he wasn't sure if he wanted to push away, or desperately grasp for. He resorted to breathing through his mouth.

"Mustang?"

Roy didn't react to the voice of Fullmetal echoing somewhere further off, unfazed by his presence. He ignored it, instead deciding to focus on figuring out what was happening to him.

Was it possible that they put him in a new location just to confuse him? All he remembered was blissfully fading away into nothing for the first time since he was locked in that damn cell, only to wake here up against his will.

But maybe thinking that was exactly what they wanted. If that was the case, then he didn't want to give them the satisfaction of knowing he was falling for their trap. It was probably their fault that he was apparently still alive.

Unless, of course, this was really just his own personalized Hell, as Fullmetal had suggested some time back. That moment felt like ages ago, and yet his words stuck with him, ringing in Roy's ears. He could have been dead this entire time, encased in darkness, without even realizing. And this too, could have been another stage in his eternal suffering. That at least explained why his surroundings were startlingly similar to his living room.

"Mustang!" It was closer now- right behind him. In response, Roy muttered something incomprehensible that was supposed to inform the kid that he wanted him to stop talking, but sounded like nothing more than a meaningless grumble as he remained on the ground.

As if to get revenge for his silence, the comfortable darkness vanished with a single click and his groggy vision was replaced by an agonizingly stark flash of white that seared his eyes and yanked a strangled gasp out him as his arms flew up to his face to protect himself from the light. Roy's body immediately seized from the shock, paralyzed as the unbearable scalding of his eyes seeped into his very bones for a fraction of a second.

"TURN IT OFF!" he yelled, voice guttural and hoarse as he curled in on himself- anything to get away from the light.

"Wait- what?" Ed stammered, somehow not understanding that bright light equaled pain. "W-what's wrong?"

"TURN IT OFF!"

A few tense seconds went by where nothing happened. With his jaw tightened and arms locked around his head, Roy slowly lowered his guard until he was able to confirm that the damned light
had indeed been turned off. As soon as it was safe too, his arms fell unceremoniously back to his sides, one in which hit something plush besides him on the way down. He flinched from it and let out a deep breath, voicelessly cursing as he did so.

"... Mustang."

Roy opened his eyes and blinked out the red that still tainted his vision until it faded, taking in the many blurry objects that appeared to surround him, as well as catching a glance of the teenager's small, featureless figure in the corner of his eye. He felt the kid's gaze land heavily on him, but was unable to see those golden eyes in the dark room, as part of him wished that he could.

"What?" he asked flatly at last, figuring that ignoring the hallucination wasn't going to cut it this time. He knew there was no use in telling Ed or those who he was sure were listening in to keep the lights off. Getting angry at them did him little good, and usually ended with more cracks in his ribs.

"... What do you mean, what?!" Fullmetal exclaimed, voice pitching with unbridled panic. "You've been gone for- do you even realize that- aagh!" He cut himself off and dug his hands into his bangs, groaning exasperatedly.

The colonel didn't register anything he said as his own mind continued to wander, but he could at least sense the hysteria in his voice. Besides anger, that was the most emotion he had seen in one of these visions so far. Curious, Roy craned his aching neck to the side to watch the teenager, who he could just barely make out to be almost trembling on the other side of one of the blurry shapes that resembled a small table.

Edward lowered his arms and returned Roy's stare, his eyes far more intense than his own, despite him being unable to clearly see it. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"What's wrong with me?" Roy echoed distantly, followed by a pitiable chuckle that cracked as his dry throat objected. "I wish I knew," he finished without thought, failing to realize that any of this was said aloud.

As if the figments of his own imagination actually wanted to know what was wrong with him, or even cared. It was almost funny. Enough so that he thought he heard himself laugh, but wasn't too sure if that voice was truly his own, or just his mind laughing at his expense.

And of course, it just had to be Edward of all people that he saw appear before him, mocking him with these questions, rubbing in his failure like salt in a wound. It was he who pinned him down in that alley, and he who invaded that one moment of solace he created for himself, bringing a swift end to it by sending his trusted team away. He who again used him like a chair and almost broke his nose on the ground, causing all sorts of other injuries, real or not. And now he was trying to act concerned.

It was if the hallucination just suddenly decided to begin acting like a human being. Roy lacked the energy to point out this observation, but he at least wouldn't let himself be confused by this more empathetic version of Edward.

The kid did not react to his response for several long seconds in favor of just staring through the darkness at him. The dark silhouette stood rigidly, causing him to question if he was still there at all, until he caught the sight of Ed's shoulders slackening with a forced exhale.

"What happened?"

Well that was vague. Not only was it incredibly unhelpful, but it only succeeded to further confuse
the colonel. Over the past few weeks or months or whatever it was, Edward seemed to have
gathered much pleasure from flaunting Roy's lack of answers over his head. And now he sounded
as if only Roy could answer the heaviest question of them all.

Maybe that was the point, since it didn't make any sense. This was just a new way to taunt him,
surely.

"I don't know what you mean," he admitted sourly, questioning why he even gave into the kid's
ploy.

Apparently unsatisfied by his response, Edward took a slow, careful step forward. Roy, unable to
see how blind the blond was in the dark, abruptly inched away and drew his legs up to himself,
holding his less injured arm above his head in defense of the strike he had learned to expect,
despite the spears of pain that shot through his torso from his screaming rib cage and the crushing
wave of nausea that plowed over him from the sudden movement.

Even as nothing happened for several painfully long seconds, his muscles remained taut. When he
sensed Edward take another step closer, he tensed further and his breathing became uneven as his
lungs struggled to keep up with the rate in which his heart was pumping.

"Whoa- hey, calm down," the kid suggested carefully, skillfully lacing that false concern into his
voice.

"Stay away," he muttered, not so much as a warning, but rather a plea. He hated the way his
pathetic tone tasted on his dry tongue, but saw no other way around it. What did it matter, anyway?
A figment of his own imagination was not going to judge him any more than he already judged
himself.

"Y- you gotta tell me what's wrong so I can help," Edward supplied slowly. Roy could just barely
make out the way he reached his metal arm forward as if he wanted to close the gap between them,
yet being held back by hesitation.

"You want to help?" he questioned sardonically, unsure where the spike of rage came from, yet
long since becoming accustomed to his own mercurial mood. "After all you've done?"

As blurry and disconnected as the vast majority of his memories were, he could at least recall when
he was given the brief moment of bliss thanks to the visions of his team continuing their antics in
his office as they always had before. For a short moment, everything was back to how it should
have been, and he was happy. But that moment crumbled in an instant when Edward stomped it,
alerting them- his friends- that he was dead, and driving them all away.

"W-what?" The kid stuttered in response, reeling away from the colonel slightly in the dark.

"Just go away," he hissed as he so often did at this damnable hallucinations, hoping that one day,
they'd finally take his advice.

Still not willing to bet that he wouldn't be rewarded with a kick to the gut, Roy tried to push himself
further away in hopes of finding that one corner in the room that he had deemed comfortable and as
safe as it could get, ignoring the aches and pains in his body to the best of his ability. But as his
hands made contact with the floor, he paused, staring vacantly past the kid as he may or may not
have said something.

He couldn't feel the ground.

He had noticed this odd sensation earlier, but Edward had successfully distracted him from it for a
mere few seconds. But now that it occurred to him again, there was nothing that could pull his mind away from this; his hands never met with cold, smooth ground, and instead felt like he was hitting a pillow. Except he couldn't get rid of it, no matter what he tried to touch.

"What- what is this?" he muttered to the air, holding his hands out in front of himself as if he could actually see anything more than a black blob. "Why can't I..." he trailed off, certainly not seeking any answers from the single spectator.

Roy had something wrapped around his hands.

*Why*!!

Did they really try to take away the single thing that could calm him by the slightest degree? His only method to confirm anything had been muffled by a fabric bind that he couldn't get off. While, yes, the sense of touch had been failing him lately, it was still something. With confirmation, came peace of mind. Without it, he had nothing.

His sight gave him nothing but vague, dark shapes, his hearing was overwhelming at best, smell only managed to repulse him at most times, but his sense of touch could relieve him for the briefest of moments, but it was enough to make him reliant on it.

Clawing on the walls until is fingers bled, gnawing on his own nails, grasping at the fabric of his clothing just to feel something different- even that was taken away from him now?!

No, he refused to let them take this too. If they wanted him to feel nothing at all this badly, then he wished they would just kill him already.

Of course, that was assuming he wasn't already dead, in which case he didn't want to think about it.

Almost forgetting that the young alchemist was still watching through the dark, Roy pawed at his own hands, hoping to get some traction with the matted binds that tied his fingers stiffly together. But when that failed, he brought them up to his mouth and bit down on the fabric and yanked back, feeling the strips tighten around parts of his hands, and loosen in others.

"Hey, what are you doing!? Stop that!"

He pushed himself further away from the source of the voice as a colorful curse was muffled through his teeth.

The colonel felt a premature wave of relief when he made out the sound of hasty footfalls distancing away from him. But before he could make more progress on pulling the wraps off of his aching hands, a dim light shined further away. Despite its lackluster, the light still managed to blind him before he could register that it was coming from a hall that he had not recognized the existence of. He shut his eyes tightly, internally conflicting between continuing his fight to free his hands, or moving his arms up to protect his eyes. The head-throbbing red gleam that shined through his eyelids eventually won him over as he shifted his arms to cross over his face, hunched over as his back made contact with something solid.

Long before he had any hope of recovering, two mismatched hands latched themselves around his wrists, not attempting to remove them from the protective position, but not allowing him to fight back either.

*Oh god, please no.*

*Too close- he was way too close.*
Flashbacks to the last time he was restrained skipped through his mind, causing his old injuries to tingle at the memory. His arms tensed against the hands, instinctively wanting to protect his core. Fighting back would mean he would have to sacrifice his defenses.

"Hey- Mustang, calm down!" the kid begged as if he were trying to speak to a wild animal or a hysterical child.

*Block it out*, his scrambling brain supplied through the chaos that rung in his ears, causing the kid's words to become fuzzy and distorted. *Just block it all out, and it will end.*

His arms became stiff- no longer fighting the sturdy grasp, but far from giving into it. His breathing hitched and caught in his throat until it stopped completely, inwardly pleading for the threat to leave him alone.

And just as his mind had promised him, it did. Just as an animal trying to play dead, he remained still even when the two hands, one frightfully colder than the other, released their hold and he sensed the source back up. He kept his arms above his head, but lowered them until he had formed a shell around him with his limbs.

Roy did not move after that, unable to notice the horror on the kid's face as he quietly stepped out of the room.

"Hughes residence," a tired yet restless voice responded through the phone.

"Hey."

"Ed? What's going on?" the lieutenant colonel asked quickly, shaking any weariness from the late hour away in an instant.

"It's Mustang. He's... awake."

"He-" Hughes cut himself off, stunned as the information sunk in. But not wanting him to get his hopes up too high, Edward continued.

"Yeah, but there's something- something's not right with him," he breathed reluctantly, his chest aching as the words were forced out. He had dialed in the number hoping to keep the call as succinct as possible, but he was clearly overestimating himself.

Sensing the incoming question, he continued heedlessly. "I don't think he realizes that he's not under the cemetery anymore, and he freaked out when I turned the light on."

Mustang's coarse, ravaging words echoed in his mind, stinging with every loop. The hateful, raging accusation in his tone struck him to the core; it was a miracle he wasn't still frozen to the spot.

*You want to help?*

*After all you've done?*

*Just go away!*

And to think: for a moment, he was too preoccupied with the euphoria of finding the supposed dead man to even think about *why* he was in that situation. Mustang had plenty of time to think about it; plenty of time to mull over their last interaction and know that his suffering over the past few weeks was his fault. How had he not considered it earlier? Of course he would be furious! Of
course he wouldn't want Ed anywhere near him.

He was in no position to blame him for that.

And because of that, he couldn't bring himself to mention the older alchemist's outburst to the man's best friend. What was he supposed to say? *Oh yeah, and Mustang hates me because it's my fault he can't even look at a lamp without keeling over.*

"I see," Hughes had replied stiffly at last. It took Edward a moment to realize he hadn't just read his mind. The older man cleared his throat. "Do you think that- I mean, is he..."

Edward held his tongue instead of snapping at the man to just spit it out.

"The things you saw written on the walls in that room-" He trailed off again, but Edward got the gist of what he was trying to get at.

After seeing how Mustang reacted to just about everything, those manic scrawls made perfect sense. But again, the blond was at a loss of what to say in response. He did not want to tell Hughes that those insane scribbles perfectly portrayed how insane the colonel was acting.

"When's the soonest you can get down here?" he asked softly, avoiding the topic altogether as he ducked his head out from the kitchen and peered into the dark living room, where Mustang was still huddled against one of the walls. "Maybe you'll have better luck getting across to him."

Hughes was silent for a moment, no doubt catching how Ed did not offer a response to his concern. "... I'll head out now."

"Okay," he murmured, just barely keeping himself from pathetically begging the man to hurry.

He lowered the handset back down as the call ended and let out an exhale that sounded far too old for his age. He glanced around the corner to the living room again, blinking as his eyes adjusted to the dark in order to confirm that the man was indeed still there.

When he started to mindlessly bite at the bandages around his hands, Ed immediately knew he would have no hope of stopping him in the dark without earning a few bruises in the process. If Mustang had spent the past few weeks in the dark as he had expected, he had an advantage when it came to fighting in the dark, having plenty of time to get adjusted to it.

Edward had scarified the time required to run down the hall and into the kitchen to flip on a light, hoping it still wouldn't be too much for the colonel to handle as he charged back into the room. Able to make out just enough to stop him from hurting his hands thanks to the distant light, Edward was thankfully able to keep him from attempting the same thing again, but that fact meant paltry to him when he saw how broken the man now looked.

He couldn't see Mustang's eyes, but he knew with a chilling certainty that they would have looked distant and frightened if he had.

To make matters worse, it looked like they would need to readjust the bandages, which he expected to be nearly impossible now that the man was no longer comatose.

Edward feared to wonder what had happened to his superior officer to make him like this, but the stomach-churning knowledge that he was to ultimately to blame for it made him want to block it all out. Of course, that was the last thing he could do at the moment. He told himself that remaining here would somehow make up for his idiotic mistake.
Maes gripped the steering wheel like his life depended on it, knuckles fading into white. Snakes were viciously tumbling in his stomach and his limbs refused to be still for so much as a second. His brain was no less active, spinning in circles until he felt nauseous to the point that he considered pulling over.

But no, prolonging it would only make matters worse.

He had hoped the discovery that Roy was actually alive would be enough to allow him some rest, but he was too optimistic for his own good. Maes had been dreading a call from Edward for a plethora of reasons, and it was safe to say that his heart nearly jumped out of his throat when it finally happened.

He was expecting to hear that Roy's heart had stopped beating, but it was the opposite: he was awake.

Of course, Edward wouldn't allow him to enjoy the revelation before ripping the rug out from under him.

He said Roy didn't realize he had been rescued; thought that he was still trapped in that dark, damnable place, all alone. This catapulted Maes' mind into terrifying tangents, forcing him to consider possibilities that made him feel sick to his stomach.

For a brief, admirable moment, he at least tried not to think about it as he drove down the slippery road, lit only by passing street lamps as the thin sliver that was the moon had still been obscured by a sheet of clouds. The rain from the night before continued off and on until earlier that evening, giving the fallen water no time to dry. The last thing Maes needed now was to crash his car because he got too riled up to pay attention to the light traffic.

His attempts to keep his mind clear lasted for a good three seconds before he thought back to the painted walls Ed had described seeing, in addition to the news that had been dropped on him through the phone just minutes ago. And what were the chances that he had experienced hypovolemic shock from the blood loss? Not to mention that it was entirely possible that Roy had been trapped in the dark during the entirety of his incarceration.

Maes had not done any research on the subject, but he was positive that light deprivation could do heavy damages to a person's mental state. He heard that similar tactics were used for interrogation in multiple countries, including his own. He did not want to know how effective they were. It was never a pleasant thought, but such things had little to do with his field, so the topic scarcely reached him. But now that such an inhumane act had happened to his best friend...

He swallowed thickly and forced his mind to go blank for the remainder of the drive.

By the time Maes had pulled up alongside the house, he had kept himself from hyperventilating through sheer force of will as he convinced his body to exit the car. The dark clouds were making their departure, drifting past the moon and casting a dim light over the house. He looked at the outer wall as his hands automatically locked the car, wondering if a raging storm awaited him inside. He currently stood at the heart of a hurricane, and was afraid to step out into the chaos that was surely beyond it.

But he had to. Roy needed him to.

Maes forced any and all hesitation out with a shake of his head and marched up to the front door, nearly headbutting the surface when it didn't open as quickly as he wanted it to. But as the door
swung open, he froze and surveyed the area, unsure what to look for in the dark as he heard Ed's voice in the back of his head, reminding him that Roy didn't want the lights on.

He heard feet trailing down the hall as he slowly closed the door, willing his hands to stay as stable as possible.

"About time," the teenager breathed as he appeared from behind a corner. Maes decided not to be taken back by his tone, positive that his weary comment wasn't derived purely at him.

"Where is he?" Maes asked needlessly as he stepped further into the house, mind already buzzing with possible locations.

"Hold on." Edward stepped in front of his path, causing him to pause and look down at the kid-actually look at him since he entered. His features were highlighted by the dim gray light that drifted weakly through the blinds next to the door, and by the warm kitchen light that trickled in behind him. He appeared strained with his brow furrowed, eyes staring back at him with a fearful uncertainty pooling within, betraying the steeled expression he tried to muster. He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came as hesitation flashed across his face. He looked behind his shoulder towards the living room for a moment, then back to Maes. "He hasn't moved since I called. He- I don't know how he'll react to seeing you."

Maes was silent, biting at the inside of his lip as he tossed the words around in his head, certain there was more Ed wanted to say but couldn't form the thought. He wanted to say something reassuring and promise that he could fix everything, but the sentiment refused to vocalize itself. Instead, all he could manage to respond with was to repeat himself, failing to fend of the grim tone that laced itself into his voice. "Where is he?"

He didn't need to ask, as he could already assume Roy was in the living room, but there was nothing else to be said.

Edward pursed his lip and turned away, quietly stepping into the next room with Maes following him close behind. As soon as his view expanded into the area, Edward stopped moving, his eyes locked on the shadow in the far corner. Maes followed his gaze, noticing the curled figure slumped there in the dark after a moment of squinting.

Roy.

He had been acting odd, but the very fact that he was no longer laying motionless on the couch sent a thrilling jolt through Maes' core, followed by a wave of relief. However, all of this was washed to the side when he found himself approaching his friend, only to notice that he was shivering.

He had given Roy a clean set of clothes the day before and it wasn't particularly cold that night, but his arms were wrapped so tightly around himself that they shook, giving Maes a good view of his bandaged hand and forearm. His knees were pulled up protectively, and his face was completely obscured by the barrier of limbs.

His feet moved on their own, bringing him closer and closer to the man as his brain was fogged by static, thoughts flying through too quickly to understand. He was almost nauseated and his balance wavered with every other step, fear ravaging his motor skills. Edward gave him little to hope for based on his latest report, but he dreaded to discover that Roy's state could possibly be far worse than he imagined.

What if he didn't respond at all? What if he was locked in his own dark, depressing world, and would remain like that forever? Had be already been pushed over the edge? Was it too late?
These dismal thoughts muted once he found himself kneeling in front of his friend, blinking as his eyes still adjusted to the dark. He could only make out the more noticeable details, such as the greasy mess that was his black hair, and the bandages that had been pulled on, tightly trapping his fingers, yet draping down like ribbons at the same time.

He tried to regain some moisture to his tongue, swallowing thickly before opening his mouth to say something. He hesitated for a moment and rose a hand up towards the alchemist's shoulder, not yet daring to make contact.

"... Roy?"

The other man's shoulders tensed slightly. Or did he just imagine the subtle movement?

"Hey," he tried again softly, finally managing the willpower to lower his palm onto his friend's stiff shoulder, anxiously noticing the flinch in response. "Come on, buddy; it's just me," he continued, forcing his voice to sound somewhat controlled despite the battling knots in his stomach.

Roy began to rise his head and Maes halted all breathing, afraid that the slightest movement would somehow push him back into his shell. With bangs crossing in front of his eyes, the man looked up at him- or would have, if his eyes were open. But even without seeing his black eyes, Maes could easily make out the deeply troubled conglomeration of emotion that tainted his expression.

Nothing that he saw belonged there.

His eyebrows were tilted with uncertainty and mouth curved in a frown that had been permanently etched into his face. His eyelids flickered with movement and there was a tense air that surrounded him, like a cat prepared to flee at any given moment.

All of it was so starkly un-Roy-like. But Maes had no choice but to continue on as if the image had not been ingrained into his mind like a scar. Rather, he forced a thin smile onto his face, more for himself than anyone else. He only wanted to appreciate that Roy was alive and awake, but the spiraling sense of dread made it rather difficult.

When he opened his mouth to say something more, though he didn't know what, Roy's expression scrunched faintly, fighting against an internal struggle. His eyelids shut tighter, then slid open, his eyes shining through thin slits for only a moment before closing again with a grimace.

The light from down the hall was at Maes' back. While dim, it was apparently still enough to harm Roy's new sensitivity. But nothing else could be done about it at the moment. They would need to readjust him to light somehow, even if it hurt.

You can do it, he wanted to say, but held his tongue as he intently watched the man try again.

Multiple quick, short blinks later, Roy managed to hold his eyes open, shying away from the distant light. Maes shifted an inch to the side, hopefully shielding him despite his better judgment. Roy gave no indication that he noticed the gesture, but when his fragile gaze landed on Maes' face, the lieutenant colonel felt his chest tighten and the hand that remained on Roy's shoulder mindlessly tensed.

Roy looked at him, breaking the contact with a flurry of blinks, only to continue his stare. An uncertain, almost inscrutable expression slid onto his visage, and mixed in with it was glance of hope. It sucked the air out of Maes' lungs as he was again reminded of the harsh reality of the situation. If everything was as it seemed, then that meant Roy had been trapped, alone, in that dark bloody room for weeks on end. Anyone would have lost all hope long ago. But something dark and
painful in his eyes told Maes that he was afraid of it. There was a reluctance there, fearful that the ounce of optimism would only get crushed. A war was raging in those eyes, trampling Maes' heart in the crossfire.

Roy fought against believing what he was seeing, yet wanted to so badly.

"... M-maes?" he whispered, his voice empty and shallow.

If there was any air remaining in his lungs, it would have been punched out of him. He had long since accepted that he would never hear that baritone voice ever again. But in that moment, Roy's voice, as broken as it was, still managed to sound like music to his ears.

"That's right," he choked out, ignoring the warm tears that swelled in his eyes. "You're safe now, Roy."

The alchemist only continued the wordless stare, something flashing across his face for a fraction of a second that suggested he didn't understand the language that was just spoken. But whatever that was, it was quickly covered up by a swarm of denial and sadness and again, hope.

Roy's hands curled into fists as they remained crossed in front of him and he shut his eyes tightly as if he was trying to block something out. But only a moment passed before he blearily forced them open again, albeit reluctantly, landing on Maes once more. He almost looked surprised to see that he was still there.

"Safe," he echoed with a slight lilt in his tone, although not enough to make it a question. It was as if Roy didn't know whether to question the word, or agree with it.

"Safe." Maes, unable to say anything particularly intellectual, could only repeat it, hoping to solidify the concept in his friend's damaged mind. But a second after the syllable left his lips, Roy's shoulder slid out from his grasp. He stiffened from the sudden movement, caught completely off guard when Roy lunged forward and wrapped his arms around his back, locking Maes in one of the tightest embraces he had ever experienced.

Roy clung on as if he were his only life-link, somehow managing to curl his fists around the fabric of Maes' shirt despite his fingers being tightly bandaged. The alchemist pressed his face into his shoulder as a choked sob broke through his tense jaw.

Realization took a moment to sink through his weary mind, but he returned the tight hug as soon as it did, feeling the weight of these past two days- no, these past few weeks come crashing down at once.

His heart jumped at the contact, overjoyed that his friend at least recognized him in light of the previous fears that swarmed his mind, but something cold and withering settled in his gut at the same time. He felt it devour any trace of joy he briefly felt, replacing it with the foreboding understanding that this was wrong.

Roy was wrong.

Nothing should have been able to take such a proud, confident man off of his self-built pedestal and turn him into the sobbing, broken mess that held onto Maes like a child. He had never seen Roy like this, even after the war.

After returning from Ishval, Roy was trapped in a pit of self-loathing, being eaten alive by his own guilt. He was miserable because he believed he didn't deserve to live or be happy.
But the man that clung to him now gave off the impression that he didn't want to live. Just looking at how he was now and feeling the agony in his every breath could convince one that his existence was too painful to find any happiness within living.

And *that* was the most terrifying part of it.

He could only imagine what Roy had been experiencing these past few weeks, but his reaction to seeing him had erasing any reason to try. For a moment, he felt as if he could somehow share in that suffering and lighten the load. He would do so in a heartbeat if it was possible.

Despite how wrong and unnatural it was, Maes wanted nothing more than to remain there. At least here, Roy was safe. At least he could no longer doubt that this entire thing had been a dream when the man he thought was dead was sitting right in front of him.

But more importantly, he knew Roy's suffering could now end. He was brought above ground and could see the sun rise again, if only he could keep his eyes open long enough.

Roy's vice grip on his shirt lightened marginally as if he had accepted that Maes wasn't going to disappear at any given moment and he allowed a long, quivering exhale to sound. "I can't keep doing this," he muttered, voice not much more than a whisper as Maes felt tremors run down the man's back.

"It's over now. You're safe."

He laughed bitterly, shaking his head in Maes' shoulder. "You're wrong," he replied sullenly with a pitiable smile in his tone.

Maes paused at his response and he felt his own bloodstream run cold, sensing far too much trepidation than he was prepared to acknowledge"... What do you mean?"

Roy only laughed into his shirt. The same despairingly tragic, self-loathing laugh as before. It was far too similar to how Roy would laugh at himself as he called himself pathetic or a murderer after the war. The way he got when he was at his lowest point. It was a chilling memory- one that he never wanted to be reminded of again. "I'm... I'm tired, Maes."

The way Roy spoke- the disregard for his concern, the disregard for life itself shot a mercilessly cold rod down his spine. He was silenced as he was hit with the realization that this had likely been Roy's mindset for days or weeks or as long as he had been down there. Of course he was tired from going through hell, but Maes couldn't let him shut his eyes again.

"No, Roy- listen to me," he insisted, tightening his grip around the man's shoulders as if that single gesture could banish every fear that screamed in his head. "It's going to be alright, okay? I promise you, I will make everything better. J-just hang on. Let me fix this." He stuttered and tripped over his own words, repeating the same shaken promises for both his sake as well as Roy's. Fear for his friend ripped and shredded his insides, leaving him too pained to think about his own words as they spilled out as if a dam had broke. Wet streaks had fallen down his face, certain that Roy's misery had only spread to him like a virus.

Roy said nothing until Maes' intent pleas had slowly shifted into a low, pathetic mummer, then to silence when he ran out of breath. The alchemist then slackened his shoulders, his grip loosening further as he laid his forehead on Maes' shoulder, obscuring his eyes.

"Hang on? Hang onto what?" he muttered darkly. "I- I already tried to let go, but they won't let me. What else is there?"
Maes was unsure if he wanted to question the statement that made painfully little sense to him. They? Who were they? Who was down there with him? And more importantly, what did they do to suck the life out of him? But as he say there with his mouth gaped open, mind churning to find the right words, his friend put a halt to the turning cogs and further expanded the void that had grown in his chest.

"I-" another miserable chuckle escaped his chapped lips. "I wish you were actually here."

Maes had figured Roy's train of thought would be jumping from place to place throughout the conversation, but he had been incredibly ill-prepared for the deeply reluctant glimmer of understanding that almost winded him on impact.

It took him far too long to regain any semblance of his voice, but Roy didn't seem to mind the silence for as long as it lasted, as if he was completely oblivious to the horror that slid onto Maes' visage. "Wh- what are you talking about?" he asked as if he wanted to follow up with a joke or a light jab, trying to hide how sick he felt. "I am here. I-" he trailed off, failing to find any other way to get through to him.

"Yeah, it feels like it," he muttered, something akin to warmth slipping into his voice for a split second. "But just like everyone else, you'll leave soon enough."

"What? No! Roy- no, I'm not going anywhere."

A faint, halfhearted scoff shook Roy's shoulders and reverberated down his back. "We'll see."

There was a sense of familiarity in his tone just then- the knowing confidence that Roy so often projected when he knew he was right. It would have been refreshing to see proof that Roy was still in there, underneath the shattered pieces, if only he was talking about anything besides Maes leaving him alone again. Anything besides Maes being a hallucination. He didn't need Roy to spell it out to figure out that was what he meant. Of course he would have only had hallucinations as company during his incarceration.

Maes felt incredibly out of his league as the weight of the situation built with every waking breath Roy took. He didn't know how to handle this, or how to progress from here on now that he knew what was on the line. But he could at least comfort himself with the one thing he was certain of: he would force the man to accept that the worst was behind him, and he would pull him out of the darkness even if he had to drag him kicking and screaming.

Maes could respond to Roy's comment only by tightening the hug, allowing the miserable tears to escape his eyes and soak into his shirt. He failed to notice when Edward stepped out of the room, leaving the two alone.
Chapter 12

Mustang and Hughes remained in the dark living room until morning hit, silent for the majority of the excruciatingly long hours as they passed. Few words were exchanged even after the hysterical colonel had calmed down, and a sense that nearly resembled normalcy settled over the house for a brief moment.

By the time Edward could bring himself to peek back into the room, Mustang was still sitting in the far corner with his arms wrapped around his bowed head, and Hughes right next to him, looking almost equally as haunted. The lieutenant colonel had tried to get the man to speak up, even daring to ask him about the events that lead to this, but he retrieved only terse, vague responses at best when it wasn't things that didn't make sense to either witness. It was safe to say that they made little progress that night, with the most information being that he believed to be hallucinating everything around him.

The biggest accomplishment to occur in that time was when Hughes got Mustang to drink some water. He brought him a glass and seemed prepared to face some resistance, but the colonel responded with a confused silence, then carefully accepted the tall glass. He appeared hesitant, as if he didn't believe what he was holding, but began to chug the drink down after he deemed it safe with a small sip. It was like a flip had been switched as soon as he realized what he was staring back at him, and the subdued comportment disappeared for a moment. Mustang acted as if he hadn't had anything to drink in days, which Edward wasn't willing to doubt, and hardly noticed when half of the glass dripped down his chin as he acted as if the water would soon be snatched away. Hughes had to keep him from choking on it.

It was the first comforting reaction to see from the man all night, even though he gave off the impression that he believed that cup of water to be the only real thing in that room.

From what Ed gathered, Mustang had grown even more cynical and pessimistic over the past few weeks, just when he thought it was impossible. Not for a second did he give any indication that it was feasibly possible that he was truly sitting in his own house. Nor did he entertain the idea that either Hughes or Edward were real human beings, despite the physical contact attempted by the former. One would think that touch would be enough to jolt someone out of their imagination, especially given how important that particular sense seemed to the man when he realized his hands had been bandaged.

Instead of doing the opposite, Mustang's awakening had only brought more questions.

But even so, Edward was glad, he reminded himself. It was amazing that the man was not only alive, but conscious after going through who-knows-what. He tried to insist this whenever dubious thoughts would distract him, doing whatever he could to focus on what was really important.

Mustang was not in his right mind. Whatever he experienced had effected him more than anyone would like to admit.

And it was Edward's fault.

Some part of him was relieved that the colonel had realized that; that he wasn't afraid to expose the blame just because it was Ed who pulled his body out of that hell hole. He deserved it, and now he had to do whatever he could to make it right.

Even when it hurt.
Even when the vehement accusations rung true in his ears.

Even when the distrust on Mustang's face burned into his eyelids every time he closed his eyes.

Ed deserved the suffocating guilt that tied another knot in his stomach with every minute he spent in that house. And it looked like he would be spending a lot of time there, especially when Hughes reminded him the next morning that he would have to go to work, after none of them got any sleep to speak of.

Edward was upset, but Mustang nearly lost his mind.

Hughes knelt down besides his friend, who had his eyes shut to avoid the sunrise that heedlessly drifted in through the blinds. Hughes told him he had to leave, but he promised he would return. Mustang, unbothered by the lack of sight, didn't seem to be effected at first, as if he expected as much to happen. There was almost something grimly smug in his face. That is, until Hughes reluctantly stood up and crept closer to the front door, looking back for longer than he should have.

Edward was watching from the other side of the room when it happened. The colonel's face was consistently accepting and downcast, in what seemed to be his default, slouching against the wall and making no attempt to hide how tired he was. But as Hughes reached the door and muttered a farewell, Mustang snapped to attention, a sudden panic overtaking his expression. His eyes shot open before closing again, but doing nothing to hide to alarm that remained there. It was as though he didn't realize Hughes was leaving despite the warning until it was happening.

"W-wait-" he had gasped, shifting onto is knees. "Wait, Maes- you said you wouldn't leave. You- wait, please-"

Edward froze, only managing to stiffly glance back at the lieutenant colonel as he stood rigidly by the door, hand halfway up to the doorknob. The look of reluctance slid into one of distress almost immediately and he was silent for several long seconds.

"...Maes?" he tried again in an uncharacteristic whisper, eyes flickering open for a fraction of a second, not long enough to confirm his presence.

"I-" Hughes forced out simply for Mustang's sake, his jaw hanging open as he fought to find the words. "I'm just going to work, Roy. I'll be back later tonight. I need to tell your team that you're here," he continued as a wry smile tilted his mouth and a pathetic attempt to sound happier than he was put a lilt to his voice, doing little to hide his anguish even though the man wasn't looking. "I bet they'd like to see you."

Mustang did not respond. He just continued to face the other man's general direction, expression lost and distressed, thoughts likely wandering in his own little world.

"... Roy, I need to go..."

"No!" he exclaimed suddenly, shaking himself out of the mild trance. "No, please- you can't-" On shaking legs, he slowly pulled himself to his feet, bandaged hands held to the sides for balance. He took a quivering step forward, but his shin collided into the nearby coffee table before he could get very far.

As Mustang cursed through a pained groan, Hughes appeared by his side in a matter of seconds before Edward could so much as register what had happened. He hastily guided him over to the couch, but as soon as Mustang sat down, any and all sign of pain vanished and was replaced by a perplexed expression instead. He traced his bandaged hands across the cushions and a scowl
flashed over his face, efficiently distracted.

Hughes watched him for a moment in concern, then glanced up at Edward. The blond just shrugged, certain that he failed to look as calm as he wished he was.

"Roy?" the lieutenant colonel asked slowly. "Are you alright?"

Mustang didn't respond at first, almost if he hadn't heard. Then he let out a sharp, terse laugh that lacked any humor or warmth, sounding empty and spiteful. "No," he muttered, something in his coarse voice suggesting it wasn't a question worth asking.

Edward felt a cold pit reappear in his stomach as he watched further by the door, not for the first time that morning.

Colonel Roy Mustang did not just admit when he wasn't okay. He wasn't supposed to allow someone like Ed to witness any signs of weakness whatsoever.

Again, Ed was hit with the desire to leave the room. He wanted to turn away and ignore everything that was wrong about this situation, pretend it wasn't happening.

But that would be the cowards way out.

As Hughes fought to find something to say, Mustang wearily rubbed his bandaged hands at his eyes, a glance of something that looked like irritation or maybe even disgust appearing for a brief moment. If Ed had to guess, he was scowling at the reminder that his hands were still restricted against his misguided will.

"... It'll only be for a few hours," Hughes continued slowly, equally as startled by Mustang's painfully honest response.

"Not again," the colonel murmured, hands still covering his face.

"Not again?" Hughes echoed, confusion chasing some of the hesitance away. "What do you mean?"

"If you leave again-" Mustang breathed, some undertone emotion weakening his voice. "- then I- I don't know what they'll do. They'll come back. And I can't stop it. I can't do anything."

Again, Hughes glanced over to the blond, but there was nothing he could offer him besides another useless shrug.

"No one is coming after you, Roy. We'll make sure of it. And besides, you won't be alone; Ed will be here."

Mustang stiffened, his restricted fingers curling around his own bangs, expression barely visible and far from readable.

"Ed... D-don't- Maes, don't leave me with him."

The lieutenant colonel reeled back as though he was physically struck with shock. Meanwhile, Edward felt like someone had punched him in the gut.

"What? It's going to be fine, Roy. Ed's not going to do anything," he tried, giving the blond a curious and almost apologetic glance.

"No, it's not," he replied quietly, voice shifting into one of a desperate plea. "If I'm alone with him,
"Roy, you're being ridiculous. Nothing is going to happen. And I promise if anything goes wrong, I'll rush back. Okay?"

Mustang didn't respond

"I'm going to leave, alright?" he asked, slowly straightening up and speaking in a tone one would use against a wild dog. "I'll be back soon. Promise."

Again, no response. Mustang only lowered his head and let out a long, relenting sigh.

Hughes tried to get a response out of him, but the time he allowed himself to run back to his house to grab a clean uniform was only being wasted.

Edward eventually chimed in, ensuring him that everything would be fine even as he doubted his own words.

But it did the trick, because Hughes left soon afterwards, leaving Ed and Mustang alone in the dusty house. The older alchemist remained on the couch, looking slightly uncomfortable but unwilling to gather up the energy required to move. Edward stood in the archway, staring blankly like a confused fish.

Hughes gave him a list of things he needed to do and watch out for while the man was away, but Edward was far from eager to complete any of them. He had to make sure the colonel ate something and ensure him from pulling at the bandages, possibly needing to redo some of them if anything were to happen; he felt like a damn babysitter.

But time ticked on, and nothing got done. He just stood to the side, staring out into space as he pondered how awkward and uncomfortable he felt, and how he didn't want to be there. That was selfish thinking, he told himself as he curled his hands into fists and bit at his cheek.

Don't leave me with him.

It wasn't fair. Such a reaction was only natural, he reasoned. But then why did hearing it tear a hole in his chest? Why couldn't he just accept it and move on?

Stop complaining, a baleful voice reprimanded. Just do your job and help him!

Somehow.

Edward probably remained there for a good five minutes at least before persuading himself to step over to the couch.

"Er- hey Mustang," he tried, attempting to sound as normal as possible despite the headache that suddenly formed. The man didn't respond, but he somehow got the impression that he was indeed heard. "Hey. You need to eat something... Are you hungry?"

This was ridiculous.

It shouldn't be this way.

Mustang's shoulders quivered in what Ed eventually figured out to be a small, broken laugh. Judging by how he drank the water, he was willing to bet that the older alchemist was indeed able to eat, but almost sounded ashamed of it. Or like he wished Edward hadn't mentioned food in the
first place.

As much as he hated to think about it, Mustang was likely starving while stuck under the cemetery. He knew better than to stuff as much food as possible into him. So then, what to give him?

"Come on, work with me here," he said carefully as he stepped closer to face the man. With a closer distance, he noticed that Mustang had lowered his hands at this point, but kept his eyes firmly shut and a grimace was stuck in place. "Eh- what's wrong?"

"Why is that damn light still on?" he asked in a rhetorical tone, as if he did not expect to get a response.

"Uh... there are no lights on. That's sunlight. You're above ground, Mustang." Facing the man as he was now, Edward perfectly understood why Hughes spoke to him in such a careful tone earlier. Something about him demanded it.

Mustang grumbled something under his breath. Something told the kid that he would be glaring at the sunlight if he could.

Edward glanced at the windows to see if the blinds could be tightened at all, before abruptly changing his mind. "You should get used to it. Gotta readjust your eyes at some point, right?" He almost wanted to chide himself for speaking to the colonel as if he understood the reality of the situation, but honestly wasn't sure what the best way to go about this was.

Mustang didn't say anything and settled for laying his forehead back on the knee he had pulled him to himself, blocking the rest of the world out.

"... I'm gonna get something for you to eat," he said slowly and began to step away from the couch as if he was trying to get away from a bomb, unaware that Mustang was silently dissecting his words.

_________

Another bright, shining Monday morning, Maes thought grimly as he squint under the sun's gleam.

The clouds from the weekend's storm had disappeared, replaced by a clear blue, spotted with the occasional plume of white that did little to keep the warming rays from hitting the earth. The humidity had thankfully faded as well, leaving the air cool and refreshing.

However, Maes did not notice any of this as he tread up the stairs to Central HQ, mind whirling with the impending discussions that he expected to have.

Despite how precise and intuitive his job required him to be, he had no idea what he was doing. Maes usually took pride in his innate ability to adapt and respond to any situation at the drop of a hat, but the discovery behind Roy's death had shocked his brain into an annoying state of inactivity. He didn't have time for this...

Maes shook his head and sighed soundlessly through his teeth as he stepped through the front door and began the trek to his office on impulse.

At least he looked tired enough to continue the charade that he was still focused on Roy's murder case, which had been all too casually tossed onto the list of Scar's victims. One of the heavier wights on his mind at the moment was that there were people who wanted his best friend to remain underground- people who likely had ties in the military at least, and would be keeping an eye out for any strange behaviors now that their prisoner was missing. And since it was no secret that they were friends, Maes was surely at the top of the suspect list.
This also put the rest of Roy's team into potential danger without them being aware of it, including Edward. God, how he hoped the kid wasn't followed that night...

He had asked himself if it would be best to let the entire team know of Roy's survival or not. Yes, they'd be furious at him for keeping it a secret, but the more people knew, the greater risk. That, and he was just their old boss' friend; he didn't have the authority or the right to put their lives in danger, and without their knowledge no less.

Undecided, he only vaguely responded to the salutes of lower ranking personnel before closing himself in his office, eyes drifting warily over the pile of paperwork that he had been putting off from the week prior.

Only now that Roy was alive was Maes able to smile thinly as he considered how similar it looked to his old desk.

Since his friend's reported death, he had begun each and every morning by diving headfirst into his work, putting every ounce of concentration into tracking Scar's movement patterns, rereading sightings reported by civilians, anything and everything he could just to at least feel productive even as he faced what felt like an increasingly lost cause.

But now it was all unnecessary- pointless, even. Yes, Scar was still an issue, but suddenly far from the top of his priority list. He needed to find the people who had imprisoned Roy, but he had nowhere to begin until the colonel chose to communicate.

Maes sat down at his desk and slid a stack of paperwork over to himself, mindlessly skimming the words as his thoughts went elsewhere.

He was trapped behind a wall, unable to move past it on his own accord. There was painfully little he could do at the moment. He supposed he could eventually go out to find the crypt Edward spoke of, but that would be to walk straight into enemy territory without any idea of what he would find. Without any plan to speak of, he was stuck with doing useless paperwork, pretending to be focused on an investigation that had lost all meaning.

At that point, the only thing he could do in order to be productive was to speak to Riza. Questioning what he would say and how he would say it cycled nonstop since he got into his car that morning, and yet he still had not come to any conclusion. And of course, this was all assuming she was there today to begin with. Since she didn't answer his calls the morning before, he couldn't help the foreboding concern that festered.

Riza Hawkeye always answered her phone. Maes hated to think that something might have happened to her while he was too preoccupied to think twice. But he knew this wasn't enough evidence to worry too much. It shouldn't have been, anyway. That's what he told himself, ignoring the small voice in the back of his head that wanted to say otherwise.

Troubled and distracted, Maes decided to spend the morning catching up on the work he postponed. Riza was fine, he assured himself, and he would find her later and tell her everything. He had a feeling that she would want to run to Roy's house the moment she found out the truth, which probably would raise some unwanted attention first thing in the morning.

So that was exactly what he did.

Only problem was, time passed far too quickly than he would have liked. Before he knew it, almost half the day had passed and putting off such an important conversation was wearing on his nerves.
Perhaps it wasn't a great idea to wait. Maybe he had to just find Riza and tell her that Roy was alive as soon as possible despite the risk of her running off to see him. She was smart enough to keep herself under control, after all. Why let her continue suffering any longer?

He sighed.

Shoving a majority of the blame for his mercurial mood onto his lack of sleep, Maes rose from his seat, stretched his back, and forced himself out the door before he could change his mind again.

But this act did nothing to calm his nerves. In fact, they only burned hotter, eating away at his walls until he was sure a nervous air was undulating from him as he walked down the hall. Thankfully, few gave him more than a second glance.

He should have gotten it out of the way as soon as he arrived; it would have been more merciful to both him and Riza. But no use in dwelling on it now, he reasoned halfheartedly as he found himself at the office she had been relocated to.

Their attempts to keep Roy's team together could only go so far when trying to appeal to superiors who did not care. All things considered, they were probably given the best possible scenario within realistic perimeters. In the end, it was Edward who unknowingly helped in holding them together.

The young prodigy was in high demand, unlike the rest of them who were all infamous for being fiercely loyal to the thorn in the sides of the higher-ups. Maes had no idea how she did it, but Riza somehow ensured that no one could simply stake their claim on the boy without getting at least some of the team involved as well.

Riza's efforts resulted in her and Edward being placed under some ambitious Colonel who's name currently escaped him. Jean and Kain were also assigned under the same command, and the same went for Heymans and Vato.

If it wasn't for Edward's desirability, there was no telling where they would have all landed. It was almost ironic that the kid had no knowledge of the part he played in this, seeing as he had made an obvious effort to distance himself recently.

This of course reminded Maes of every complication that came of Roy's position in the military now that he wasn't actually dead, but he forced those thoughts aside for later.

After a brief conversation with a major who worked under the same superior as the two blonds, he made his exit once discovering that Riza was nowhere to be seen. She had clocked in that morning as always, but was off somewhere else after gaining approval from the acting colonel.

It took about a half hour of peeking through doors and asking bystanders, but Maes finally managed to pin down her location to the archive room: the room where it all began. This was the last place he saw Roy before the man vanished under the guise of deceased, the night that repeated through his head countless times as he asked himself what could have been different.

He pushed the door open, eyes immediately falling on the blue and blonde figure at the table in the center, surrounded by folders and loose papers, radiating a tired and worn aura. Riza was never one to fidget with her appearance, but that made the slight wrinkles in her uniform, the rings under her eyes, and the few stray strands of hair that fell out of her clip all the more noticeable.

"Riza?" he started, eyeing her suspiciously, hoping the reality wasn't what he suspected it to be, yet being almost too afraid to ask. "Were you here all night?"

The blonde looked up at him and blinked focus back into her eyes, expression steeled but not quite
able to hide how tired and drained she so obviously was.

"Yes," she said after a moment, likely figuring there was no point in lying to him. " Haven't gotten any closer."

Something cold and regretful was pulled taut inside his chest as he watched her, pursing his lip. He had found her, but he still had not decided how to go about it. Without thought, Maes walked across the floor to join her at the crowded table, idly eyeing the array of papers that overpopulated it. He opened his mouth to possibly chide her about not getting enough rest or overworking herself- he wasn't exactly sure what was going to come out- but his tongue was stilled as his eyes caught the word "discharge" within the clutter. Without thought, he began to reach for it, but Riza stealthily collected the spread of papers in one swoop, watching him sharply.

"What can I do for you?" she asked almost casually as she tapped the papers' edges against the table to straighten the stack, slipping all too easily into a familiar mask.

"... What was that, Riza? Who's getting discharged?"

The blond closed her eyes for a moment, resignation slipping across her face for a brief moment. "It's nothing, Hughes."

"It hardly looked like nothing."

"Don't concern yourself."

"Riza."

She stopped mid sentence and looked up at him from the table, expression closed and unreadable. He held her gaze as firmly as possible.

At last, she sighed. "I have... considered continuing the search for Scar on my own."

Maes paused, mouth gaping slightly as he wanted to say something but lacked the words. He shouldn't have been surprised. It had been surprisingly difficult to get anything done lately, as if someone was purposefully putting roadblocks in their path. The search for Scar continued as always, but whenever they tried to dig further into the night of Roy's death, there was always some kind of complication. It only made sense that Riza, as determined as she was, considered leaving the military altogether in order to find Roy's killer. Even as he watched her, he didn't have it in him to be shocked. He remembered clearly during the Ishvalan war, she had the eyes of someone who had seen too much blood. Now, there was a similar coldness there; the eyes of someone who wanted to see more.

But leaving the military was much easier said than done. The Amestrian military did not take kindly to letters of resignation.

"Havoc and I were both thinking about it," she continued heedlessly, gazing idly down at the stack of papers she held loosely in her hands. "But we've decided against it. So as I said, it's nothing."

"But how would you have even-" he cut himself off as a shuffle past the exit door met his ears. He glanced back at the ajar door, silently scolding himself for leaving it there as he moved to close it. No need to risk anyone passing by to overhear their conversation. He turned back around to see Riza examining him carefully.

"... Why are you here, Hughes?"
He blinked at her for a moment, then forced an exhale through his teeth. He supposed none of this mattered now, anyway. He stuffed everything he had learned into a corner, but nowhere where he would forget about it, and willed himself to get on with his point despite the new pile of complications that again began to stack.

"I need to tell you something," he began carefully, returning to his spot besides the table. "It's about Roy."

She continued the stare, a flash of pain blinking through her eyes so quickly that he might have imagined it.

_God, why was he beating around the bush!? Just spit it out!_

"He's alive," he finally said quietly in case the walls had ears, seeing no other way to say it. He swore he heard a gasp, but Riza was motionless, as if she wasn't even breathing. "It was all staged."

Maes wouldn't dare to say too much here, unsure if it was safe to do so.

Riza stared at him, eyes empty yet somehow focused at the same time- stunned into a blank slate. He could basically see the cogs struggling to turn. After what felt like multiple minutes, she looked as if she wanted to say something, question his sanity, plead for more information, but still took her a moment to organize her thoughts. Within a shorter time span than he expected, she blinked some life back into herself and straightened up to the slightest degree.

"That's... Where is he?" she asked almost in a whisper, stricken with a warring mix of disbelief and hope. Riza was one of the few to see Roy's body- or whoever's body it was. His words would have sounded like complete nonsense to anyone besides the truly desperate.

Maes did not answer right away, mind turning. It was entirely likely that he was being paranoid, but he couldn't bring himself to divulge that kind of information unless he knew for a fact that no unwanted ears would hear. He considered just bringing her to Roy's house himself, but the thought of doing so stopped his thought process cold. What would seeing Roy the way he is now do to her...?

Before he could round together a decent response, the click of the door nob sounded behind him and he spun around, mind alert and heart suddenly in his throat.

_Idiot_, he spat to himself as the door was pushed open. He shouldn't have said any of this anywhere near the HQ. It wasn't safe and now someone else might have heard-

His rising fears tumbled, then stopped when he was met with the familiar blue eyes of Jean Havoc. The lingering scent of cigarette smoke drifted into the room as he did, almost distracting Maes from the man's expression.

If it wasn't for the way he stared at the lieutenant colonel as if he was a ghost and how his hands shook when he closed the door behind him, Maes might have thought that he had not overhear everything he just said to Riza.

"How much did you hear?" he asked slowly, figuring there was no point in asking why he was listening in through the door. He probably heard them from down the hall before the door was shut.

The blond swallowed, tension radiating from him in waves. "Enough."

So much for not letting everyone know immediately. Although he supposed Havoc had as much reason to know as anyone else on the team did.
"It's true then?" he dared, wide eyes drifting to Riza, then back to Maes. He spoke in a whisper, at least understanding the need to be quiet. "Mustang's alive?"

Maes felt both of their gazes drilling holes into him with their intensity. He nodded, unsure what his expression betrayed.

"But- but that's not possible. I- we saw him. He was-" The second lieutenant trailed off.

"I can give you more details later, but it's true."

"... Shit," Jean drawled in an amazed mutter, running a hand through his already ruffled hair. He shifted his weight back until he leaned heavily against the door, staring into space. Maes turned to glance at Riza, who looked equally spacey, mind whirling with thoughts that he was deaf to. The air in that room was thick and tense and carefully silent; he was unwilling to break it, knowing they both needed time to process the news. He could tell just by looking at them that they both wanted to ask a million questions but held back, unable to voice their words for more than one reason.

Finally, the quiet squeak of a chair rubbing against the floor pulled his attention to Riza after a moment of studying the ground. She stood up and met his eye with a fierce determination, which was still shadowed by an unshakable fear.

"I want to see him."

"So do I," Jean quickly added, as if the concept of actually seeing Roy jolted him out of his thoughtful stupor.

"Hold on," Maes started, moving so he could look at the two blonds at once instead of being surrounded. "It's a complicated situation. We can't afford to draw any attention to this. And- I expect that we are all being watched."

The warning put them both at pause, but did little to waver the resolve in their eyes.

"I understand," Riza replied. "But sir, I need to-"

A terse knock on the door interrupted, causing Havoc to jump to the side just before it was swing open. Upon recognizing the face as a private in the investigations department, Maes' alarm settled slightly but not enough to relieve the twists in his gut.

"Sir," the young man just barely out of his teens exclaimed, breathing through his words as he raised his arm in a stiff salute. "There's a call for you from the Fullmetal Alchemist on an outside line. He says it's urgent."

A cold chill sucked the already fleeting warmth out of his body. "Alright, thank you." Voice stiff, he answered automatically to dismiss the private, who barely gave the other two in the room a second glance. His subordinate thankfully didn't know anything about his connection to the lieutenants, and left without another word.

Maes barely held back a sharp curse as his mind automatically flocked to every worst possible scenario. If Edward was calling him at work, it could mean nothing good.

"Ed? Does he know about this?" Jean asked after a moment.

Maes let his anxious silence answer the question. He then cleared his throat and glanced between the two. "Asking you two not to talk about this goes without saying. We'll need to figure something out, but for now, I need to take that call."
Without waiting for a response, Maes made to leave the room, not saying farewell only because he knew they would follow adamantly even if he did.

Which is exactly what happened.

He raced back to his office as calmly as physically possible, which wasn't saying much, with the two lieutenants hot on his heels. He didn't have it in him to blame them after what they just learned. There appeared to be no chance of him getting out of giving them more details by the end of the day.

But suddenly, he didn't really mind. In comparison to the fear that shot into his nerves upon hearing that Ed needed to talk to him, the two trailing behind to pry more well-deserved information out of him was the least of his concerns.

Maes didn't reach his office soon enough, allowing the blonds to follow him inside before closing the door, retrieving a few more curious glances on the way over than he would have preferred. If anyone asked, he would say he needed to talk to them about the night Roy "died"

As he circled his desk, the two stood off to the side, exchanging a few hushed comments to each other. Blood was pumping too loudly in Maes' ears for him to hear, but he didn't really need to. Idly, it occurred to him as he moved to pick up the phone that he hadn't seen that much life in either of their eyes in weeks. It was refreshing.

"Lieutenant colonel Hughes," he announced into the phone on the waiting line, purely by habit.

"Hey," Edward's voice rang through the other side, relief flooding in between every syllable.

"Hello Ed. What's up?" he asked casually, slipping a tone of ease into his words. He hoped the kid knew not to say anything too incriminating on the military line.

"Uh I was just wondering-" he paused, hesitating curiously. His voice shook, whether from fear or anxiety or something else altogether, Maes wasn't sure. "Do you plan on, uh, heading back anytime soon?"

"I could," he replied simply, wanting so badly to just demand what was happening. "You doing alright?"

"Y-yeah, fine- shit," Edward spat under his breath, followed by a muffle that sounded like static through the phone. "You should hurry though."

"Alright." Keeping his voice calm was almost impossible by this point. He glanced up at Hawkeye and Havoc, meeting their focused, worried stares. "Do you mind if I bring some company-"

"Shit, shit, shit- stop that! Hey!" Ed's voice was suddenly distanced slightly as he spoke away from the phone.

"Ed?"

"Company? No!" he exclaimed as his attention was obviously divided. Edward's earlier attempt to keep up a casual conversation was losing speed quickly as a nervous tension laced his voice, building with every passing second. "No, bad idea; no one else."

"Yeah, okay, I'll head out s-"

"SHIT!" Edward's voice was obscured by a loud rumble that Maes couldn't dare to call and
explosion, forcing him to reel away before it blew his eardrums. That couldn't be right- right? What the hell was happening?! "Gotta go!"

Before the lieutenant colonel could say anything in response, the line went dead, putting an abrupt end to the chaos that sounded from the other end. He stood rigidly with the hand piece still to his ear, staring into space as the beeps filled his head. After a moment, he lowered it back into it’s place, then looked up, unsure what expression he was giving the spectating lieutenants.

To say that they looked nervous would be an understatement.

"I need to leave," Maes heard himself say as he straightened up, cast a quick glance to see if there was anything important he needed to bring- which there was not- before moving towards the exit.

"I'm coming with you," Riza announced as she took a step to follow, Jean nodding behind her.

Ed's words echoing on his head, Maes stopped with his hand on the door and looked over his shoulder.

"No, you're not. I'm sorry, I know you want to, but Edward sounded adamant about me going alone." He could see the argument on the tip of their tongues, and continued before they could voice it. "Like I said, it's complicated. But it's best if I go alone. He isn't very- well, he's-" Maes cut himself off and shook his head. If he kept going, he'd only give them more questions that he didn't have time for. Perhaps it was cruel to leave them without telling them about Roy's current state, but he wasn't really given an option here.

"Fine," Havoc relented from behind, doing little to hide his discontent with the decision. "But we need to tell the others at least-"

"No," Maes cut in without thinking, only to be met by two pairs of stubborn, confused and worried eyes. Again, he didn't have time for this! "Just- be quiet about it. I need to go."

The reasonable part of his mind knew saying so was pointless. Roy's team would never do anything to put him in danger if they knew what was on the line, but the unnecessary warning flew out without thought, far too distracted by Edward's phone call.

Riza called out to him as he stormed out of the office, but his legs physically would not slow down, carrying him out into the hall and down the quickest path to his car as his overactive mind buzzed with possibilities. The loud, explosive burst of sound that nearly deafened him circled through his mind on repeat, as well as Edward's shocked exclamations.

He hated to think about what it all pointed to.

Maes raced out of the building, thoughts far from the woman who solely occupied them earlier that day. Now, he could only hope that he wouldn't return to see Roy's house razed to the ground.
Chapter 13

Roy had decided that being dead would have been the simplest explanation for the mass amount of confusion that compressed his head with every waking moment.

The other possibility was that he was no longer in that underground cell, but somewhere else entirely. A place that just so happened to remind him of his home, but that thought never failed to repeat the circle, beginning with him wondering if he was dead.

Upon first waking up in these new surroundings, he believed he was simply hallucinating again, just as he was when he once found himself in his office. He would have preferred it if that was the case. Too many times now has Roy allowed his hopes to rise only for them to get crushed, and he refused to let it happen again.

But now he was forced to acknowledge that something was clearly different about the room he was in. It was too loud. Even when there was no one around to bother him, there was a constant low rumbling sound that seemed to bounce off the walls and fill every inch of space. As if to compliment that, it was too warm as well. He recalled growing numb to the cold, naturally curling in on himself to conserve his fading body heat as often as possible. His hands were constantly stiff and uncooperative, and he had eventually learned to ignore his own shivering. But now none of it was necessary.

They were trying to trick him. The monsters who ripped his life away wanted him to lower his guard just so they could further break his will. He may have been reduced to a pathetic, sniveling wimp, but he at least still had the will to fight them.

Even if it meant giving everything else up.

Of course, his company sure has not made it easy for him.

Edward may have very well been one of the most confusing factors. He was angry and sadistic one moment, and then suddenly caring and concerned the next. Surely his own imagination could not be that cruel- that it would use the appearance of his subordinate to torture him with this mental warfare. Somehow, it had become far easier to accept that this was someone else's doing. How, he wasn't sure, but Roy would believe anything at that point.

The kid had left him alone for the moment, but not before leaving his words behind to circle Roy's head like vultures.

You should get used to it. Gotta readjust your eyes at some point, right?

Readjust... to the light?

Why would they want him to do that after using the light as a weapon to cripple him? Either Edward was working with them, or his own subconscious was being especially vicious. Either way, it couldn't be for his benefit. Roy didn't understand what game they were playing, and he loathed to cooperate. But what harm could it do? Dare he even ask..?

Roy slowly rose his head from the cocoon that was his arms, flinching slightly as a dim light sunk into his eyelids, assaulting his vision with a soft orange. He fought the urge to shy away, which he supposed was a decent first step.

However, he couldn't help but wonder why he bothered. He had already forfeited his life once;
what was the point of fighting when even that did not work?

He was stubborn, Roy decided with a slight shrug that he wasn't aware of. Too stubborn for his own good, probably.

Before deciding if the effort was worth it or not, he forced his eyes open, flinching away from the bright gleam that did not hesitate to set fire to his nerves. A hushed curse slipped past his lips as he pondered how pathetic this was.

It was light! It was so simple, and yet he avoided it like it was a physical thing that would hurt him if he got anywhere close.

Oh, how weak he had become...

Roy sighed and forced his eyes to remain as thin slits, not bothering to fight back the scowl that effortlessly slid into place.

At least there was something comforting about the room being mostly dark, with the light coming primarily from his left. He turned away from it, settling for keeping his untrained eyes on the darker area. Although calling it that was a bit of an exaggeration, since it was nothing like the empty void of a cell he had come to know.

It was closer to the picture his brain would paint for him when there was nothing else to look at. Dim and lacking color, but there was more depth than what he was used to. It was almost nauseating. Though it was only a motionless room, there was too much stimulation. Too many details and muted colors that his already strained eyes jumped to without his consent.

Long streaks of light flooded in from the blinds behind him, falling on the dark blocks he assumed to be furniture, highlighting their edges and curves, but also making it impossible for him to see what they were shining on. What should have assisted his sight did the complete opposite; appearing as shining beams only made manageable by his squinting eyes.

Roy believed he saw bookcases pushed against the walls, loaded with contents with details too fine for him to grasp. Small side tables and a few framed photos, an armchair pushed into a corner, a clock that did not tick. But why did it all resemble his own house?

He hated it.

He hated being reminded of his life before it was mercilessly ripped away. He didn't know why he was made to be taunted like this, but he refused to give into it. It appeared far too good to be true. If Roy allowed himself to believe he was actually in his own home, then he wouldn't be able to recover from the blow of discovering it was untrue. And wondering how they managed to recreate his living room was a waste of time. After all, the theory that this was some abstract, disturbingly creative version of Hell was still valid.

Besides, many things still did not add up.

Maes was acting himself for the most part, but there was a distinct lack of rants about his family. Of course, Roy wasn't complaining about that. Edward on the other hand, was acting like a different person entirely. The Ed he knew was hotheaded and blunt, quick to throw insults, especially at him in particular. He would hide his concern for others behind sarcastic remarks and jabs. He certainly wouldn't speak to a fully grown man as if he was a broken child, offering to make meals and such. It was so out of character, it was almost comical.

There was no doubt about it. The kid he saw was not Edward Elric.
Too many questions, and no answers.

Before his headache could grow, Roy pushed the tedious thoughts to the side to focus on what was right in front of him.

He blinked, hoping his eyes would adjust quicker, but it seemed like it would take some time. The pain stagnated instead of continuing to steadily grow, at least.

Without putting much thought into the act, he shifted his legs until his feet hit the floor. After a deep breath, Roy bullied his legs into taking his weight and he stood up slowly, hands out at his sides in a vain attempt to keep his wavering balance upright. His legs shook and the movement caused his head to spin. It was a miracle he didn't fall over or throw up- or both.

Roy shifted his weight to take a step forward, hesitating when the bruise on his shin throbbed as a gentle reminder of the short barricade that he collided into earlier. Gliding a hand across the edge of what seemed to be a table, he slowly made his way around it as invisible weights stacked up with every step.

He found himself in the middle of the small open space in the living room, only realizing now that he didn't have anything to hold onto in case his legs failed, nor did he have a purpose for standing there. Where was he trying to go? What was the point of trying at all?

*Curiosity*, a voice provided as his eyes fell on a shape he knew to be a picture frame. He almost wanted to laugh at the thought of his captors attempting to imitate his photos but no humor could make its way through the unsettling chill that hollowed out his chest.

He approached the small table pressed up against one of the walls, almost stumbling before he could reach it. The table was at about hip level and was bare besides the single small frame, and an empty ceramic vase he had gotten as a housewarming gift many years ago. He recognized the dark maroon despite his blurry vision, but diverted his attention to the picture. He reached out for it as he leaned alongside the table for support, pausing as he glanced down at his own hand.

The blurry appendage that was his own hand was unnaturally discolored, the strange dark shade drawing his eyes towards it. He was reminded that he was unable to stretch or bend his fingers, appalled that he had managed to forget in the first place. The binds he had previously tried to rip off were still there, hindering his movement and muffling his sense of touch. The urge to pull them off itched in the back of his mind, but the photo took priority. Roy carefully picked up the picture in his clumsy grasp, mindful that it didn't slide through the fabric around his hand, pulling it close to his eyes and squinting to make out the shapes in the mild darkness.

But no matter how hard he focused or how close the frame was to his eyes, he couldn't make out the image. The lines blurred together, meshing into a single seamless swirl of color, muted by the darkness of the room. For a brief and foolish moment, Roy considered allowing one of the beams of light to shine on it in hopes of increasing visibility, but stopped that train of thought before he could be blinded.

He set the frame down with more force that he realized, failing to notice he placed it face down. Still desperate for some kind of confirmation, Roy stared blankly at the table, stubbornly trying to remember the details of his own home.

A dim mental light bulb flickered to life long enough for his attention to bounce back towards the table, eyes trailing down with his hands for guidance. He found a small drawer that was built underneath the surface, primarily for decoration above functionality.
He pulled it open with only mild resistance, unable to make anything out within. He knew something was supposed to be there, but for whatever reason, could not quite remember what.

Roy cautiously searched it with his hand, though it did little good when he couldn't feel much besides the four walls of the open drawer. That was until he felt something soft roll under his movements. He curled his restricted fingers around what seemed to be a small piece of fabric and pulled it out, using both uncoordinated hands to straighten it out in front of his face.

Memories plowed into him with enough force to make him take a step back, breath hitching in his throat.

How had he forgotten?

How did they know?

It was a pair of his gloves. The two white pieces of cloth were familiar even as they looked to be nothing more than a colorless blob, with only the faintest hints of red making it through his failing vision. He had kept multiple pairs scattered in certain rooms around his house just in case, but hadn't touched most of them in months, usually sticking to the gloves that permanently switched between his nightstand and pockets.

His admittedly weak grip tightened around them as if his life depended on it, unable to fight off the feeling that they absolutely did.

If he had his gloves, he wasn't defenseless. He could finally fight back. He could finally preform alchemy-

As if a floodgate had been opened, more memories and mental images swamped his mind at the mention of alchemy. Carving circles in the rough cement walls had been one of the first things he tried after realizing he was trapped there. Roy was surprised when his first attempted didn't work, figuring that he was too out of practice to draw a perfect circle while blind on his first attempted. But anger soon took over after he tried again and again and again, failing each time to accurately mark the precise lines and glyphs into the wall.

He never stopped trying, but after some time, never thought about it either. It became a habit, something as natural as breathing. He didn't realize he was still clawing circles into the walls, the action blocked from his memory, hidden behind the dark veil that constantly clouded his memories of that place.

Then he finally managed to do it. The circle was flawless, but he could only guess how the details turned out. Not well enough, most likely. The moment he activated the circle, his eyes had long since adjusted to the absolute darkness. The blue spark that began to illuminate from the array burned his nerves like acid, and he pulled away from it before the transformation could truly begin, cutting his energy from it. It would have been for the best, considering he was too brain dead to process any equations at the time. It could have easily rebound on him, but the possibility never seemed like a concern to him.

Roy forced himself out of the past before he could get trapped there and returned his focus to the gloves, attempting to glide his thumb over the ignition fabric, reminded yet again that he couldn't.

Enough of this.

Using one hand to carefully place the gloves back on the table, he brought the other up to his mouth and closed his teeth around the binds, yanking back even as it threatened to cut off the
circulation to some of his fingers. He shook his hand until it loosened, surprised by the overall lack of resistance. The wraps draped off and he discarded the damned thing on the ground. Roy flexed his free fingers, then went to work on the other. The discomfort he had grown used to returned once he started fiddling with the binding, but the ache and burns in his hand did nothing to slow his progress. Within a few seconds, his left hand was freed as well and he wasted no time before swiping the gloves back before they could vanish.

He almost paused when the familiar, tough sensation of the ignition cloth met with his sensitive hands. There was no way they were fakes, created by those who trapped him here. It had to be the real thing. Wondering how they got his gloves was an unsettling thoughts, but one he ignored for the moment.

"Mustang?"

Roy jumped and pulled the gloves close to himself as he turned and took a step back from the source of the voice that ripped him from his thoughts. He had almost forgotten that he was trying to train his eyes into seeing properly again, reminded only when the gleam through the windows flashed in his vision, forcing another grimace to slide across his expression.

It was Edward, of course. Roy didn't hear him coming, but he supposed the kid could just manifest whenever his subconscious willed it.

"What are you-" he paused once his eyes met with Roy's. Or at least, that was what he assumed happened. He felt his weak stare being returned but could not differentiate the color of his eyes from his hair. He only saw a blur of gold and black. "You opened your eyes."

Roy nodded on impulse, then began to wonder if he actually did the gesture, or only thought about doing it. Well, he supposed his own imagination would understand either way.

"Wait-" Ed started, something unsettled slipping into his suddenly hesitant tone. "You- what the hell? Why did you take the bandages off?!" This version of Ed wasn't entirely incompetent at imitating the real kid's temper, apparently. "Here, lemme see them."

Roy only took a hasty step away when the kid outstretched an open palm. Edward did not react, but he felt the kid's eyes boring into him with an intensity that made him admittedly uncomfortable. Meanwhile, each blink was becoming longer, his eyelids growing heavy and eyes stinging from the strain.

At last Edward sighed deeply and lowered his arm back to his side. "Hughes is going to rebandage you when he gets back whether you like it or not, ya know."

It almost sounded like a threat, but Roy had to wonder why he kept calling them bandages. That implied they were trying to heal his wounds- help him. But why would they waste time and resources doing such a thing? Another layer to the deception, he supposed.

Roy didn't have much of a response, but he hoped the stubborn expression he felt himself make was enough to get the point across. He would not let them restrict his hands again. Not without a fight, anyway. They've taken too much already.

The silence continued for a few seconds longer than he would have liked. If it wasn't for the fact that he felt Edward's eyes still on him, he would have thought the kid disappeared again.

"That wound… on your neck; how did you get it anyway?" Ed asked slowly in an uncharacteristically small tone. "Were there other people in there with you? Or animals?"
Other people? Animals? Flashing memories of the many faces he saw in the unyielding darkness flew past his distant eyes and he heard the hungry snarls of dogs, pacing around him, studying him for signs of weakness. He could still feel it's teeth sink into his skin, rubbing against his bone, ripping out and spilling blood across the floor. Iron filled his nose as the liquid dripped down his arm and dried into his shirt.

The voice of the one who mocked him nearly on a daily basis- Envy- rung in his ears, disorienting him with it's pitch. The insults and promises of pain swelled in his brain as images of his team flickered, then disappeared, washed over by the very kid who was currently speaking to him. He had become just as cruel as Envy was, appearing in the cell only to attack the blind man as if he was nothing more than prey.

Roy remembered his laughter. Twisted, sardonic joy filled the room, bouncing off the walls and back at him with double the force. He felt the small figure standing above his bruised, beaten body as the air around him radiated an unspoken threat. It made the hair on the back of his neck stand up in terror and sent a hundred alarms blaring in his head, so loudly he swore it would explode.

He felt his hand under the sole of a boot and his ribs cracking under the weight that pushed him into the floor. His hair was tugged on by metal fingers, looping around the joints, stuck, yanked out, hearing his own useless cries occupy the air.

A voice always- always- told him to fight back, no matter how quietly. His frail attempts rewarded him with more pain, but now he had a weapon.

"Wait- where did you get those?!"

He pried his eyes open and glanced down to see the white gloves now hugged his hands comfortably. He didn't remember putting them on, but proceeded to tighten the fabric around his bruised fingers with a single tug. He glanced up at Ed, mildly aware that something wasn't right with this situation, but the dread that raced through his veins did not allow him to stop and think about it.

"... Stay away from me," he said in little more than a gasp. Adrenaline raced through his body as he felt the power of the ignition gloves every time he rubbed his thumb and index finger against each other. The alchemic energy tingled through his hands and a jolt of excitement followed, unknowingly pulling a small smile from his lips.

He didn't need to fear getting another cracked rib ever time he opened his mouth anymore. Now he has some power. How he was in control.

"Whoa- hey, what are you doing?"

Roy took another step back, blurry eyes locked on his own hand. His mind wanted to question if all of this was just another hallucination or dream, but he craved it too much to entertain the thought for very long. It had to be real, and the desire to believe that would continue even if he found evidence to suggest the opposite.

As if to test this again, he flicked his thumb across his finger as if he were switching on a lighter, gentle enough to create only a spark. The light that ignited from his hand was brief and expected, but he still flinched away from it. The soft heat that emulated outwards only added to the illusion that his eyes were on fire.

He could feel Edward's presence distancing and he glanced up only to confirm it. He was saying something as he inched further way, but Roy couldn't make it out behind his bloodstream pulsing
in his ears.

Just as the kid disappeared behind a corner, Roy felt his balance give out and he slouched against
the wall, washed over by a new wave of weariness. Perhaps it was simply because he had not
successfully performed any alchemy in a while, but something felt off about it.

And why did his hand feel like it was on fire?

Roy brought the hand up closer to his face despite the invisible weights that pulled it out. Even
through his failing vision, he was able to make out a black smudge on his fingertips.

That wasn't right. That wasn't supposed to be there.

He felt eyes on him and looked up, catching movement before it vanished, and forced his ears to
tune in. Edward's voice was muttering something in the other room, though he couldn't hear what
and hardly cared to begin with. As long as he stayed away…

Drawing his attention back to his gloves, he tried creating a spark again, but he underestimated
how much force he put into the snap. A flame erupted from the glove with an angry hiss, dancing
upwards and then disappearing into the air. The heat sunk into his glove and burned his own hand,
forcing him to wave it through the air until it cooled.

Roy wondered if he had only grown accustomed to the heat in the past, but could not quite
remember.

Edward cursed in the distance and said something that sounded like an order to stop.

There was no way in hell he was going to listen to his orders. Hallucination or not, he no longer
had any reason to listen to their threats. Anyone who didn't agree would regret it.

He didn't remember much from when he first got imprisoned so long ago, but he did remember
threatening to find whoever had put him there, and burn them alive. Now he could finally do that.

Again, Roy felt eyes on him, and a switch flipped. The unyielding desire to protect himself burned,
and he rose his gloved hand without thought and snapped.

This time, he was clearly able to hear what Edward exclaimed in reaction. "SHIT!"

Shit, indeed. It did not go as expected.

The bright fiery light filled the room, forcing Roy to shut his eyes as the heat was blown back on
him and smelled of soot, but the familiar sound of the alchemical snap was overpowered by what
sounded like thunder. The force of the explosion pushed back on him, throwing him off balance
and colliding into the nearest wall. He heard something crash on the ground and the overwhelming
scent of smoke surrounded him.

The reaction rebounded in his face, but thankfully wasn't a very large one, explaining why the fire
bit back at the hand that created it. Of course, he was an idiot for even attempting it. Or maybe just
incredibly desperate. One needed a clear mind to perform the art, especially a form as complicated
as flame alchemy. He felt the failed transmutation drain the energy from his body, but not
completely dissuading him from trying again. If he could just remember the correct formulas. All
he had to do was break down the water in the air into hydrogen and then combine it with oxygen,
but the correct proportions fled from him, as well as all control he once had over the flames.

Roy heard himself groan as the rebound kickstarted the aching pain in his bones, lacking the
energy to stand up just yet. His healing ribs in particular did not like the blow at all.

However, he got his second wind as soon as he heard footsteps approaching him.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Edward stood over him, and while he couldn't make out the kid's expression, there was a hint of fear in his voice.

Good, he thought grimly. They should fear him. He briefly wondered if he could blast these hallucinations away with alchemy.

"You wanna know?" he gutterally muttered as he forced his legs to support his weight, using the wall to drag himself back up. "You asked about my neck; well I'll tell you," he growled wrly, although part of him was certain that Ed already knew. Why wouldn't he, when Roy was constantly being watched?

Edward didn't say anything.

"Everything I've had was taken. Everything besides my own senses; although you tried to take that too, didn't you?" Edward seemed like he wanted to interject, but Roy continued. "I was sick of playing your games! So I did this-" he pointed at his neck "- to myself. It was the only way to win your game, so I took it."

"Y-you… what?"

"I wanted to feel it, understand?" Roy demanded through bared teeth. "I wanted to feel myself bleed out! That is what you made me resort to! That-" Roy unconsciously brought his hand up to his neck, but the vehemence in his face vanished and his words were cut off when he made contact, rage replaced by confusion.

Something soft was wrapped around his neck, covering the wound he had put there. A bandage. .., Why?

Why were they suddenly trying to help him?

Yes, they wanted him alive for some kind of sacrifice, but there were other ways to keep him just barely breathing. Just like with his arms, they were trying to not only stop the bleeding, but heal the wounds. It didn't make sense.

It was more mind games, wasn't it? All some ploy to make him confused or feel indebted to them, perhaps? Well Roy wouldn't fall for it. He couldn't. But he didn't know what to think.

Roy, too distracted by his own internal crisis, failed to recognize the guilt-ridden horror on Ed's face or the similarities they both shared as the two alchemists stood in the dark room, facing each other and yet refusing to make eye contact.

Roy was hastily considering a plan of escape when Edward's surprisingly remorseful tone broke through his panic.

"I'm sorry." He couldn't recall the last time he heard an apology, especially in Edward's voice. "I- I'm sorry. You're right, this is my fault. It's my fault you're afraid and not making any sense and- and I'm sorry! I shouldn't have left you there that night. I was stupid and selfish and- and- I know I can't do enough to make up for it, but I- I'm trying to make it right."

If Roy was able, he would have willed his eyes to process what was happening before him with as
much clarify as they were once capable of. But as it were, he could only imagine the distraught
description on Ed's face as he spoke with a miserable sincerity that could not be faked.

He compared this sniveling child to the vicious monster who spoke with the same voice, and there
was suddenly a divide between them. He knew the Ed who tried to break his nose and crushed his
ribcage was not the real one. A hallucination most likely, but he would sooner believe that it was
some kind of shape shifting demon that the Fullmetal Alchemist. As reluctant as he was to dare get
his hopes up by accepting that maybe that vile creature wasn't here, that still left the question of
what this Ed was.

Roy just hoped he wasn't the real one. He didn't want to kid to get caught up in this hell.

"... Mustang?" Edward asked when Roy had not responded to his rambling, voice still broken and
laden with misery.

The colonel rubbed his eyes with a gloved hand, desperate for the fog that clouded his vision to
fade away as the weariness that hung over him further dimmed his sight. If only he could see the
kid's eyes, he was sure he would know what to think. But as things stood, he was just as blind as
before, drifting out of control, tossed around by his surroundings without any idea of how to make
it all out.

"Just- just tell me what's happening. What are you?" He had already asked that question once
before. And as always, he received nothing but a vague response that did nothing to clear his
spinning thoughts. He doubted he would get anything else this time-

"Listen," Edward began with some strength returning to his tone, fortified by a purpose. "I found
you underground in a cell, bleeding out on the floor. You don't know what's going on because I
dragged you out of there when you were still unconscious, and Hughes drove us to your house.
Come on, you know this place! You know us... I don't know what happened to you down there, but
it's over now. You have to believe me."

Roy could only shake his head, jaw set with enough strength that he thought he would crack his
Teeth. His brain refused to process anything that was being said to him. He knew it was important,
but he had grown so accustomed to questioning everything and trusting no one. Anything that
seemed positive lead only to crushing disappointment when he realized it was all a figment of his
imagination, or another trick to further break him.

What if it's all true? What if this is really him and you're actually safe?

"Come on, say something." Edward took a step closer, causing Roy to reel backwards. He nearly
collapsed again until he shifted his weight into the wall, grazing his useless eyes across the room.
He needed to get out of here and think. He couldn't process a single thing with the kid watching
him. As much as he loathed the idea, Roy needed to run away like a damn coward.

The sudden movement forced Ed to hesitate as an air of uncertainty streamed off of him in waves.
Roy used this as an opportunity to keep moving, hoping against all odds that he could find
somewhere dark to hole himself up in and organize his thoughts.

But just as he thought he was actually nearing a path of escape, a forewarning click met his ears.
Too quickly for him to react, a door swung open and a blast of orange light pooled in and fell over
him, halting all movement besides his arms as they flew up to cover his face. A pained gasp made
its way out as he took many hasty steps back, nearly tripping over something in the process. Roy
forced himself to his knees before he would hurt himself further.
"Roy!"

Maes. He had appeared just as he said he would.

But wait- if Roy was having second thoughts about Edward, what did that mean for Maes?

He felt the man kneel down besides him, but Roy was too focused on the fire that burned his eyes to pay much attention. He was saying something- he and Ed were speaking, but their words sounded muffled and distant to him, mind spinning and suffering from a terrible migraine. While he forced himself to remain motionless, the adrenaline began to die down, causing him to realize just how exhausted he was. Roy knew he wouldn't be able to stand up again at this rate. His body had all but given up on cooperating. He couldn't defend himself like this.

"Roy- hey, are you alright?" Maes asked him, panic still weaving through his voice as he placed a hand on his friend's shoulder.

"Yeah," he muttered without thought, ignoring the fact that his answer was far from the truth and they all knew it. He had lowered his arms once the door was closed, but couldn't find the strength to open his eyes.

"...Could you take your gloves off for me?"

A burst of adrenaline flashed through Roy's mind at the suggestion, but then began to fade before he could do much with it. "No."

"Come on, Roy-"

"Why should I? Why should I be left defenseless?" His voice lacked any strength to properly back up his words, and they came out sounding more lifeless than he would have liked.

"You know it's not like that," Maes replied, something akin to a plea in his tone.

"I'm not taking them off."

"Roy-"

"It's okay, Hughes." Both of the older men were surprised to hear Edward jump in. "Just let him keep them."

Maes was silent for a moment as his hand slid off of Roy's shoulder, who fidgeted for a moment, cursing himself for being to weak to fend off his suffocating blindness. He tried to pry his eyes open for a moment, but he couldn't make anything out anyway.

"But Ed, you know why that's… dangerous. Look at what just happened. You didn't get hurt, did you?" he said gently in a soft tone that suggested he wished Roy wasn't there to hear.

"I'm fine, Hughes. It's fine. Everything's fine," Edward huffed. Something in his voice was forced, but Roy couldn't pinpoint it. "He won't use them unless he feels a need to."

"Then what the hell was that?" Roy felt a shift in the air around him, and he assumed Maes had hastily gestured to something. He idly wondered if there were any scorch marks in the walls.

"That won't happen again. Right, Mustang?" No response from Roy. "His alchemy is rebounding. I doubt he's very eager to try again unless his life depends on it. And we're not going to give him a reason to try."
Meas did not reply right away. In that short moment, Roy felt two pairs of eyes on him, and he glared back behind his closed eyelids. "I don't think this is a good idea," the lieutenant colonel finally relented.

"Take my word for it, Hughes. It'll be fine."

But even Edward didn't sound convinced that time.
Chapter 14

Ed collapsed onto his small military-issued bed with a great exhale, kicking his shoes off as he scrubbed at his face, hoping to rid of all the worries that plagued his mind. But just as he pessimistically expected, a growing headache continued to pound as his mind was constricted with the thoughts that refused to leave him be.

"Tiring day?" Alphonse asked from across the room, having the forethought to give Edward enough time to lay down before asking the inevitable questions.

"That's the understatement of the century," he muttered plainly, lacking the will to do much more than huff when he heard his voice break from exhaustion.

"So... how is he doing?" For the sake of secrecy, they tried to use Mustang's name as little as possible while within the military's walls. Hughes' warning about ears being everywhere had stayed with him, constantly a shrill reminder in the back of his head.

Edward groaned and shifted until his face was halfway pressed into the pillow, tilted just enough so he could still breathe and speak with more clarity than a muffle. He opened his mouth to answer, but the words remained on his tongue, refusing to go further as his last encounter with Mustang cycled through his head.

The fear, the uncertainty, the lack of trust and the willingness to do anything to save himself.

Edward tightly shut his eyes, willing the images away and sculpted his partly obscured expression into something less distressed. He had told Alphonse the vast majority of what was happening, but his brother held Mustang in such high regard; telling him of what the man was reduced to was harder than he expected.

"I don't know, Al. I thought that maybe I was starting to get through to him, but I dunno if he even hear anything I said."

After he had finally tossed aside his pride and apologized for everything that he had caused him. Ed didn't know why he thought for a second that that could do anything when Mustang already knew it was his fault. The man had told him straight to his face in more ways than one that he was to blame for the hell he endured, and the side effects of the torture.

And that was why he tried to kill himself.

What he did was so simple; Ed just walked away. He got mad and turned his back to the problem like he so often did, and it resulted in a chain of events more horrible than he ever could have imagined.

And he apologized for it.

But nothing changed.

He didn't need to be forgiven; he just wanted to fix it. But maybe his guilt and his apology were worth far less than he thought.

The worst part was that he could not relate to what Mustang was going through in the slightest. He knew it was a serious issue, but finding a solution felt nearly impossible when he couldn't even begin to comprehend the problem.
He tried clearly stating the situation with every ounce of honesty he could muster. That at least seemed to get the man thinking, but it might have overwhelmed him instead of helping. After adjusting to the lacklustre lighting, he could easily see the desire to flee etched into Mustang's face. And as soon as Hughes appeared, all focus was drawn away from their conversation.

He began to regret making that phone call if there was a possibility that he could have broken through Mustang's stubborn denial if given the time. But considering the circumstances, he wouldn't have dared to risk it. What were the chances that Mustang would shatter a window and run down the street if he felt like he was being chased? He still acted like a caged animal, desperate to escape his captors, so Edward couldn't afford to put such behavior past him, as much as he wished he could. He reacted to Hughes' presence far better than Ed's, so he was thankful he showed up before things could take another turn for the worst.

"Even as he is now," Alphonse began, his voice a source of clarity in this sea of confusion. "He is a smart man. I'm sure he hasn't forgotten what you've said. Maybe he just needs more time to process it."

"Maybe," he breathed, likely sounding just as unconvinced as he felt. If Mustang was so smart then why was he still refusing to accept what was right in front of him?

"When are you going back there?"

"Tomorrow morning. Hughes agreed to stay the night in my place, thank god."

He felt Al watching him and tilted his head to return the look. There was an unspoken question in his glowing eyes.

Edward sighed. "It's not how it sounds," he corrected wearily. "I want to help however I can, but I...I hate being there. The entire state of the house- everything- reminds me of what I've done that lead up to this."

"Brother, you can't keep blaming yourself for this," Alphonse said, surprising Ed with the sudden urgency in his voice. Edward didn't respond, but rather kept his distracted eyes on the floor between them. "This guilt will destroy you if it keeps on like this."

He withheld another sigh. "I know, Al. I'm sorry. As much as he wanted to argue, it was all he could manage to say.

Even Alphonse knew it was his fault. There was no denying it. He was told to stay by the colonel as extra backup for the threats that lucked, and yet he turned his back on him. So what was he supposed to do? Just forgive himself and move on when Mustang was still trapped in his delusions and steps away from shattering for good?

He didn't have it in him to voice these painful truths. In fact, he didn't have the energy to do much of anything.

Ed rolled over onto his side, making it clear that he was finished with his venting. Eventually, his eyes closed and he drifted into sleep, dreams just as chaotic as his thoughts. And though it was early, he slept until the next morning.

The night passed within what felt like minutes. The next morning, as he left to return to the source of his dysphoria, there came a moment in which he swore he felt eyes on him. But shrugging it off as Mustang's paranoia rubbing off on him, Edward continued on his way without a second thought.
When Maes drove back to Roy's house Monday evening, enticing multiple people to honk and flip off his hasty driving, he wasn't entirely sure what he walked in on. There was the distinct scent of smoke in the air, but not enough for him to think the house would burn down. Even as his eyes landed on the maroon shards of a broken ceramic vase against the far wall, he got the impression that the situation had already simmered somewhat by the time he got there. His involvement seemed to have calmed his friend down enough to put an end to it, at the very least.

It wasn't until he got Roy to scarf down a thin sandwich did Edward finally decide to tell him what had caused the incident.

Roy had found a pair of his gloves, obviously, but the discovery must had brought his mind back to that cell, just as he was beginning to find his way out. He was disoriented, believing he needed to have a weapon to fight back if they were to hurt him. Maes desperately hoped that he would just wake up and remember how woefully unnecessary it was, but something told him that was too much to hope for.

However, there was something off about Edward's recount of the story. There were gaps in his explanation and he seemed shaken, like something was weighing heavily on his mind that he did not want to talk about. Maes didn't pry, but it still bothered him. He missed something, and he feared it was more important than the kid let on.

But he let Edward leave after that, seeing how drained he looked. Hopefully some rest would do him some good.

Roy more of less passed out not long after, on the floor no less. Maes didn't want to wonder why he looked more at ease in the corner, but moved him to the couch anyway, even though his own room was only steps away. As ridiculous as it sounded, Roy wasn't nearly as familiar with his bedroom at the moment, and Maes was not eager to start switching up his surroundings without his knowledge.

It wasn't until several hours passed that he was certain his friend wasn't going to wake up any time soon, and got to work on removing his gloves. He would reluctantly put them back on once he was finished, but Maes needed to see the state of his hands if he were to have any peace of mind at all.

Of course, actually accomplishing all of this was much easier said than done.

Even while laying on the couch, Roy kept his arms wrapped around himself, his hands curled in loose fists that would occasionally tighten from whatever distressful dream he was likely having. Through a series of impressively timed maneuvers, he eventually managed to slip the two gloves off without waking the light sleeper.

Maes peered at the white fabric, struggling to find what he was looking for with only the setting sun sneaking through the blinds and the distant kitchen light for assistance. Besides a few faint smudges, the inside of the fabric seemed fine, which told him the bleeding on Roy's hands had calmed considerably. Not surprising, since it was already fairly light to begin with- but that wasn't to say the wounds were no longer in desperate need of treatment. And more curiously, the fingertips of the outside were blackened from the misuse of alchemy. One would think that flame retardant gloves would not have this problem.

Abandoning the small cloths onto the coffee table, Maes' attention was swiftly directed to Roy's hands themselves. He almost felt bad for checking on his wounds behind his back like this, but the man left him no other choice.

As he knelt down besides the couch, the lieutenant colonel gently took hold of one of Roy's wrists,
turning his limp hand in the dim light, squinting to make out the damage.

While not bleeding, his skin was still angry and raw. The many wounds that coated his hands were just beginning to scab over, but the use of alchemy and wearing the gloves looked to have further aggravated the skin. Roy must have been too distracted to think much of it at the time, but Maes knew they hurt. It was chilling to wonder if Roy believed there to be no point in voicing this, or had simply grown used to the pain over time.

Some areas of his skin were incredibly dry with the deep red of unshed blood seen within the cracks, turning his hand into some sort of miserable wasteland. Meanwhile, other parts looked as if they had been recently hit with sand paper, causing Maes to begin idly pondering if his fingerprints would be able to return. In fact, his fingers in particular had a peculiar shine to them, almost as if they have been-

_burned._

A jolt of panic spread like a looming storm, and Maes quickly moved to compare his friend's other hand, confirming his suspicions when he discovered Roy's right fingers were more red than the left.

He was forced to release his friend's wrists before his own shaking could wake him up. Biting into his cheek, Maes curled his hands into fists, breathing through the enraged mixture of screaming, crying and cursing that wanted to break through his fading composure.

It was so _wrong._

Roy shouldn't have felt like he was in enough danger to excuse burning his own hands in an attempt to defend himself- or whatever he called that alchemy stunt he tried to pull on Edward earlier. He must have known that he could not currently control the flames, and yet he tried anyway. Somehow, in his mind, setting off an explosion in his own living room towards Ed was worth it.

Frankly, Maes was surprised Ed had not yet complained about the work watching over Roy required.

With a deep breath, he willed himself onto his feet to fetch some burn ointment, and went to work on treating his friend's wounds once more.

After sufficiently coating Roy's hands in yet another layer of antibiotics and painkillers, he let them be for the moment and drew his focus over to the man's many other injuries, giving them a once-over now that he was finally still enough to allow it. He changed the bandages that tightly wrapped his forearm, thankful that Roy had not decided to start ripping at them too. A sick curiosity still prodded at his mind, asking what could have possibly been down there with Roy to cause such a deep and ravenous bite wound, but he mostly was afraid to ask. Whatever it was, it couldn't get to him now.

As much as he tried to avoid it, Maes' gaze eventually found itself on his friend's neck, and he was hit with an impenetrable wall that forced him to hesitate at the very sight of the ivory bandages that obscured the self-inflicted wound. He tried not to look too carefully, terrified that he would see the stains of blood soaking through.

The wound that could have killed him.

The wound that was purposefully made shallow, because Roy wanted it to be slow.
Maes couldn't pull his eyes away, only marginally aware that his vision began to blur as his heart wept for the tortured man.

He wasn't entirely sure if Roy would have died even if the gash in his throat was not covered when it was, or if the blood flow would have slowed before then, but the intent remained. And Maes hoped with every fiber in his being that Roy realized that he no longer had to escape.

Forcing out a breath he didn't realize he was holding, the lieutenant colonel gently unwrapped the bandage, taking as much time as was needed to unravel it around Roy's neck, his priorities set on disturbing him as little as possible.

Once he finally managed to slip the bandage out from under him, he began to clean the wound as gently as possible, pausing every time the sting of the treatment caused Roy to stir. He couldn't decide if actually seeing the injury served to remind him that it wasn't as bad as his imagination liked to insist, or further worry him because it existed. Both, probably.

The incriminating gash was about two inches long, slanted and veering close to the trachea, yet avoiding anything of importance by a stroke of luck. The surrounding skin was thankfully not particularly red or inflamed; an infection in the neck was the last thing he was prepared to face.

The cut itself was jagged and grotesque, freely exhibiting the dark red of escaping blood. The shallowness of the cut was the only factor that stopped him from attempting to sew it shut himself, seeing as the pressure of the bandages were enough to halt the bleeding.

With a hollow sigh, Maes began to wind a clean roll of gauze around his neck, then leaned back against the coffee table as if every trace of energy drained out of him within the last ten minutes or so. His eyes scanned over his unconscious friend, a sight that had become painfully familiar by this point. Roy covered in various wounds that could only be partially covered by bandages, unconsciously curling into the corner as if he could hide from the world. The image he saw could not compare to the man he had known for so long now. He couldn't help but wonder if he would ever see the Roy Mustang he knew again.

He's in there, a voice assured, answering his dark thoughts. You know he's in there somewhere.

Maes rubbed at his eyes and begrudgingly worked the gloves back onto Roy's battered hands before he could forget, not daring to test how far the man would go to get them back if he were to wake up too soon. He hated that he had this distrust, but Roy was in no state to constantly be armed with a weapon that has, can, and could continue to harm both himself and others. But Edward made a good point once they were able to step aside from the man and talk about it.

It was a matter of trust.

The people who had imprisoned Roy like an animal would never allow him any use of alchemy, besides what he tried to engrave into the walls, which quite clearly did not work. They needed to differentiate themselves from those monsters in as many ways as possible.

Maes certainly had plenty of time to think about more ways to accomplish this, since Roy had slept through the night and the entirety of the next day.

However, there was one single concern that plagued his mind during this time above all others. He constantly swapped between fretting over it like nothing else mattered, and forcing himself to forget about it completely. If he thought about it too much, he would probably make himself sick.
Because the fact of the matter was, Roy was suicidal.

What made it worse was knowing that Roy had blatantly told him this disturbing little detail himself. The first night he woke up, he told Maes that he was tired and that he tried letting go but someone else wouldn't let him. Maes was too busy reveling in the fact that he was alive to realize that he didn't even want to be.

God, how dense could he be?

Roy certainly did not seem to be itching to off himself since then, but there was no telling what could happen if he felt that same desperation again.

That single revelation haunted his thoughts when he went to sleep that night, infected his dreams, distracted him as he drove to work the next day, and worked it's way to the tip of his tongue when Riza found him at the office and started discreetly imploring about Roy once again. Havoc did the same not long later, and he caught a few more intent stares as he passed by Falman and Breda on his way to get lunch.

They deserved to know, but he remained silent.

They all knew Roy was alive at this point, but were thankfully keeping it as quiet as possible, since Maes had been yet to sense anything off within the military so far. He was still willing to bet that Roy's captors were still searching, but he dared to hope they had not sniffed him out, even now that more people knew the truth.

He feared to think about the secret meetings Roy's old team were having behind closed doors, discussing his situation and how they could track him down without Maes coughing the information up. As much as he would have loved to bring them over so they could see Roy with their own eyes, the thought also terrified him. Nothing good would come from Roy being in the same room with more people than absolutely necessary.

And he didn't want them to see what had become of him.

Maes could see it in their eyes. They all wanted their brave, inspiring leader to come back in a flash of light to pull them all back together to continue their goal of reaching the top of the chain once more.

The way Roy was now, he wasn't going to be doing any of that any time soon.

Until he learned to separate the visions that haunted him apart from reality, he would be doing very little of anything. And even as Maes gave it his all in order to help his friend accomplish this, he couldn't help but feel incredibly useless. For not the first time that day, he told himself once again that something needed to change.

A little over half through the work day on Wednesday, Maes left the office early, claiming he had an important family matter to attend to. He hated spending so much time away from them, but taking a day off from caring for Roy was simply out of the question; he could not put that kind of pressure on Edward. Getting maybe someone like Riza involved crossed his mind, but he had not been able to give the idea much thought lately, considering it seemed impossible at the moment.

Edward greeted him at the door on his way in with an unreadable expression in place. He tersely stated that Roy had woken up earlier, but was still in a haze and drifted off again not long after. Apparently, he had been mumbling to himself since then as well, trapped in a trance-like stupor. Maes would have asked him for more details, but the kid seemed eager to leave, and was already
standing in the door frame by the time he finished his short explanation. Lacking the willpower to focus on his behavior, Maes just let him go, and returned to Roy's unconscious side yet again.

By the time the front door closed behind the fleeing blond, Maes had taken a spot besides Roy on the couch, finding plenty of room as the man had curled up on one end.

The room seemed pale, but not dark as the mid-day sun managed to sneak through the tightly shut blinds. He could see everything around him with relative ease, but there was a downcast air that was almost suffocating once he stopped to consider it. Maes was not used to living in such a continuous drabness, but didn't need to ask to know that Roy would still not take kindly to him opening the windows. He could only hope that his friend's light sensitivity was decreasing by the day, and it was only a matter of time before they could allow some light through. As it were, the house was beginning to feel depressing.

Roy fidgeted on the couch, expression tight and arms tense around his body, successfully drawing Maes' attention back towards him. Without any clear cause, he flinched away from something unknown to the lieutenant colonel, a pained grimace etched onto his face.

He frowned at the sight, wishing there was something he could do fend off the night terrors without waking him up.

"Stay away," Roy breathed, slightly more coherent than Maes had expected. Another violent flinch, his head turning abruptly into the safety of the couch cushion.

Maes felt his heart crack as he watched his friend writhe, and gently placed a hand on his tense shoulder. But as soon as he made contact, Roy kicked himself away further back, stopped only by the sofa's arm.

"Get away!" he hissed, eyes now wide open, searching the room wildly, his breathing rapid as he fought to focus on whatever danger he sensed.

"Hey, it's just me," he assured, voice as calm as he could will it. Roy's eyes settled somewhere past him, distant and foggy, but Maes fought to keep the obvious distress from his expression, for his own sake if not Roy's.

His friend did not respond, continuing to stare beyond him for several prolonged seconds. Just as Maes contemplated saying something more, Roy flinched again with enough strength that one would think he had been physically struck.

"N-no- shut up. Shut up." Roy spoke in a rasp, bowing his head and covering his ears. His legs were pressed protectively against himself, giving Maes the impression that he would get automatically kicked in the gut if he dared to get too close.

The lieutenant colonel had no choice but to hold his tongue and keep himself still, unsure who Roy was talking to. Surely he could not have caused the man to react so vehemently, but one could never be too sure anymore.

Slowly, Roy eventually lowered his gloved hands, arms shaking, frightened eyes staring into nothing- and empty void that surrounded only him, blackened by horrors only he could see.

"Roy?"

He glanced at Maes, but his dark eyes were then drawn away, searching the room as if he barely noticed his presence. Each breath was willed and heavy, his entire body heaving and shivering with every intake, depending on the movement like it was the only thing that kept him functioning.
"Just... stay away-"
"Roy."
"-you damn animals."

Oh.

Oh.

Maes wasn't entirely sure if Roy was still trapped in a vivid dream or if he was hallucinating, but he dreaded to lean towards the latter. He instinctively glanced down at his friend's forearm, still wrapped in bandages, covering the mangled bite mark that was underneath.

With a deep breath, he scooted himself closer on the couch, positioned so he was directly in front of Roy, who's back was still pressed into the corner.

"Roy, listen to me," he ordered, hoping his voice would break through whatever fogged his mind. "You're in your house, remember? There are no animals here. It's just you and me."

Whether it was by divine power or sheer luck, this at least managed to get through to him. Roy blinked rapidly for a moment, eyes thin and wary, and looked at him. Some of the terror on his face faded, replaced by something far more agonizing that tugged on his heartstrings. It was that same hopeless, confused expression he had seen earlier- the one he hoped to never see again.

Roy's mouth cracked open to respond, and he shook his head. "If they're not here," he began slowly, and a gloved hand lightly grazed the bandaged around his arm, "then why can I still hear them?"

Maes hesitated, unsure how to respond to the painfully genuine question. Roy had to have known he was hallucinating, since he seemed to think even he was imaginary. Whatever had attacked his arm must have left quite the mark on his mind as well, revisiting him in dreams and appearing in the corner of his vision.

"They want to kill me, Maes," Roy gasped when he didn't get an immediate response, arms now returning to wrap around himself, eyes wide and staring down at the floor. "I can hear them. Pacing- growling at me- hungry. They followed me. They- they want me dead." he paused, thought for a moment, then chuckled pitiably at himself. "But I already am dead, aren't I?"

It was a rhetorical question that left him faltering. Roy didn't expect an answer. But there was something in the way he spoke- something distant and thoughtless that told him that Roy was stuck in a reverie, but too conscious for him not to take it seriously. He was awake, but Maes had seen him act more aware than this in the recent past. Roy was stuck in between, and needed help to break out.

"No, you're not. You're just as alive as I am, Roy," he insisted, shifting to catch his foggy gaze again. "You know I wouldn't lie to you."

His friend blinked a few times again and looked over at him, a thoughtful frown in place. And then his shoulders sulked, glazed eyes widening slightly as something new occurred to him. "But they wanted to kill you too."

"They... what?" Maes muttered without any thought whatsoever, having been yanked off of his train of thought and left stumbling to recover his balance.
"They want to kill you; they told me. But they didn't. They didn't and I- I don't remember why."
Roy scowled down at the couch, an irate struggle clear in his thin eyes. "I can't remember. Why can't I remember?" he growled, a hand absently trailing up towards his mouth, close enough only for his glove to lightly graze his lip, paused, then continued upwards until his fingers curled into his long bangs.

He did not have a response to that. Maes found himself torn between imploring Roy to explain what he was talking about exactly, or pulling him out of his trance. But in his hesitation, a bark that only Roy could hear sounded and he flinched away from it again, swinging his right arm over his head for protection from something that existed solely in his mind. Maes found himself speechless as he looked at the scene of a terrified man shielding himself from an invisible beast with an arm that had already been ripped apart.

Maes thoughtlessly extended his hand forward again- to do what with, he wasn't sure; remind Roy that he wasn't alone anymore, hopefully. But before he could, his friend's arm began to lower, then froze mid-way as his slit eyes landed on the glove that hugged his wounded hand. He stared at it too long for comfort, then slowly began to curl his fingers except his thumb and index finger.

A harsh shiver ran down his spine and alarms blared in his mind as soon as Maes realized what the man was thinking.

Confirming his thoughts, Roy licked his dry lips and looked up to search the room with the slightest of smiles tugging at his visage. "That's right," he murmured quietly to himself. "Almost forgot. I can- I can fight back now. I can kill them before they kill me. I-"

He was cut off with a rough gasp as Maes grabbed onto the wrist that was steadily rising into the air, posing to snap. Roy instinctively pulled back, but Maes kept his grasp firm, not allowing him to withdraw into himself, or worse, aim for him.

"No, Roy- don't. You'll hurt yourself."

Roy stared at him through unfocused eyes, flabbergasted and something resembling betrayal mixing in as well. "Why are you trying to stop me? I can get rid of them. I know they'll go away if I could just..." He trailed off, pulling back against Maes' grip again, a small spark flickered from his fingertips as the tense digits rubbed against each other.

"Stop it, Roy," he insisted, forcing his friend to lower the gloved hand, and reaching for the other before he could get any ideas.

"No!" he exclaimed, panic lacing into his voice. "I need to- please, Maes!"

Just as his heart shattered for what had to have been the third time that day, Maes decided to do the only think he could think of, regardless of whether or not it would actually help. The gamble was worth it, he decided as he watched Roy glanced around himself, hysteria building as he searched for either a clear threat, or an escape route.

Maes released Roy's arms for just long enough to wrap them around Roy's torso, his head falling easily into the crook of his neck as he pulled the man towards him, grip tight and secure. The alchemist stiffened rigidly at the contact and stopped all breathing as if he did not understand what was happening, and needed to direct all effort into figuring it out.

Maes felt like he was leaning over an open fire, but he did not loosen his hold when Roy fidgeted and tried to break out as he murmured promises that he was safe.
"W-why are you trying to stop me?" Roy asked, his voice alarmingly quiet and broken when the fight started to die out of him. He allowed himself to breath again once he began to accept that there was no use in trying to break free in his current state, and hopefully realized he didn't need to. "You're helping them."

"No, I'm not. There's no one else here, Roy. Just focus on my voice. It's only you and me here."

Roy finally stopped resisting and the tension eventually slid out of his body as if he decidedly relented, rather than understood that there was no threat. His arms slackened by his sides, still trapped within his unyielding embrace. He slowly lowered his head, his chin slightly touching Maes' sleeve. He couldn't see his friend's eyes in his position, but he was sure they were just as hollow as before.

The sickening realization that Roy was simply giving up hit him like an oncoming truck, but still, he did not release his hold.

Neither moved for what felt like many long moments, besides lightly shifting once or twice just to remind Roy that he was there, and keep him focused on reality.

Although he appeared relatively clam, Maes could clearly feel Roy's pulse racing and his breathing was hitched, like he expected a blow to come at any moment. But the fact that he stopped fighting had to have meant something, right? Something besides giving up. Something for Maes to latch onto. He so dearly hoped that Roy trusted him, not just as a friendly illusion but as someone who had the very real power to keep him away from harm, but a sinking feeling suggested that that was nothing more than hopeful thinking.

Maes began to drift into his own thoughts by the time Roy finally moved. He managed to surprise him by tilting his head to the side, gently leaning into Maes and resting the side of his head against him. Somehow, Maes doubted he was even fully aware of this subtle gesture.

"Are you like them, Maes?" He spoke so quietly, it might as well had been nothing more than a passing thought. But he wouldn't dare treat the question as such, taking a brief moment to dissect the words.

"No," he said sternly, willing sincerity into every syllable of his assertive tone.

"You're just telling me what I want to hear."

"I'm telling you the truth," he insisted, his arms subconsciously tightening around his friend. "I'm not like them."

*I'm not a hallucination. I'm real, and not going to hurt you.*

In response, Roy only hummed dismissively and continued to allow the hug to last as if he hadn't noticed it. After a moment where nothing more was said, Maes absently hooked his hands together, letting his arms remain around Roy with little effort, no longer expecting him to pull away.

Until that moment, he had no idea how... distinct Roy's hallucinations were. The line between reality and illusion seemed to have been erased completely. Things couldn't go on like this, Maes ensured himself. And he was no longer willing to just wait and hope the problems would solve themselves. But what could he possibly do to help? Scheduling Roy for therapy was far out of the question, but maybe he could coerce someone into selling him some medication for hallucinations, if such a thing existed. He would need to do some research...

Roy rose his head to glance around the room, pulling Maes from his thoughts. He tensed, afraid of
what his friend might have seen, but his eyes only drifted aimlessly for a moment, until he went still.

"They're watching," he whispered, remaining surprisingly slack as the foreboding words left his mouth. Maes glanced around as well, particularly at the windows, but felt no such sensation, which was something he had become quite intone to turning the war.

"Is it... the animals that attacked you?" he asked carefully, still entirely unsure how to respond.

Roy pursed his lip, then slouched again, seemingly relaxed and far from suggesting that anything was terribly wrong, besides the slightly furrow of his brow. "I'm not sure."

But if there was a bright side to anything, it was that the beasts have finally left him alone for the time being.

Maes sighed, and tried not to think about the trials that were to come with the next step. He needed to find a solution or a cure to these hallucinations, and face the possibility that there simply wouldn't be one. No matter how tightly the trepidation curled around his lungs or how badly his head ached, he directed his attention back onto the present and his friend who, even as he remained safely in his arms, felt miles away.
Chapter 15

Maes had not realized he had fallen asleep until he woke up the next morning, sprawled out on the couch. The tiredness in his eyes vanished the moment Roy came to mind, but one swift turn discovered that he had at some point relocated to the floor, leaning against the leg of the couch, staring blankly at nothing and huddled in his own arms. Something told him that Roy had not gotten a wink of sleep the entire night. Even as he watched, his friend would mumble something to himself every now and again, but Maes had no hope of deciphering the words.

He tried speaking naturally to the man, hoping to feign some sense of normalcy as they went about the morning routine, but the responses he got back were subdued at best. He was hoping that his latest conversation with Roy would help shake in some awareness into him, but he supposed it wouldn't be that easy.

Maes took his leave as soon as Edward arrived to swap shifts, not quite noticing the growing reluctance that was beginning to show through the blond, and hurried to the library on his way to the office. By the time he arrived at the office, on time might he add, Maes was carrying four large medical books under his arms.

As much as he would have liked to bring Roy to a professional, conducting his own research would have to do for now.

He no longer had the luxury of telling himself that nothing was really wrong with Roy- that whatever this was was nothing more than a phase, and he could single-handedly fix it. Maes had to come to terms with the fact that something was broken, and he needed to make the proper steps to correct it.

It killed him on the inside, accepting that. He wasn't sure if doing so was taking a step forward, or realizing that he was much further back than he originally thought. Maybe it was a little bit of both, but it left a sour taste in his mouth all the same.

Maes locked himself in his office and opened one of the heavy books at random, not giving the title a second thought as he started skimming the table of contents for anything mentioning any of Roy's symptoms, specifically hallucinations. He flipped to a specific page that seemed to summarize a few possibilities, and began picking out keywords, keeping Roy in mind as he hoped to break them down.

The book briefly listed out a few causes of hallucination, such as a number of drugs, fevers, and bodily failures, like in the liver and kidney. It didn't say anything about sensory deprivation, which he assumed had something to do with it in Roy's case, but his attention was grappled when psychotic disorders were mentioned, dedicating entire chapters to the topic. Swallowing his dread, Maes continued on that tangent, flipping to the next section.

Psychosis

Also referred to as "psychic neurosis", psychosis is a mental disorder that was first named in 1845. Major symptoms include thinking and emotions that indicate the person experiencing them has lost contact with reality. They may suffer from hallucinations, which are sensory experiences that occur with the absence of an actual stimulus.

They may experience having thoughts and beliefs that are contract to actual evidence, referred to as delusions. People with psychosis will also commonly show signs of a lack of motivation and
Well, that was alarmingly similar.

He skipped ahead until he found a more in-depth section

*The exact cause of psychosis is not always clear, and each case is different. Depending on the situation, multiple types of psychosis can develop. There are specific illnesses that can cause psychosis, and it can also be triggered by drug use, lack of sleep, and other environmental factors.*

Perhaps lack of sleep played a part. Roy's sleeping schedule seemed to be dangerously out of order, and he feared to wonder how much rest he was actually allowed while imprisoned.

Maes decided to skip ahead again, landing on a chapter that focused on different psychotic disorders. His eyes breezes through the list, digesting the options, turning them around, then tossing them aside, doing whatever he could to ignore the nauseating knots that twisted in his gut.

Bipolar disorder- no, that wasn't it. Psychotic depression- probably not? Schizophrenia- Maes paused, re-reading the short description before jumping into the explanatory body paragraph.

*Schizophrenia causes the person experiencing it to slowly lose contact with reality and will suffer from delusions or hallucinations, and will often get confused for split personalities.*

*Symptoms of schizophrenia include unorganized thinking or speak and strange behavior, such as trouble controlling impulses, strange emotional responses to situations, and a lack of emotion or expressions, causing the person to appear to be in a coma-like daze.*

*A person experiencing schizophrenia could have a loss of interest or excitement for life, becoming evident in multiple ways, such as social isolation, trouble experiencing pleasure, and completing normal everyday activities.*

*There are not currently any tests to diagnose schizophrenia, and there is no known cure for this mental illness. Lifelong treatment to control or reduce severe symptoms includes medications such as:*

Maes stopped reading, allowing his heavy gaze to drift for a moment.

God, he hoped that wasn't it. Every fiber in his being repulsed away from the thought, wanting to forget about the possibility completely. Lifelong treatment? That suggested that Roy would be like this forever if this happened to be the case. There would be no hope of reaching his goal of becoming Fuhrer, or even returning to the military for that matter.

With a sigh, he pushed the book to the side and opened up the next one, repeating the entire process from the beginning.

His eyes glazed over countless familiar words, all chipping away at the hole that had formed in his gut, making it deeper and more agonizing with every passing minute.

*Psychotic, schizophrenic, insane, mad...*

None of these words fit the picture of Roy that had occupied a permanent place in his memory many years ago. But then he would force himself to look at the evidence from the past few days, he stopped himself short of tossing the contents of his desk out the unsuspecting window in a fit of rage.
He exhaled slowly through his teeth and closed his eyes for a minute before continuing on.

Maes found a section that was dedicated to recording recent tests done to find cures for psychotic behavior, although the book wasn't quite as current as the last one. Worth a shot, he supposed as he read on until something caught his eye.

*It was noted that people with schizophrenia recovered slightly when their temperatures were high, which begun the testing of what was referred to as "fever therapy", in which psychiatrists would induce fevers reaching temperatures as high as 41 degrees Celsius (106 degrees Fahrenheit). Psychiatrists also experimented inducing fevers by injecting the patient with sulfur and oil, or causing abscesses.*

Maes shoved the book away from himself, stricken by horror and skin crawling in disgust. It slid across his desk, saved from falling off the side by the table lamp, which rattled on contact, flickering until it settled.

Nope. No, no way in hell, absolutely not.

He still wasn't sure what exactly it was that Roy had, if he could even fall into any simple category, but treating it was not looking good at all. He would rather die than subject Roy to something that sounded so inhumane and painful and no.

Sulfur? Oil? What the hell!? If the method would guarantee an answer to all of his problems, he would maybe -very, very reluctantly- consider it. But as it were, not on his life. He was not going to so much as contemplate the concept until he had something more than tests and theories to go off of.

*Damn it, why was this so hard?*

Surely Roy was not the first person to suffer like this. So then why was there so little to work with? Why had they not yet found a cure or a solution? Why was this not a vocal issue? What happened to all the other people who had been crippled by their own broken minds?

A dark, cold voice provided him the answer with little convincing:

They were locked up in asylums and mental hospitals to be forgotten by the rest of the world.

Maes shook his head, banishing the thought to the furthest recess of his mind as his fiercely protective nature bristled at the concept.

As much he would have loved to toss every one of those damn books into the trashcan, lie his head down, and never get up, desperation prompted him to reach a weary hand forward and slide the heavy book back over to him. He hung over it, back arched as he leaned on his palm, staring down at the page. Flipping past the depressing text, Maes limited his search to words that offered any fragment of optimism to grasp for.

He lost track of how much time he spent boring into the pages, reading and re-reading segments simply because his mind was spinning too disorderly for him to comprehend the words. But as he glazed through the emotionless text, one phrase caught his eye and caused him to immediately backpedal a few paragraphs under the *Types of Psychosis* section.

*Brief psychotic disorder.*

He dared to get his hopes up.
A brief psychotic disorder, also called brief reactive psychosis, is an uncommon psychiatric condition characterized by sudden and temporary periods of psychotic behavior, such as delusions, hallucinations, and confusion. Symptoms can last as little as a day or as long as a month, but may be severe enough to put the person at increased risk of violent behavior or suicide.

Brief psychotic disorder is differentiated by its limited duration and is not triggered by drugs or alcohol abuse. Most often, brief psychotic disorder does not indicate the presence of a chronic mental health condition and are most commonly caused by major stress or trauma.

He read over those two paragraph a few more times, engraining the words into his mind before they could vanish into thin air.

Brief psychotic disorder? Something temporary that was caused by stressful situations? Temporary?

A light bubbling sensation in his chest told him he was overwhelmingly relieved and happy to learn this, but he was somehow left numb instead. It was too good to be true. Too easy. This book was trying to tell him that their largest problem would indeed just get rid of itself in time. That none of this would last. That Roy's damaged mind would mend itself and he could eventually continue with his life.

Too good to be true.

But he could let himself hope until proven otherwise, right? Surely there was no harm in hoping that just once, things would end well for them.

But if he was wrong- if whatever had infected Roy's mind was more permanent and there was no cure, then he had no idea what he would do and what kind of grim realities he would be forced to accept.

The only bright side was that he did not yet need to cross that bridge. The possibility would remain in the back of his mind whether he wanted it there for not, but at least for now, he allowed himself to be hopeful.

Maes leaned back, staring at the open book from a distance as the lines blurred together, his mind churning the information on overdrive, dubiously wondering what the chances were that he had imagined the entire thing.

He paused as a knock sounded from his door, prying his eyes away from his swirling thoughts. One of his younger subordinates cracked the door open upon his response.

"Sir, some of Colonel Mustang's old team are asking to speak with you."

He sighed, Hawkeye and Havoc appearing in his mind's eye. They had been persistent lately- not like he blamed them or was surprised in the slightest.

"Show them in," he responded, hoping his voice didn't sound as weary as he thought it did. He promptly closed the book before him and stacked it with the others, casually turning the revealing spines away from the office's entrance.

Of course, he learned seconds later that while he was close, his guess wasn't quite right.

It wasn't just the two blonds, but Roy's entire team, save for Edward. Breda, Falman, and Fuery followed the first two in, all crowding into his office with sober, determined expressions that set alarms off in his head. He had little reason to be concerned, since he knew exactly what they
wanted and he held all the cards, but the organization and the sense of feeling cornered was appropriately offsetting.

"Lieutenant Colonel Hughes," Riza began as she took up the front of the helm, facing him squarely with stiff shoulders and resolution shining in her sherry eyes. The mourning and suffering she had endured these past few weeks was still painfully evident somehow- in the way she held herself and even in the way she spoke. There was something tired and broken there, something that desperately latched onto the sliver of hope he had offered a few days ago. It drove her to pull herself out of the depressed pit she had tried to conceal, and carried her to his office in search of more. And the others looked not much better, all equally tired and worn behind their shared will to finally get answers out of him.

"With all due respect, sir," she began formally, the rest of the team not stirring in the slightest, "we have a right to know why you've been tight-lipped recently" She trailed off without giving any more details. It went without saying that the matter was to be kept surreptitious, and he could at least appreciate that they were taking it seriously.

Maes sighed and scanned his olive eyes over the group, inwardly hoping no one of importance saw them all traveling towards his office together. Something told him that someone was keeping tabs on them, making sure they weren't doing anything too suspicious. And if so, a group trip to the investigations office was sure to raise some flags. But at this point, it wasn't worth commenting on. Maes wasn't about to waste the time they carved out of their day for this.

"It's a... delicate situation," he started slowly, caught between wanting to tell them the unsavory truth, cover up the worst of it, or just not telling them anything. "It's not safe to talk about."

"We got that part," Breda said from his position by the door, creating a barrier in case anyone would try to interrupt the meeting. "But there must be something you can give us"

"I know, but-" he cut himself off, unsure how to explain what was stopping him. He hated the reality of the situation too much to admit it. He opened his mouth to spit something out, but caught a glance of Furey staring down at the stack of books he had pushed off to the side

"Um- Sir-" he began timidly, eyes unable to remove themselves from the cover of the book that sat on top of the small stack. "Why were you looking into psychosis?" Something in his tone suggested he already knew the reason.

Maes inwardly grimaced. If it was just the two lieutenants, there would have been less of a chance of them noticing the incriminating evidence, but the same couldn't be said now that there was a total of five people in his office searching for answers from him, all arcing around his desk.

The other four sets of eyes followed the gaze of their youngest member, all coming to the same conclusion before Maes could feel their collective stare rest heavily on him. He struggled to meet their gazes, much preferring the idea of staring at his discarded paperwork instead.

But damn it, they had every right to know. Even if it would hurt them- they needed to know the truth.

"Wait," Havoc murmured as he connected the dots. "That's not for- for the colonel, is it?"

Maes laced his fingers for lack of a better place to put them, and dropped his gaze, soaking in the sense of defeat that followed him since this situation came to light so many days ago.

"It is," he admitted solemnly. "The truth is, up until about a week ago, Roy had been kidnapped,
light deprived and tortured since he was reported dead."

The leaden air was sickeningly quiet as he felt their eyes bore into him, heard the soft gasps, caught the subtle tension out of the corners of his eyes.

"Who- who would do that to him?" Fuery asked quietly, appearing to be the least capable of bellying his horror within the small group of soldiers.

Maes shook his head. "We still don't know. But whoever they are, they're still out there."

"Hold on a moment," Falmen suddenly interjected, drawing the other's attention towards him as he pursed his lip for a moment in concentration. "If he's alive, then who was buried during the funeral?"

Maes had not put much serious thought towards the subject, primarily because there was no helping it. "Hopefully, the casket is empty. Or maybe it's whoever- or whatever- Hawkeye and Havoc saw in the alleyway that night. But regardless, it just goes to show you how much power these people have."

He finally managed to draw his eyes back up towards them to be met by Riza's steely, yet simultaneously deeply troubled gaze.

"Then why can't we see him?" she asked sternly, her voice sounding more like a command than a question.

"... For the very same reason I have these," he answered remorsefully, placing a heavy hand on the stack of tomes that occupied the corner of his desk. "Since we found him, he's been... hallucinating. At times, he still thinks he's still there, and that we're trying to hurt him. It's been a challenge getting through to him, and surrounding him with more people wouldn't help. In fact, I believe it would only make things worse."

The answer put Hawkeye at pause. She looked as if she wanted to argue, but had nothing to say for the time being, settling on fully digesting the alarming words in silence.

"Hallucinating?" Havoc echoed with a furrowed brow. "Hallucinating what, exactly?"

"People, mostly," he answered easily, based on how naturally Roy spoke to him even when he was convinced he was nothing more than a figment of his imagination. "Sometimes animals."

The five of them shared a look, all carrying various degrees of strain as Maes' words hung dauntingly in the air.

"So you're saying he might confuse us for hallucinations?" the second lieutenant asked carefully.

Maes nodded.

"But- but if he saw us, maybe he would-"

"It's not that simple," he cut in, fighting keep his snappish tone away from the surface as memories of his best friend denying his existence flashed across his mind. "Either he can't tell the difference, or he's too afraid to try."

"Afraid? What is he afraid of?"

Maes stared blankly at his desk for a moment, thinking about how good of a question it was. He
had been asking himself the same thing from time to time. "He's afraid to discover that he's still
down there where we found him. He doesn't want to believe he's safe only to be disappointed."

Some part of him had already known what a large part pure reluctance played, but it wasn't until he
spoke the words aloud did it finally sink in.

"What about any physical injuries?" Hawkeye asked suddenly, her tone weary and forcefully
detached in order to reign in her composure. She didn't speak quickly enough to make one think she
ignored what he said, but just to give the impression that she did not want to think about Roy's
mental wellbeing. "You said he was tortured..."

Maes frowned to himself, wishing she hadn't asked. "Overall, I'm not... entirely sure. It's too
dangerous to bring him into a hospital, but he's covered in superficial wounds. His hands in
particular are a mess, but they could heal in time. He might have a few cracked ribs..." He trailed
off, listening all that he knew in is head but not certain enough to actually bring half of it up.

"Hughes," Riza began, the instance in her voice drawing him out of his thoughts. "If he's been
tortured, then he needs to see a doctor."

"If you manage to find a reliable underground doctor, then let me know. But until then, this will
have to do." He wasn't entirely serious, but something in the way she silently stared back at him
told Maes that this would not be the last time they had that discussion.

His office was filled with a stifling, contemplative silence once again.

"I'm sorry everyone," he continued after the somber stretched for a moment longer. "I'm sorry I've
kept this from all of you for this long. Roy- he still has a long way to go. But hopefully-" he
glanced down at the stack of books under his hand. "-he'll recover."

"We need to find the bastards who did this." Maes glanced over to Breda, who had folded his arms
and kept a steady glare pointed at the ground.

"I agree. But we'll need to keep our heads down."

"Or," Riza cut in after pulling herself from her thoughts to lock her eyes onto his. They burned with
a savage determination that he had not seen in quite some time- if ever. "We'll have to find them
before they find us."

The work day could not have ended soon enough. He began to regret breaking into the medical
books in the morning, as it made enduring the rest of the day almost unbearable. He wanted
nothing more than to run outside and tell someone- tell the world that Roy had a fighting chance.
Contrary to what he had expected, it was refreshing to let the team onto his friend's situation. Being
the head of investigations, he had already been skilled at keeping secrets, but something that hit so
close to home was another story.

But after all of the excitement, spending the rest of the day on paperwork seemed painfully
anticlimactic. He would occasionally take breaks from the mundane to skim through the library
books, but he only managed to further familiarize himself rather then learn anything as
groundbreaking as his latest discovery.

In addition, he did a little more research near the end of the day by asking the people around him
tactfully casual questions about different types of medications. While there was no cure, if he could
find something to ease Roy's suffering until then, then it would certainly make him feel better.
That at least seemed like the only thing he could do at this point. But whatever it was, something
was better than nothing.

When the office hours finally came to an end, he hurried back to his car and stopped at the local pharmacy on his way back, picking up some over-the-counter medication that he heard were generally relaxing, and would hopefully ease his friend if the delusions got too out of control.

Maes locked the door behind him as soon as he entered Roy's house, casting a glance over his shoulder to scan the hall that stretched out before it. The kitchen lights were generally always on now, emitting a warm yellow glow in the otherwise dark house. The sun had nearly set, allowing very little light from its downcast rays to reach through the closed blinds, creating an illusion of night from within.

Straightening up and stuffing his keys into his pocket, Maes walked forward with a bottle of medication in his hand, stopping only once he reached the living room. He could see Roy's form sitting on the floor in the corner, but did not feel overly eager to approach him this time. The medicine felt cold in his hand, forcing him to be starkly aware of its presence at all times, and even more so at the sight of his friend.

He continued on until he reached the kitchen, naturally being drawn towards the only lit room in the house, not ignoring yet not quite acknowledging the small tinge of shame he felt at walking past Roy without a word. But it wasn't a big deal; he would speak to him in a moment.

He stepped inside the open room, eyes immediately shifting towards the blond who was leaning back against the counters with his arms folded and a mostly empty glass of water besides him.

Edward looked up at him, mild signs of surprise in his tired comportment. "Oh, I didn't hear you come in," he began in a voice that was a little too quiet for him, and a little too weary for comfort. "How was it today?" he asked plainly. It was unnervingly quiet in this house.

Edward exhaled and scratched the back of his head, gaze falling away to the floor for a moment. The hesitance did Maes no favors, but he reigned in control of his festering nerves and waited for the blond to answer.

"He's not getting better."

Maes wasn't sure how much weight Edward intended to put into that statement, but the words hit him like a crushing blow. He wasn't able to respond, but Ed took it as an invitation to elaborate.

"I think he might be trying to scratch into the walls again. Like what he did in that cell," he went on, a hint of reluctance sounding through his voice, and avoiding eye contact and he squirmed uncomfortably from the words. "Hard to tell though, since he'll just stop everything and stare at me whenever I get too close. But that's one bright side, I guess- that his sight might be getting better."

"I see." It was all he could bring himself to say, torn between the good and bad news. Although one vastly outweighed another.

"What's that?" Edward asked, sparing him from dwelling on the topic any longer. He glanced down to the small bottle in his hand and placed it down on the kitchen table.

"Barbital."

Edward stared at him for a moment, glanced down at the bottle, then back at Maes. "You're gonna drug him?" he asked, a little too loudly.
"It's just a sedative, Ed," he corrected pointedly with a frown. As much as the idea clawed at his insides, logically, it would be far better to give Roy some kind of relaxant rather then let him burn something down. He could just take the gloves away, but then Roy would freak out and give him another reason to use the sedative.

"That might help the symptoms, but it won't do anything in the long run."

"I know that, but there isn't really a cure for this type of thing."

Edward blinked, stilled by the statement, but something accepting in his golden eyes gave the impression that he was not surprised. He looked downcast, his folded arms tensing slightly.

"Figures."

"But I have reason to believe it won't be permanent." The kid once again gave him his full attention, albeit dubiously. "We can't confirm anything for now, but it's possible for... psychotic symptoms to appear from stressful situations. They'll go away on their own now that he's out of there. In theory."

"Well how long is that supposed to take?"

"A few weeks, I think it said."

"And if it doesn't?" Edward asked, his eyes narrowing into something that resembled a glower. "What if he never gets better? What if he's stuck like this for the rest of his life? For the rest of our lives?"

Maes frowned and took a moment before responding in hopes of keeping Ed from blowing up. "Come on, give Roy some more credit," he cajoled calmly, hoping to defuse the kid's rising tension.

"Credit for what? As soon as I think he's getting some clarity back, he falls back into some-delusional haze." Edward spat, flicking a wrist at the word, as if he could banish it so easily. "Ed-"

"I thought he was going to blow the place up again after you left."

Maes paused and furrowed his brow. "Weren't you the one who said we should trust him with his gloves?"

Edward's shoulders slumped and he was glaring at the floor now. "I know, but- but it's not working. Nothing's working."

Maes shouldn't have been surprised to see this behavior. In hindsight, he wasn't surprised. Everything has been piling on the poor kid, and Maes began to realize that he had been too distracted by Roy to notice.

Making up his mind, Maes walked across the kitchen and knelt in front of Edward, who's scrutinizing eyes followed him without fail.

Just below his eye level, Maes stopped to actually look at the kid for the first time in several days, now easily able to pick out the signs of stress that did not belong on someone so young.

"I know this has been hard," he began, the understatement tasting sour in his mouth. "But Roy
needs us right now. He has never given up on either of us, so we need to return the favor."

The tension faded to some degree but Edward still did not look convinced. Maes reached out and placed a hand on his shoulder with an assuring squeeze. "It won't be like this forever."

"What makes you so sure?"

"...We can't afford to let this continue. Roy can't afford it. We'll figure it out somehow."

Again, Edward did not look convinced, but the kid wasn't expecting much of a response anyway. They were both painfully aware of how little they had to work with.

Whatever Edward was going to say in response was cut off by the sudden shrill ring of a telephone. Both of them jumped and heard a hasty muffle coming from the other room to indicate Roy's shock as well.

Maes rose to his feet and glanced at the ringing phone, then back at Ed, then back to the phone as he began to approach it. He wasn't even aware the line was still active since Roy's reported death. But then again, who would have cared to deal with it besides him?

There were only a handful of people that came to mind who could have had any reason to call Roy's number, all in which would have been trying to contact him. Unless it was someone who just had not heard the news, of course.

Maes picked up the handset and pulled it to his ear, listened to the silence on the other end, then offered a cautious "hello?"

"Maes?" replied an angelic voice.

"Gracia," he greeted, shoulders slacking and a small smile naturally slipping through his worries like silk. His wife was one of the few people who knew Roy was alive. After so many days and nights of worrying about his friend, the crumbling wall that kept him from talking about it eventually gave way when in her presence, usually late at night after a long day. She was overjoyed to learn the truth, but was even more worried about what the future held, just as the rest of them were.

He had kept the more frightening details to himself for the time being, but being able to at least express some of his frustrations to her from time to time was his saving grace.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything," she began carefully, unknowingly making his heart flutter at the very sound of her concern. "Elicia really wanted to talk to you."

And just like that, he felt his heart both sink and swell at the same time. He had been spending more and more nights at Roy's house instead of his own, leaving pathetically little time for his family. Whenever he did come home, it tended to be too late in the night. His dear daughter did not know the details, since children were not known to excel in keeping secrets. He was already planning the lengthy apology he would give her when he would finally be free to tell the world of Roy's survival, and then the whole family, Roy included if he was up to to it by then, would go get ice cream.

But until then, she was under the impression that he was still working on cleaning up the deceased man's house.

Hesitantly, he cast Edward a glance as the kid was inspecting the bottle of medication. He didn't seem particularly put off by the conversation, so he turned back towards the phone, failing to
Edward stood back and watched as Hughes picked up the phone, almost amazed when the stress vanished upon speaking into it. Once he learned it was the man's wife on the other end, he decided that he did not need to be present. Besides, it didn't take a genius to figure out that he wouldn't be discussing anything Ed could find particularly interesting.

As his gaze began to drift, another shuffle caught his ear and pulled his attention to the living room. But around the corner and in the dark, he couldn't see a thing. He figured Mustang was probably having a panic attack from the ringing, and impulsively picked up the bottle that Hughes had discarded on the table.

If he had to guess, it was probably a weaker version of the sedatives that were used in hospitals. If it was going to be of any use to them, it would be better to be placed in somewhere more convenient.

Edward gave Hughes one more meaningful glance, who promptly returned it, before stepping into the hallway with the cold glass bottle in hand, his mind already pulling up a mental map of the living room to find a good location for it. Somewhere out of the way so Mustang couldn't knock it over, but close enough for them to get to quickly if the need arose.

But as he turned into the living room, Ed froze in the archway, eyes falling on the figure who wasn't where he expected.

Mustang had pulled himself to his feet and moved to the center of the room, tense and more focused than he had seen him in days. And if it was even possible, there was more distrust present in his dark eyes than ever before.

Even as the room grew darker as the sun continued to set, Edward could clearly notice when the man's eyes fell to the bottle in his hand, then traveled back up to meet his gaze.

"I knew it," he muttered, his voice dark and foreboding, somehow managing to send an unnerving jolt down Ed's spine. "I knew it was all too good-" he chuckled grimly "-that all this could actually..."

As he trailed off, Edward took a step forward and opened his mouth to say something reassuring or calming, but-

"Stay back!" Mustang barked, curling his hands into fists and taking half a step away, as if the three meters between them wasn't enough. "And keep that away," he added, pointing distastefully at the bottle in Ed's hand.

"What?" Ed muttered, following Mustang's gaze down to the medication. "This isn't- it's not-"

Being at a loss for words was made no better by the manic grin that spread across Mustang's face, somehow disconnected from the obvious pain that shadowed his eyes. And Ed only now noticed that his arms were shaking; with what, he wasn't sure.

"I heard you talking," he began, then grimaced suddenly, his brief smile falling into a frown once again. "I always hear you. It's always you... You want to drug me again. I heard you."

Edward only gaped, sensing his voice abandon him. How could he be such an idiot? He supposed...
he just didn't think Mustang was listening. He usually wasn't... *Stupid.*

He barely caught the *again* in the man's statement, but something in the back of his mind told him it wasn't right.

"What for?" the man asked rhetorically, tilting his head, allowing the dim, far-off lights to catch his dark eyes as they gleamed with distrust and rage- and fear. "Want to knock me out so you can bring me back *there?* Or do you want to make me defenseless again? Maybe just cut my hands off while you're at it!"

"Hey, calm down, Mustang," he pleaded, feeling the energy to fight the man on this drain with every second. He did not expect his words to do anything, and he was right. His mind began to spin with the different paths he could take, hastily weighing the pros and cons to figure out what to do. But as one idea came to mind, his gaze was brought back down to the bottle of sedatives in his hand without thought. He did not expect that one small gesture to be so damaging.

Mustang bared his teeth in a snarl as his intensifying eyes followed Edward's gaze. "They wouldn't do that to me. They're not- you can't be him. You're not Edward. And just when I started to think..."

"Wha-" Ed cut himself off and set his jaw as his eyes narrowed. His confusion was stifled by the brewing storm of conflicting emotions that sprouted at the scene before him. "What are you even *talking about?* Just- just quit acting like this, damn it! Who could I be, if not myself? How could you not get it after all this time?"

Mustang stiffened as the blond rose his voice, but otherwise did not move. "N-no, you're lying. You can't be him. This can't-" His breathing began to grow heavier and he mindlessly curled a hand into his hair. "Shit- just make up your mind already. I can't keep doing this! You- you think I'm insane. But I'm not! I'm *not.*"

"Sane people don't hallucinate on a daily basis," he shot back, thoughtlessly allowing the man to rile him up.

Mustang staggered for a moment, almost winded by the retort. "So it's true then. It is all just... just a hallucination."

"What- no! That's not what I-" he paused and groaned as he combed a hand through his bangs. "Damn it, listen to me," he ordered, taking another step forward, nearly forgetting about the glass bottle in his other hand. "*Just think,* Mustang; the hallucinations aren't real. You can't touch them, and they can't touch you."

As Edward attempted to approach, the older man responded by backing up. Whether he realized it or not, a trembling hand rose to his bandaged forearm for reasons that were entirely his own.

"You gotta be able to tell the difference."

Mustang just shook his head as the distant fog began to return to his eyes.

Something yearning jumped inside of Ed's chest with a jolt as he watched the focus begin to fade. He needed to do something to keep it there. He couldn't let Mustang fall back into a daze; there was no telling how long it would last this time.

"Let me prove it," he offered, proceeding to close the gap. But all too eager to help him, Edward
failed to heed the signs as the man's gloved hand curled around his wounded forearm, just lightly enough to avoid irritating the hidden bite mark.

"N-no, you're lying," he said in a whisper as a flash of pure, raw fear blinked into his visage. Edward, determined to see his intention through, did not allow it to slow him down. If he never shoved the confused man out of his comfort zone, then how would they ever progress?

Mustang reeled further way, but the back of his legs collided into the coffee table, forcing his balance to falter. He flailed for a moment to correct it, but also momentarily blinding himself from the blond for a few precious seconds.

By the time he looked up, Edward had cut the gap in half and held his flesh arm out almost in a sign of peace, but it was really just an instinctual gesture that he put no thought into, just like what one would do when approaching a wild animal.

"Let me help, Mustang," he insisted, struggling to catch the man's restless gaze. He never managed to, however. Something told him that his vision was still too unfocused and dim to make out his eyes yet anyway.

"Stop," he tried again, now pulling his wounded arm up to himself protectively. His tone was careful and on-edge, clipped like he expected to be interrupted by a physical strike at any moment. The sight made Edward's blood boil; it wasn't right that he was being targeted with this much fear by his commanding officer. Roy Mustang shouldn't have had any reason to fear him, and yet somehow, for reasons beyond his understand, he did.

This realization dug a deep, unforgiving hole in his heart. It had hurt so much to look at him, but the only thing that kept him going was the waning prospect of fixing it. If he could help to repair the man's shattered mind, then he could put up with anything. But if not...

"Mustang, please just trust me here," He was only an arm's length away from the man now, who's retreat was halted only by the conveniently placed furniture. He stared back at Edward, blinking rapidly for a moment. He recognized the request, and weighed the options.

And as they stared at each other, Edward actually thought for a moment that Mustang would freely give him that trust.

But the man shook his head, fear overtaking his movements. Fear of being hurt- fear of betrayal or being wrong- Ed wasn't sure, but something held him back. Something that he could not push through.

It was in that moment that he knew it was now or never. He had something that seemed rare those days: Mustang's attention. While not able to recognize what seemed plainly obvious to anyone else, he was awake, and he was thinking.

If only he could prove that he was real- if he could make that physical contact, then perhaps he could push the man in the right direction. Yes, Hughes had managed as much already, but it was always when Mustang was trapped in some kind of trance-like reverie that probably felt more like a dream to him than anything else. Ed needed to take advantage of this opportunity before it faded.

With a steady breath, Edward readied himself, idly remembering once again that he still held the bottle of sedatives in his automail hand. His grip on it stiffened for a moment, and he wondered for a split second if Mustang was then reminded of it as well.

It felt like minutes had passed, but the decision was made.
Edward stepped forward, unsure of what he was going to do- simply desperate to do something. But he had no way to know that Mustang had countless memories of being attacked by him, all through swift forward lunges that would result in more injuries, more pain, more suffering. Except this time, he came across to the man as attacking while armed with yet another drug in hand.

He had no way of knowing that in that moment, Mustang's mind brought him back to the alleyway where it all began.

"GET AWAY!" Mustang growled, eyes ablaze in a confused rage that manifested in an instant. "YOU LIAR! GET AWAY!"

He blindly swung is arm through the dark air and his unnaturally hostile screams rung in the kid's ears, leaving him too stunned to dodge when his hand made contact with the Ed's cheek with enough force to whip his head to the side and leave him unbalanced, nearly tumbling back. The glass bottle slipped from his grasp and hit his ears with the sound of it rolling on the floor, miraculously not shattering.

An angry stinging sensation replaced the numbness almost immediately and far before his mind caught up to understand that he had just been hit across the face. He stared at the wall blankly for several long seconds, barely capable of recognizing the deafening silence that now consumed the room. Slowly and without thought, he brought a hand up to his cheek, almost as if to test if it had really happened. As he did so, he drew his widened eyes back to the man, silently studying the aggressive, distrustful and painfully confused expression on Mustang's face.

There wasn't a shred of regret or understanding on his visage; only that same animalistic defensiveness that could see no wrong in his own actions. In his mind, he did not attack his own subordinate; he was just defending himself from a threat.

Edward did not recognize him.

That realization hurt much more than any physical blow possibly could, but both factors played a part in the warmth he felt build in his eyes and the crippling ache in his heart.

Edward couldn't bring himself to remain there any longer. Everything began to piece together as clearly as someone holding up a sign, and he knew there was no longer a point in saying another word. He turned his back on Mustang and walked out, rubbing at his misting eyes with his sleeve.

He couldn't stay there.

He needed to get out of this house.

He needed to get away from all of this.

Ed stomped through the hall, feet feeling heavier with every step he took away from the room. But as he turned a corner, he stopped abruptly as Hughes stood in his path.

Once the lieutenant colonel took one look at the blond, his eyes quickly found the reddened spot on his cheek as well as red hint in his treacherous eyes.

"What happened in there?" he asked in a panic, his phone conversation undoubtedly cut short by the screams.

"He slapped me," Ed growled as he subconsciously returned a nursing hand onto the side of his face in a vain hope to null the sting, looking his pathetically teary gaze away from the man in shame.
"He- what!?" Hughes looked above Edward's head and towards the room where his lost friend remained, dumbfounded. He cogs visibly turned in his mind until he came to a conclusion, portrayed by the narrowing of his eyelids.

"Even in this state, there's no excuse to-" he began as he stepped past the kid to give Mustang a lecture, but was stilled when a metal hand suddenly grabbed hold of his wrist.

Without looking up at him, Edward spoke slowly and downcast in both voice and posture.

"He's gone."

He was given only a tense silence in response for a moment that felt more like minutes.

"... I don't know what you mean," the man said softly, prying his gaze away from the teenager and onto his friend down the hall. "I can see him. He's right there. He's-"

"No, Hughes," Edward snapped. His hand unconsciously tightened his grip as he finally turned his head to face him. His expression was grim but resolute as he tried to hide the black cloud of sorrow that hung over him. "He's right there, but he's gone. Roy Mustang isn't here anymore. There's nothing keeping me here either."

His hand fell from the man's wrist and he turned to keep walking. Hughes was frozen stiff for only a fraction of a second before he willed himself into action and placed a hand on the kid's shoulder, forcing him to stop.

"You can't do that, Ed. You can't just give up on him," he pleaded, fingers tightening around the fabric of his jacket in terror that he would break away and leave. "Roy would never do that to you. He doesn't deserve that."

"What are you even talking about?!" Ed demanded as he shrugged his shoulder free only so he could swivel around to face him directly. "Mustang never liked me from the beginning! I don't know why you ever thought that I could do anything to help!"

The lieutenant colonel opened his mouth to speak, but he was at a loss for words, forced to hesitate by the onslaught of mixed emotions that Edward undulated.

"I'm going home, Hughes," he stated, the energy sapped from his body as he marched to the door and pulled it up. "I'll see you later."

"Ed! Wait, please-!

_Slam_
Gaspish, harsh breaths ripped through his throat, his shoulders heaving with every inhale and body shuddering with every exhale. Mind numb with adradline, no thoughts passed through the overwhelming buzz of pure instinct. Only once Roy had sensed that he was alone did any trace of clarity return to him. The animalistic demand for self defense was no longer needed and slowly began to slink back into its cave. But once he was allowed to think again, the torrent of information that overflowed was too immense to make any sense of.

There was an overpowering sense that something wasn't right- this awareness made his heart beat loudly in his chest, constricted it with uncertainty, and tugged at his growing headache. Instead of attempting to shift through the evidence, he focused on keeping himself from choking on his tongue.

He heard voices in the distance- loud, angry, desperate voices that bounced off of the walls and echoed inside his skull, yet not quite reaching his brain. He had grown used to the voices, Roy told himself before he could begin to wonder if they were worth listening to. He had not heard them in sometime, actually, but he decided to blame that on the doubt he was beginning to have regarding his situation. They returned now that he accepted the truth- now that he no longer dared to consider any alternative.

And yet, that didn't feel quite right either. But Roy went with that anyway, purely because it was easy.

He had consistently told himself not to get his hopes up- don't fall for their attractive lies. But honestly, Roy did not know why he fought it so adamantly. He could have just went along it; he could have pretended that everything was indeed okay. It would have been easy to convince himself that, since it was all very convincing.

But something still wasn't right.

He looked down at his hand, obscured by the white glove that had been faintly tainted with red. Squinting through the dimness of the room and the fog in his eyes, he could see traces of what had to be his own blood seeping in from underneath.

And it stung.

Before realizing what he was doing, he felt the impact of the blow he had made on Edward. He did not expect anything. He expected the kid to vanish within an instant as the visions always, always did.

But he remained there, standing rigidly, head turned to the side, shock evident in his eyes that, for a long moment, could not look back at him.

Roy's vision had improved considerably over the past couple of days, adjusting to the blissful consistence of the dim room, but every line was still blurred and small details were lost to him. He could make out expressions now. He could see the horror and the betrayal- not the tears, however.

Roy's clouded mind did not let him process any of this until after the fact. Only now that he was alone could he look back on it and dread to wonder why.
He was certain they were at times nothing but hallucinations, but he forced himself to think back to all the times this version of Ed had attacked him, physically making blows that he always felt, some of which still remained with him to this day. It shouldn't have been strange that he was able to make contact back.

And yet, it wasn't right.

Why did it hurt to look at him? Why did his gut twist into knots at the thought of hitting him? He was just trying to get rid of a threat! And he succeeded-

Just… not the way he expected.

He could feel the inexplicable dread spread through his body, weighing him down and growing stronger the further its reach got, like some wild monster that became more terrifying and savage with every second. It devoured his insides, making him hollow, leaving plenty of room for self-doubt and a suddenly striking terror to take root and sprout.

He couldn't shake it. No matter how adamantly he told himself that he did the right thing, a cold, knowing voice in the back of his head continued to shoot down his attempts with an unforgiving rage. There was a small, usually meek part of himself that was furious at his actions.

Questions began to ask themselves in his head- questions that he wanted nothing to do with. He couldn't bare to ponder them or even acknowledge their existence. The same questions of what was real and what was not, except with an enormous amount of potency.

His eyes snapped back into focus when he noticed movement. Maes had returned from around the corner, tense and radiating a heated, distressed air, suddenly giving Roy the sensation of being cornered even before he fully entered the room.

"Roy," Maes breathed, clearly torn between acting as gentle as he had thus far, or relenting to the raw, tired frustration that fumed just beneath the surface. "Do you realize what you've done? You-"

He paused, interrupted by the anguish evident on his friend's tense expression.

"I- I don't- understand," he stuttered, voicing his raging thoughts more than trying to hold a conversation.

"What don't you understand?" Maes asked wryly.

"Why I... why I feel like I-" Roy paused, mouth gaping open as the words refused to form, his eyes staring out blankly into nothing.

"Like you did something wrong?" His sharp clarification warranted no response from the man besides more hesitant silence. Maes moved to place a hand on his shoulder, but Roy swiftly backed up, stumbling over the coffee table, and held his arms up in front of himself defensively.

"Stay away," he gasped mindlessly, dark eyes locked on him, scrutinizing him, looking for something that even he did not understand.

Maes looked far too fed up to heed his warning.

"Enough of this Roy. You need to accept that we're not another one of your hallucinations. I realize it can't be that simple, but-"

"Stop. Stop, no- no, you can't be." He inched himself further away, wanting nothing more than to melt into the floor. "You can't be real. I can't keep letting myself think that. Because if- if you are,
then-" he paused and his gaze dropped for a second, a grim, crooked smile appearing for a moment before shifting into an agonizing grimace.

Maes only watched him for a moment, expression unreadable. Roy glanced away as if to find an escape route, but his focus snapped back to him the moment he took a step closer.

"I know you're paying attention, Roy. I know you're not gone just yet. So please, Roy- you need to break out of this- this delusion."

"I said stay back," he said again, holding a hand up as if to physically stop him if he were to cross some unseen line. But instead of considering his words, Maes glanced down at his exposed palm, his train of thought coming to a halt as he eyed the faint bloodstains in the white fabric.

"Your hand," he muttered mindlessly, not nearly as concerned as he was for the overarching problem that was Roy's questionable sanity. But he felt the weight get added to the pile, nearing it closer and closer to the tipping point.

Roy yanked his hand closer to himself, holding one within the other as if he expected to be pounced on. He opened his mouth to say something, most likely another plea to leave the gloves alone, but something stopped him before he could get the words out.

The gloves… Flame alchemy.

He didn't know what- it really didn't seem to make sense- but something told him that that's where the answer was.

A hallucination would be swallowed by the flames. The monster who wore the skin of his subordinate would rightfully get burned to ash. It was a win-win.

But what if it was actually him?

Roy flinched at the thought, vehemently shaking his head to send it away as he grasped his own hand. Such a possibility could not be true. He refused to consider it- because the moment he did would open up a floodgate of questions that would shine Ed's and his own actions in a new light-one that was far too harsh to look into.

To put it simply, the Edward who had advanced towards him with a bottle of drugs could not be the one he had met in Resembool and bantered with on a daily basis. Not because it seemed impossible (too possible for comfort), but because he was convinced he could not handle such a reality. He would much rather face up against a shape shifting demon than to accept he had been wrong this entire time. It wasn't the sake of being right that mattered to him- but what it meant to be wrong.

A possibility too dreadful to consider- so he laughed it off. Physically, vocally, laughed it off, earning a concerned look from Maes.

It wasn't worth it. It doesn't make sense. You were wrong.

He heard the voices again, but they were distant, muffled and unimportant, obscured by his pulse beating in his ears.

Then finally, his laughter faded: "I know how to stop it," Roy breathed, a lilt from the revelation laced into his voice. His eyes fell down to the red and white gloves. "I know how to make them leave me alone."
"Roy," Maes cautioned slowly. "Don't do anything rash."

"There's nothing rash about it. I'll make them- I'll burn them away. It'll work. I know it'll work."

Maes pursed his lip, unsure what to make of the threatening vibe he felt in the air, especially when Roy's eyes, slightly glossed from whatever voices whispered to him, set on him again.

"Knock it off, Roy," he started, keeping himself from taking a step back by sheer stubborn willpower. He had no intentions to cower from his best friend; blinded by delusions, or not…

"It's fine, Hughes. It's just an- an experiment. But it'll work. It has to. I need to get rid of them. I-"

"Roy, listen to me!"

The sharp quality to his voice cut through his rambling and stilled his tongue, but the manic, conflicted humor still remained.

"If you have any sense at all, then just believe what I'm telling you for once."

"Sense?" He heard himself laugh again, felt himself shake his head, disregarding the word completely without being able to put any thought into it.

Maes had every right to look at him as if he was insane- which was exactly what he did. His brow was furrowed in distress and now that Roy spared a moment to look twice, he could vaguely make out something shadowing his eyes that resembled a deep, terrible sadness.

It cut off his laughter and his thin smile fell into a frown.

Roy did not understand much these days, forced to second guess everything he saw and heard. But Maes had always been safe. Hallucination or not, he had never mocked him or attacked him. The worse he had done within these past few weeks or months or whatever was make him reconsider everything he had previously accepted to be true, unknowingly adding to his perpetual migraine. And he could still remember images of his team turning their backs on him, convinced he was killed- Maes was one of them, mournfully leaving him for dead in that dark, empty hellhole. But he had come back time after time, just as he said. While Roy's skin burned and ribs ached and head felt as if it would split into two, Maes was always there, holding him as he suffered through suffocating panic attacks, promising everything would be okay. He never wanted to believe him- he didn't want to dare let himself believe him. And yet, some small, treasonous part of him always did.

He didn't want Maes to be sad.

But he was the one causing it.

Why? He was only trying to defend himself.

You know that's not it, a whisper accused in the back of his mind. He shook his head at the voice, mouth ajar as if to justify himself without knowing how to.

Without his consent, his mind automatically began to blatantly wonder if Maes was right- if he did something wrong. It wasn't just a subtle, idle whisper in the furthest corner of his mind as it had been before, but in the forefront where he couldn't easily block it with other, less horrifying thoughts.

His eyes shot back up to his friend, then immediately fell back down to his hands as a spike of pain
shot through his chest. "Hughes," he forced himself to say, vaguely recognizing that he was shivering. "W-what did I do?"

He desperately needed to know. He didn't know anymore. He never really knew to begin with.

Maes stiffened slightly at the question, his shoulders square and eyes serious. "You hurt Edward-the real Ed. You scared him into leaving."

His body moved by itself, trembling for reasons he didn't know- refused to acknowledge- and tried to take a step back only to be stopped by the damn coffee table again, lacking the strength to just step around it.

"N-no, I didn't. I couldn't have," he rasped, but his words sounded to be in vain even to him. "That couldn't be him. He- he was trying to-

"He was trying to help you!"

"No, no, no, he- he was- he isn't-"

"He isn't what? Are you going to say he's not real? That none of this is real?"

Before Roy could utter a response, Maes bridged the gap between them, determination radiating off of him as he reached forward and held Roy's face between his hands, forcing him to keep a steady eye contact no matter how much he instinctively pulled back, stopping just short of physically shoving him away.

It was Maes for god's sake.

But his hands still wrapped around his wrists in a vain attempt to break the contact despite part of him desperately craving it.

"Tell me Roy, does this feel real?" he asked sharply, volume raising. "Just as real as when you hit Edward across the face?!"

He stared back at his friend's strong, incredibly focused eyes quite against his will, forgetting that he wasn't even capable of doing so a day or two ago. But even so, there was a subliminal awareness that he had not truly seen Maes in what felt like ages. The stare he was targeted with was raw and powerful and seemingly all-knowing, packed with such a sheer amount of certainty that shouldn't have been physically possible. In fact, Roy could not recall a time where he had ever seen so much pure conviction in his friend's face.

How could he fabricate something that he had never before witnessed?

"Answer me, Roy," he demanded, pulling him out of his wandering thoughts yet again.

He made an attempt to shake his head as he shied away, pushing back on Maes's arms with his own, bowing his head slightly to slip from his grasp and avoid that piercing eye contact, but the man contested.

"I- I don't know," he answered pathetically, only for the sake of saying something in response despite being capable of putting any real thought into it.

"Yes you do!" he exclaimed, lowering his hands onto Roy's shoulders with a gentle shake. "I know you do."
"Stop-" He brought a quaking hand up to his head, searing fingers curling around his hair as if enough pressure would clear his bogged mind. But Maes didn't stop. He continued with a litany of assurances and pleas and promises that neither knew if he could keep. He insisted that Roy knew what to think, deep inside; implied that all of his confusion stemmed from denial and fear.

But he didn't-

He *couldn't*.

Before he could realize, both of his hands covered his ears, head still lowered and legs naturally trying to step away from his friend who's grip on his shoulders was unyielding.

Roy felt a conglomeration of words flood past his lips, though he couldn't hear them through the pounding in his head and his pulse beating loudly through his limbs. He soon reached a point where he thought he'd explode if it went on any longer.

"P-please stop," he felt himself stutter. "Just stop- stop talking!"

"Not going to happen, Roy. You need to realize what you've done. You need to fix this!"

He recalled images of Edward staring at him in a mix of horror and betrayal, an incriminating glint in his golden eyes. Eyes that raged with a swarm of complex thoughts and feelings, far too advanced for anyone his age, shadowed by a knowledge and understanding that had long since stripped away his childhood.

He remembered the eyes of the kid who had mocked and abused him, drugged him in the alleyway and trapped him underground to rot. They were soulless and cruel, highlights by a sadistic pleasure that simply did not belong in such a pure shade of gold.

An expression that only portrayed irritation or anger whenever directed to Roy morphed into one that was baleful and menacing, then again into one of concern. All the same face, and yet they were different.

The Edward who stepped into the living room with a dark glass bottle that brilliantly caught the light behind him looked at him with concern and empathy- traits that were unfamiliar on the kid, but not impossible.

His expression was easy to read, and it said he wanted to help.

Help.

Help him.

Roy rejected his help, blinded by scarring memories of the past that failed to parallel the present. But he couldn't see beyond the similarities.

Roy had lost all sense of his surroundings or himself, focusing solely on the images that flashed through his mind. He didn't realize when both hands had curled so tightly around his own hair that his knuckles turned as white as the gloves that hid them. He didn't realize when his knees began to buckle or when his back arched forward or when the strength required to stand up straight readily abandoned him. He didn't notice that it was because of Hughes that he was still on his feet at all, calling out to him in a voice that was heavily muffled by the screams that echoed in his head.

He didn't notice when he let out a sobbing wail that contorted into an agonizing scream that ripped at his own throat and sent vicious tremors down his spine.
He couldn't handle it.

The uncertainty, the doubt, the fear. God, the fear.

"I- I need to find him," Roy gasped though his battered throat, oblivious to Maes' strong grip around his arms that still tried to keep him stable. "I need to find him! I need to know!"

Maes' apparent confusion was understandable, since even Roy did not know what he meant by that.

But the alchemically powerful gloves tingled in excitement as images of the kid's worry switched with a cruel inhumane grin.

"Roy- wait, what are you talking about?"

He was barely aware of lowering his hands to tug reassuringly at the fabric, eyes dancing wildly around the room as if his target would magically manifest himself in that moment. Once that did not happen, he began to pull away from Maes, almost ignoring his presence completely.

A sturdy arm intercepted his shaken, unstable movement. Roy shoved past the obstruction.

He needed **answers**, damn it!

The arms returned, wrapping around his torso and holding him back, trapping his own arms against his body and he heard an angry growl in his own voice. "Let me go!"

"Stop it, Roy!"

"No- don't get in my way!" He tried to force his arms free to fight back, but Maes' grip strengthened, forcing him to double over as he again attempted to gather his strength.

"I'm no going to let you do it!"

"You don't know what I-" he cut himself off as his teeth bared into something that resembled a snarl, pushing against his strength out of nothing but desperation. The momentum he gathered for a second, rocked both of them to the side, almost pushing Maes down into the couch until he regained his balance at the last moment.

"You want to find Ed and decide if he's real or not by attacking him!"

Was that what he wanted to do? He wasn't sure. He could only hear the voice in his head that told him he **needed** to find him. He needed to find Edward no matter what.

"I- I need to know!"

"You already know!" Those words, though he had heard them a dozen times, rung in his ears as they always had, but pierced through a wall that he had not realized existed. It shook and crumbled, crushing everything that was hiding behind it. He felt the debris sink heavily into the ever-growing pit that resided in his gut. He didn't know what made it different this time. Perhaps he had just reached his limit.

"No!" He cried out again as he felt the fight begin to wither and die, but the resilient stubborn refusal that had strengthened his voice thus far was replaced with a defeated despair that sapped the very life from his bones. His eyes stared absent at nothing and his legs gave out. Roy felt himself lower to the ground, kept from all but collapsing by Maes, who had tightened his grip around him.

"No, no, no." Roy's knees hit the ground as the mantra effortlessly slipped through his teeth, which
Maes had followed him to the ground, kneeling in front of him, his grip weakened considerably now as he eyed his friend over.

But Roy didn't see him. His eyes could only show him moving pictures of himself striking Edward, playing them on repeat again and again and *again*.

Every since he had woken after a last-ditch effort to kill himself simply to run away, every moment he had ever looked at the kid faded in and out of his mind, set on a permanent cycle.

He saw sadness, annoyance, guilt, fear, desperation, pity, agony, suffering… The list went on, but he never once saw that cruel smile that met him in the alleyway, or heard that condescending tone ring through his voice.

No, no, please, no…

He was always trying to help.

Help *him*.

And then he chased him away.

Roy remembered visions of Ed appearing in his fabricated office, telling his hallucinated team that he was dead, convincing them to turn their backs on him and leave him alone in the endless darkness. The kid was the only one who remained. But even as he too began to turn his back on the man, Roy tried to keep him there. Even after what he had done, none of it mattered because he just wanted him to *stay*.

He had came back since then, but it was never the same. That sadistic version of the kid did not count.

But this one was different.

He was *different*.

But he needed to know why- and how.

*But you already know.*

*No.*

*You hurt him.*

No, please- stop-

*You did what you said you would never do, and you hurt him.*

*NO!*

He lunged forward again from the ground, eyes set on the distant light that crept in from down the hall, as if that light would give him all the answers. The answers he needed and craved- he was so tired of being in the dark.

The arms that were still wrapped around his torso tightened with his movement, bringing both men crashing to the floor. Roy ignored him and tried to drag himself forward, stretching one hand
beyond the other as they both cried out in agony. His entire body shivered from the exertion as well as the pain, but he ignored it all if he could only just move forward and reach the light.

Maes held him back. He heard pleas to calm down echo somewhere far away. He wanted to ignore it, but the words circled through his head as if they were important somehow. Whether it was because he was asked to, or simply because he lost the will, a strangled, miserable breath forced its way out as the strength in his arms drained. He allowed himself to slowly lower to the floor, his cheek making contact with the cold surface. His fingers curled into fists and his eyes shut tightly to fight back the sense of defeat that felt alarmingly similar to drowning.

He felt a shuffle besides him but he ignored it, wanting to just focus on the burning turmoil that ravaged his mind.

Roy?” an out of breath Maes gasped as he practically dragged himself up to Roys eye level, having latched himself when they went down. "You alright?"

"I-" He shook his head slightly, choking on the words as violent shivers tore down his spine. His eyes shut tightly and jaw tensed as of that was enough to keep himself from shattering.

Maes, on the floor besides him with an arm around his shoulders. Roy felt him warmly rub circles on his back. The ground as well as the very air above them was freezing, and would have chilled him to the core if Maes wasn't there as a source of warmth and mercifully being something he could focus on.

And deep inside his soul, he knew that warmth and protection was real.

And if that was so, then the same went for Edward.

Everything Maes had told him was true. He had been saved when he wasn't looking. He had resisted them when they tried to help. He had struck out against his own subordinate.

He had hurt Ed.

And suddenly the fragile warmth in his body died as the realization sunk in. The cruel, impossible reality struck him to the core, leaving him winded for a moment as he gasped at nothing, staring straight ahead in his own mind at the memories that ran through, while Maes only stared back in concern.

When his vision finally broke through the fog and he met the eyes of his friend, the reality he had been ignoring stared back as well.

Every wall he had built to ignore the unbearable truth disintegrated before him, and there was nothing left keeping in the regret and remorse from bursting out.

On the floor with his best friend besides him, the sobs finally came. First quiet, subdued cries turned into hysterical tremor that shook his entire body as he coughed and choked on his own emotions.

"Roy?” Maes asked as worry laced his tone, continuously drawing comforting circles on his back with an open palm. "What's-"

"You were right," he gasped, voice ragged and worn. "You were right, you were right- god, you were-" he was cut off by another violent sob, only vaguely aware of his friend shuffling a little closer.
He could almost sense Maes open his mouth to question him, but something kept him quiet.

Roy rolled onto his side and curled in on himself, back facing Maes. His friend wasted no time in readjusting the embrace, lightly pressing his forehead into the back of Roy's as he murmured nonsense to rival his miserable cries.

Roy found one of his hands reaching for Maes's arm that crossed across his chest, fingers curling into his sleeve despite his joints cracking and aching with movement.

"I- I hurt Ed," he choked as his voice cracked. "I've hurt you both."

Maes didn't say anything in response, but he suspected he was too stunned to get any words out.

"I'm so sorry," he gasped, struggling to get the words out as his throat tightened. "S-sorry, I-I'm s-s-so-"

"Sshhh, Roy; it'll be alright," Maes whispered behind him, gently brushing the bangs out of the miserable man's face. Roy knew he didn't mean what he said- he couldn't know that for sure. He was only trying to say something supportive, but he appreciated it all the same.

Everyone he cared about was gone. They either thought he was dead, or he had chased him off. Maes was the only one who remained. Just once, he consciously allowed himself to sink into the embrace, wishing he could just disappear.

By the time he reached the military dorms, Edward was basically dragging himself down the hall. Energy drained, each step required more and more effort as he slowly made his way down the hall, idly wondering how he had even made it that far.

His cheek still stung.

He was sure the redness of the smack had disappeared by then, but he would occasionally find himself drawing a hand up to his face, gently testing the skin. But the longer he thought about it, the more he was convinced that it was nothing more than phantom pain at this point; just a residual sense that remained purely because he couldn't stop thinking about the incident.

The defensive look in his eyes, the hysterical fear in his voice, his arm blindly swinging forwards, towards Ed-

He shut his eyes and pushed the images away, failing to notice the faint grimace that pulled at his primarily closed expression.

*Damn it.*

He couldn't even justify throwing around insults, even if only just to himself, because all of this was his own damn fault!

Grinding his teeth, Ed wiped his sleeve over his eyes that insisted on watering up every time the thought passed his mind.

He deserved more than just a slap to the face.

Edward paused and leaned against the wall, rubbing fiercely at his eyes to fend off the tears that only continued to escape down his cheek.

"Come on, I thought I was done with this," he groaned irritably, but his voice broke halfway
through, injecting the entire statement with a pathetic quality that he was immensely glad no one was around to hear. God, he hated crying but any attempts to force himself to stop or at least forget about what had caused it proved useless.

Through his now damnably blurry vision, Ed rose his head and looked down the hall to where his dorm was- to where Alphonse was undoubtedly waiting for his return. He couldn't go in there looking like a mess- too many questions. He didn't want Al to know of how much of a failure he was.

*He probably already knew*, a cynical voice told him as he found himself sinking to the floor besides the wall, leaning against it as he laid his head down on his raised knee.

He sat there for several minutes, not quite thinking about what weighed him down, yet not distracting himself from it either. Edward tried to keep his mind blank for as long as possible for the sake of calming himself down, but the damning thoughts always found a way back to the surface. He would stew on them for a while longer, then shove them away, allowing the cycle to continue.

"Brother?"

Edward jumped out of his musing and his head whipped up to see Alphonse standing further down the hall just outside of their room. The heavy metal of his armor rattled as he began to approach.

Ed quietly swore under his breath and feverishly wiped at his eyes before he could see the tears.

"How long have you been out here?"

Edward shrugged, not quite looking at him yet. He lost track of time, now that Al brought attention to it.

His brother stopped when his metal feet were less than a meter away. After a moment, he too lowered himself onto the floor to sit besides Ed.

"Are you alright?"

The older Elric said nothing. Despite all of his usual bravio, he couldn't bring himself lie through his teeth and say he was fine, but he also couldn't admit that no, he was not okay.

He shrugged.

"What happened?"

A grim smile tugged at Ed's lips but died almost immediately. He had broken the routine by returning a little earlier that usual, and it didn't take a genius to put the pieces together and come to the conclusion that something had occurred at Mustang's house. Something that drove him away and left him moping in a hallway.

But instead of explaining, he just shook his head, unsure how to properly describe the past events to begin with, just as he was unsure if he could get the words out through his tightening throat.

"I…"

"Come on, Brother; talk to me."

He sighed. "M- he's not getting any better."
"Well maybe he still needs more time."

"No, Al- that won't cut it. He's completely lost it. And he-" He hesitated and stared at the opposing wall as he recalled it all over again.

"... Ed?"

"He- he hit me," he admitted, mentally cursing the tears that started to swell again and the weak lilt that he heard in his voice.

Alphonse was too stunned to respond as he started besides him, metal creaking.

"So I left. There wasn't any point anymore."

"You left?"

"I couldn't stand being there anymore."

"That's- that's…"

"He's not even the same person anymore. I couldn't-"

"... I know you're upset right now, but… but that was stupid."

"... W-what?" he muttered, flinching slightly when Alphonse reeled around on him.

"What made you think that would be a good idea?!"

"Al, you don't understand-"

"No, you don't understand! How could you turn your back on someone who's been there for us for so long?!"

"That's what Hughes said, but it's not that simple!"

"It's not complicated, Brother! Don't be an idiot!"

He flinched at his brother's outburst.

"I would give anything to be there and do whatever I can to help, but I've stayed back because you said you and Mr Hughes had it taken care of. You said you didn't need help. You can't just give up when you haven't done everything you can!"

"It's not like that, Al! I couldn't get help from anyone else! He would have lost his mind if anyone-"

"How do you know? Maybe seeing the others would help. Has he even seen Mrs Riza yet?"

"Eh- no, but-"

"Then you have no right to give up on him."

"I said it's not that simple! You don't know how hard it is to sit there and watch him fall apart, all while knowing that it's my fault to begin with."

"I'm sorry, Brother- I know this has been hard; more so than I can fully realize. But you need to go back there and do what you can. You owe him that much."
"And what exactly do I owe him?" He regretted the words the moment they met his ears. Al knew it too simply by the way Ed's eyes widened for a moment, then dropped to glare at the ground. His brother did not bother answering the painfully obvious question, much to his relief.

Mustang had put his entire career on the line when he found the twelve year old, physically disabled child in the small town of Resembool. He picked him up from the pits of despair and gave him a purpose, a goal, a new life. Asking what the brothers owed him sullied those actions and left a sour taste in his mouth that would not fade anytime soon.

Edward exhaled slowly and folded his arms, staring holes into the ground. He knew Al was right, as he always was, but the thought of going back there anxiously compressed his lungs and hitched his breath, forcing the last interaction with Mustang to flood his mind yet again. He shuddered and shut his eyes before they could begin to weep against his consent.

Roy was alone.

When there were others around, comparing them to hallucinations had become easy. He would see others walking around and doing things, and when not, he would at least hear them speak from a different room, or simply in his mind. It was confusing and chaotic and he hated it.

But now he was alone; no images, no voices- nothing.

Maes had told him that morning that he had to go to work to avoid suspicion- that he didn't want to and would give anything to stay with him. Roy got the impression that if he asked, the man would have indeed dropped everything and risked whatever was on the line. But he did not ask.

Maes left.

Roy was alone.

He had mixed feelings about this; too mixed to fully understand. But part of him still wished he had spoke up. Since last night, he had kept himself mute, absorbing everything around him with new eyes, yet unable to shake the fearful doubt.

The silence was sobering.

When he was trapped in that cell underground, silence was deafening. When he heard nothing, his ears would ring and his blood would pump in his head in a rhythmic pattern that was too alive to let him drift off into a reverie, forcing him to stay focused on the agonizing present. That was of course before the voices began to occur, which seemed like a blessing at the time.

But this was different.

He heard the building settle every now and again, he heard traffic fly by in the distance, he heard birds chirp from time to time. He found no reason to react to any of it.

Except for when the dogs barked.

He couldn't say he had gotten used to it, but he thought that he could in time. Like how it used to be.

He remained in one place since he awoke, having found himself lying across the couch once again. He stared up at the ceiling for hours, occasionally allowing his gaze to drift towards the covered windows. On occasion, he would consider opening the blinds or even turning a light on. Roy
wasn't sure where the sudden burst of what was surely misguided optimism came from, but it never lasted long before it withered and died.

So he stayed where he was with only his troubled thoughts for company.

The night before left a bold mark in his memory, which was quite refreshing amongst the collection of mismatched thoughts and disorganization that usually resided there.

He felt different when he woke up. After the tears had dried and his breathing returned the normal, Roy opened his eyes with the ability to study his surroundings as if they had never mattered until that moment. Though his vision wasn't yet perfect, it had cleared considerably, and he felt as if he was never actually able to see until then.

Of course that was not to say that his problems were solved the moment after he had a breakdown. He woke to whispering voices as he so often did, and his mind was still riddled with doubt and second-guessing.

He felt... better, somehow. Only slightly- too marginally to justify mentioning it to Maes. But better.

That was at least until he remembered what had originally caused the reluctant revelation- Edward had disappeared, because he had attacked him in a blind rage. He would be reminded of the deep pit that had settled there, suddenly feeling cold and empty as the regret and horror festered.

Roy almost drifted off again as his mind raged with potential ways to make it up to Ed, all to be shot down as he told himself that it was ultimately impossible. His paranoia questioned if he would ever get to see the kid again anyway. And if he did, what he would even say.

Or if it would even truly be him.

Hours passed of him just laying on the couch, listening to the gentle sounds of the outside world- until there was a knock at the door.

Roy remained where he was, blinking up at nothing for a moment, mind suddenly reeling as he wondered if he had imagined the sound or not.

Then another knock, and a muffled voice that sounded painfully familiar. He pulled himself to his feet, legs wobbling slightly as he found the door without having to think about it, and stared at the surface.

"Hey- Mustang, open up."

Edward.

His heart leapt in his chest and he stiffened as the kid appeared in his mind. The kid who he was fighting to get to just the night before. He came back.

He came back.

Roy was caught between feeling surprised and overjoyed and terrified as the three options pulled him in different directions, disorienting himself for a moment as another knock came from behind the door.

"Come on, I know you're in there. Mustang!"
Startled, he reached for the doorknob and began fumbling with the lock with his clumsy, battered and shaking hands. He still wasn't sure what he wanted from the kid, or what he wanted to prove by seeing him again. And part of him was afraid of what he would see now that he was more able.

Only a day had passed since his last conversation with the kid - a conversation that had left an ugly scar in his chest, but had mostly blurred into a jumble of raised voices and painful expressions. He didn't know what he was doing then, and certainly didn't know what he was about to do now.

The door opened and the bright mid-morning light flooded onto him. He grimaced from it, but it didn't sear his eyes nearly as badly as it once did. He could even keep them open for a moment before being ushered to the side as the small blond figure stepped past him, into the house.

He blinked the blinding light from his eyes as he closed the door and turned the face the kid who had not yet looked directly at him, choosing to instead glance around the house as if it was all new to him.

"So how's it going?" Ed asked eventually, wandering further into the house as Roy followed at a distance. So far, the kid had strung together his sentences carefully, all likely for his sake as he walked around the man as if he were made of glass. This sudden casual tone was surprising, to say the least. Was he trying to pretend last night did not happen?

His arm swinging forward, striking the kid across the face. The shock, the pain in his eyes, the eye contact that lasted for only a second before he ripped his gaze away, teeth bared in a deep frown.

For a moment, he wondered if this was not the same Edward. If he was different, as if there were indeed multiples walking around. But at the end of the day, that didn't make sense. It was a thought he dueled with constantly, entertained only because there was evidence to support it.

But he didn't know.

He needed to know for sure!

Roy did not respond, mind still floundering from the alarms that began to ring, unsure why and unsure what to do about it.

But… it was just Edward.

He wanted to help.

Something cold curled in his gut, though he couldn't quite discern what it was.

"What, you're not going to talk to me?"

Then slowly, Edward turned around, the dim light from down the hall hitting the side of his face, catching one eye and shadowing the other.

Ed smiled at him.

A wide, sinister smile that seeped baleful promises into his golden eyes, locking onto him like how a cat would look at a mouse.

A thunderous jolt of realization and fear struck Roy to the core, paralyzing him for a moment that felt more like an eternity, trapping him defenselessly in those eyes.

"Didn't you miss me?"
Roy stayed in that stunned trance for a long, terrifying, unmoving moment.

And then he snapped.
Chapter 17

The reaction was not nearly as smooth and elegant as his flame alchemy tended to be. Instead of a beam of flames that always hit their target with terrifying accuracy, it was choppy and uncontrollable- a single burst of alchemic fire in one random spot. But it did enough.

The fiery explosion shook the house, searing Roy's own hand from the heat and blinding his still sensitive eyes. A mangled scream echoed down the hall, filling his head with Edward's agonized voice. He took a few hasty steps back as he tried to wave the heat away, eyes shut until the blinding light faded. He eventually looked up, eyes dancing across the hall until they landed on Ed, who had been pushed back against the wall by the reaction, clothes smoking and charred, and Roy was hit with the scent of baking skin.

"What the hell," he growled and coughed on the smoke that trailed up from himself. "Who thought it would be a good idea to arm you?" he asked vacantly after a series of deep breaths. The question only confirmed his thoughts.

"You did," Roy spat through his heavy breathing.

Slowly, after the smoke had cleared, his head rose to look at Roy, greeting him with the horrid sight of blackened, raw skin coating his face. There was a pause that he hoped to call hesitant before his mouth opened to respond. "Is that so? Well then, I must have been crazy too." The cruel grin returned just as his face sparked with an ominous red, highlighting his suddenly unfamiliar features and healing the burn with ease. "What a shame."

Roy took another step back, acutely aware of the danger that radiated off of the kid who appeared to have given up the act.

"... Who the hell are you?"

"Aww, don't tell me you've forgotten. And after all the time we've spent together!" he exclaimed in a voice that sounded like Edward's, yet was nowhere near at the same time. He outstretched his arms for flair, clearly comfortable as Roy was anything but. "Well, maybe I can jog your memory."

If it was possible, the sickeningly smug smile grew wider, contorting his face and brightening the sadistic glint in his eyes that did not belong.

"Stay back," Roy warned, tensing his burning, aching fingers as those golden eyes watched him with amusement.

He pounced with lightning speed, slipping from one end to the hall to the other too quickly for Roy's disoriented eyes to follow. Before he could so much as snap his fingers, Edward had appeared in front of him and reached an arm forward, metal fingers latching around his neck and simultaneously shoving him into the front door in one swift movement.

He gasped through his tightening windpipe and he tried to pull the grip loose, but Ed was unyielding, staring up at Roy expectantly as it became harder and harder to breath, eagerly waiting for the man to lose consciousness or die.

Roy choked under the powerful grip, grasping uselessly at the hand that blocked his airway as his head began to feel light and his lungs screamed in a desperate protest. The metal fingers curled uncomfortably close to the bandaged wound that was trying to heal, setting fire to the sensitive nerves that surrounded the gash. Within seconds, his legs started to lose their strength beneath him,
but he stayed upright purely because of the metal arm that held him pinned against the door.

The ability to fight back began to get sucked out and darkness tunneled around his vision. A blaring, defenseless fear quickly consumed his thoughts as he felt the muscles in his throat tense and convulse in a last ditch effort to grapple any air. The blood flow to his head was interrupted and caused a sensation similar to what he thought imploding would feel like.

Roy knew how to handle life or death situations. He had spent his entire life training for them, facing them for months on end, but his brain—what had once been his best friend—had turned against him and left his helpless, left to do nothing else but uselessly claw at the arm that tried to suffocate him.

His vision blurred with the sick grin on Edward's face being the last thing he could register before black began to flicker.

He didn't want to die. Not like this—even though he had wished for it not very long ago. He came so close to death, but was saved. He was saved, and he wanted to live. But...

Then just as his arms slackened and fell, Edward shifted his stance, turned, and Roy was unceremoniously heaved into the air and tossed to the other side of the hall with far more strength than he though the kid capable of.

He landed on his side with a winded grunt and rolled further down the hall until his back collided into the far wall, sending jolts of pain through every limb. Light from the kitchen flooded onto him as he laid there, gasping for air to return to his starved lungs. His now freed throat choked and heaved, and he thought he would get sick if he had the energy to. Limbs shaking too badly to pull himself up, all he could do was remain torpid on the ground as his body quivered and air was forced into his lungs. He at least managed to lightly prod at the bandages to ensure that his neck did not start bleeding again.

Roy vaguely heard footsteps drawing closer before he willed his head up, cracking his eyes open to see a small, blurry red and blond figure looking down at him with a wicked sneer.

It was entirely thanks to the alarms in his head that sensed the baleful air emanated from the figure that he was able to gather up a second wind of sorts. Through a tremendously arduous effort, Roy pulled an arm underneath him to prop himself up on the ground, grounding his teeth through the burning pain that ripped through his beaten body. His movements were lethargic, but he managed to raise his other hand, posed to snap, yet shaking helplessly from the strain and the self-inflicted burns of his uncooperative alchemy.

But Roy did not snap his fingers the moment they were raised. It was something he would come to regret soon after, but he kept them there, eyes locked on the kid, stilled by an unbidden hesitation. He could only guess that it was because he doubted his rebounding alchemy could stop him. Roy was not eager to try again and risk the explosion turning on himself once more. But when Edward took another step closer, he swept the fears to the side and snapped—

Or at least he was going to, before a hand swiftly lunged forward and curled around his own, trapping his fingers in the kid's unbreakable grip. He hesitated, unsure what he planned to do as he looked up at the blond, stunned by the wave of trepidation that washed over him as he was met with that same smug smile as before that was hiding an abysmal intent.

Before he could attempt to pull back, the hand around his own tightened. His eyes widened as he was hit with realization, but it was far too late to do anything about the great strain that encased his hand, crushing his fingers until he heard something pop and crack. A ragged cry tore through his
throat, fed by the air that he did not have, and his shoulders tensed and head lowered to the ground in a vain attempt to endure.

As he writhed on the ground, a sharp, inhumane laughter echoed across the walls, reminding him that he needed to fight back and bring an end to this menace who posed as his subordinate, but his body refused to move besides its useless shivering. He felt the bones in his hand rub against each other and bend in unnatural angles and it took everything he had just to keep himself from howling in pain.

Just as his floundering mind began to wrap around the concept of actually doing something to stop him, the grip around his hand vanished, allowing the broken limb to fall to the ground. A relieved, gaspish exhale burst from his lips, but he was certain it was not a gesture of mercy.

Another shrill laugh rang out, infecting the air with its toxicity. "You're so pathetic! How can you even live with yourself?" the demented voice asked as the monster who posed as Edward knelt in front of his lying form. His very presence shot icy spears down his spine, but through his guttural breathing, Roy could not yet consider pulling himself away.

Cold fingers wrapped into his hair and yanked his head back into a position that was painfully familiar, forcing him to look up at the face of the fifteen year old kid smirking down at him as his back arced and weakened arms shuddered in an attempt to hold himself up to ease the pain. He growled through his teeth, hissing each breath through the suffering as well as at the sight of the monster who caused it.

"It's about time you came back home, wouldn't you say?" he asked with ease, obviously feeding off of every second Roy was in agony.

Roy froze, his eyes widening as images of that eternal darkness consumed his vision yet again. For a moment, he could taste the stale air and feel the madness come creeping back. He would not go back there.

His focus snapped back to Ed, eyes narrowed in a glare as he sacrificed his balance to aim his left hand and snap, creating an alchemic eruption in the air between them. With the small blond already being so close, Roy had to bring up his other arm to meagerly protect himself from blast that shoved him back into the wall and threw Edward away from him, yanking a few stray hairs with him as he screamed from the festering burns that again blistered into his skin.

Doing his best to ignore the array of bruises that surely colored his back at this point, Roy lowered his arm once the light had faded and the screams died down. But to his absolute horror, the burnt body that leaned against the other wall for support began to spark a brilliant blood red and his features were healed almost instantly, mending any signs that fire had come into contact with him.

"Damn," Edward mumbled as his face reconstructed itself. "You're much more annoying with those gloves. I liked you a lot more when you didn't have them. Let's take care of that."

He felt a hungry gaze fall on his gloved hands and told himself yet again that he needed to get up. His eyes dropped down to his hand for a moment, grazing over the now useless fingers and prepared himself to shift his arm to put weight on his elbow, grimacing as the broken and bruised appendage cried from the movement. Followed by his other arm and then his legs, Roy slowly pulled himself up with the assistance of the wall behind him, opting to focus more on his breathing rather than the aches in his ribs and limbs. His back was arched slightly, lacking the strength to stand up completely straight as each inhale lifted his tired shoulders, then allowed them to drop a moment later.
Edward seemed unconcerned with his progression as he watched, likely mulling over his options to discern the most effective way to disarm him. But Roy had no intention of giving him enough time to put any plan into action. He raised his left hand as his right remained limp by his side, inwardly preparing himself for the next blast.

He released a quivering exhale, willing himself to focus on the elements and formulas that spiraled through his head. He knew how to perform a successful flame transmutation. But he had grown cocky— he knew it so well, that when a wall grew to divide him from his own form of alchemy, he was unprepared to recreate it. It wasn't that he had forgotten, but there was a blockade in his brain that interrupted the process, causing the flames to rebound and become uncontrollable. They bit back at their creator, but it was all he had for the time being until he figured out what he was missing. Whatever it was, it was obvious. He could feel that missing calculation on the other side, just out of his reach.

With wavering confidence but more than enough conviction, Roy tensed his raw, burning fingers in Edward's direction. Part of him couldn't help but wonder if he was really just crazy— if he was attacking another hallucination or if he was actually staring down the real Edward Elric; if maybe his own mind was contorting the words that were spoken into something else, telling himself that it was wrong when it really wasn't.

But it was too late to wonder such things. He ordered himself to have some faith in his intuition, and narrowed his eyes in a warning. Just as he sensed the kid about to move, he snapped his fingers and tried to will the flames to follow his command. The reaction might have gotten further before erupting, but the flames still lacked the smooth, dignified quality they had in the past. Again, the reaction morphed into an angry explosion, sending stray flares back at him, licking his hand and searing his skin even as he yanked himself back, shielding himself from his own transmutation.

But as he shied away from the blinding combustion that raged in the space between them, he did not see it when Edward jumped around the reaction and rounded on him before he could open his eyes. He looked up just in time to see the kid appear before him and swiftly sweep a metal first through the air and into his exposed stomach.

The little air that he had returned to his lungs was easily pushed out of him, sucking out the strength he had collected to stand. Roy cursed under his breath when his knees gave out and thanks to more prompting from Edward kicking his side, he collapsed once again, just barely holding himself up with one good hand on the ground. A familiar boot found itself on his hand, which he could only barely register after dry heaving from the blow. The weight pressed down on his bones and he could feel them begin to crack.

"Does this seem familiar yet, Colonel?" the kid sneered from above.

Roy, however, could only scarcely hear him as he recalled reaching his hands through the cell's only hatch in a desperate attempt to escape, only for his fingers to be crushed in the same way. Envy's voice rung sharply in his ears, cursing at him for even daring to fight back.

He had never actually seen what Envy looked like. In fact, he had never seen anyone, besides the hallucinations and the sadistic kid who looked exactly like Fullmetal.

Roy had temporarily blocked out the present to dwell in the past. His mind had disconnected from the pain as much as it could, but his arm still quivered uselessly from the pain and adrenaline, gaining a mind of its own and somehow being able to experience fear even as Roy felt miles away. But just as he began to return to the current situation, the foot that crushed his hand hesitated and the sound of squeaking hinges sliced through the tense air, drawing the two sets of eyes back to the front door.
Roy knew that silhouette anywhere.

Edward Elric stood in the doorway, gaping at the scene that unfolded before him. The light from behind bellied many features, but there was no hiding the nonplussed shock that engulfed his very being as he remained paralyzed his place.

Roy had to look back up at his attacker to ensure he was still there- that there were actually two of them now- that he wasn't imagining the entire thing.

The false Ed furrowed his brow for a moment, then apparently had come to a pleasing decision as he smiled and turned his animalistic gaze back onto Roy. "Well look who decided to join in on the fun," he purred. But the victorious smirk wiped away as they both heard a flurry of footsteps. With a foot still pressed down on Roy's defenseless hand, he swiveled his head back around just in time for the real Edward to come barreling at him at max speed with a metal fist drawn back in preparation to strike. The weight off of Roy's hand was lifted and without him being able to see exactly what happened, they both went tumbling back into the kitchen, filling the air with a chorus of curses and battle cries, all in the same voice.

Roy could only remain were we was, silently nursing his poor hands, wondering what in the hell was happening. Whatever was going on in the kitchen also brought to light another question that had been dauntingly spinning through his mind since he began differentiating the two Edwards: how was there two Edwards?

He had easily accepted that he wasn't going to find the answer by remaining on the floor.

The halls echoed with a litany of insults and taunts, as well as the Fullmetal brand of vivacious howls as the two surely tumbled around the room, knocking into furniture and walls alike.

Energized by whichever voice was the true one, Roy took a deep breath and held it as he bared his teeth and forced his legs to work themselves to a stand, his arms up against the wall for balance. Every bone in his body detested the movement, but he could not excuse doing anything less as Edward fought with... whatever that was.

Through expending an immense amount of effort, he pulled himself around the corner and into the kitchen just as one Edward threw a punch at the other, which was just narrowly missed as he took a few steps back, both determined with eyes that could kill. They paused in their fighting as Roy entered the room, sparing a moment to glance at him while keeping a wary eye on each other.

He looked between the two of them, finding no differences besides hair sticking out in odd angles. He felt a cold chill, unsure what to do as they watched him. The same issue occurred to one of them, who's eyes widened slightly, then turned back to the other.

"Quick, Mustang; do something!"

Roy froze as the Ed who spoke pointed vehemently at the other, who stared back with something that resembled offense. "What!"

Shit. He should have assumed that this would have happened the moment the second Edward opened the door. Roy could only gape as he stared between the two. How could he figure out which one was which when they looked and acted exactly the same?

He was not prepared for this. Roy should have seen it coming from a mile away.

But thankfully, the decision was made for him.
The offended Edward glared at the other for a long moment. Instead of saying something to convince Roy that he was the original, he turned and slammed his fist into the other's face, forcing him to stumble back by pure shock if nothing else. Roy gaped dumbly for a moment, unable to help but assume that he was indeed looking at the real Edward now; never needing to prove anything to anyone, opting to resort to violence instead.

There was something reassuring about it.

The false Edward had his head turned away from the blow to his cheek, but he looked otherwise unaffected by it. "Aww, that's no fun," he drawled as his head slowly turned, prompting the real Ed to draw his curled fist back and create some distance. By the time he was looking at the two of them again, more red sparks flashed across his torn face, instantly healing the small wounds that the metal knuckles had inflicted. "I guess there's really no point in keeping this up, hmm?"

Before either Ed or Roy could respond, the sparking returned, dancing across his entire body as he morphed into someone else entirely. Golden hair turned black and fell out of the braid, and the flashy red coat disappeared, replaced with black, tight fitting garments that plainly exposed the strange tattoo on his thigh.

"Wha- Envy?" Edward exclaimed, forcing Roy to do a double take the moment the words processed.

"Wait," Roy heard himself say. "That's Envy?" he asked the air, unsure if he was surprised or not. Seeing someone turn into someone else as if by magic should had been incredibly shocking- it was shocking- but after all of the shit he had experiences, he was willing to accept anything. But as another thought occurred to him, he then glanced at Edward. "You know him?"

Edward just looked at him for a brief moment, mouth ajar as he too tried to wrap his mind around the situation. "Yeah, from Lab Five," he muttered absently just before he set a heavy glare on the apparent shape shifter. "It was you, wasn't it? You were the one who staged Mustang's death!"

"Now you're starting to catch on," Envy sung, forcing his grating voice to sound somewhat ariose as he flicked an entertained wrist in the kid's direction.

"You got some nerve coming back here, especially now that you're outnumbered," Edward growled, both hands now curled into fists.

Envy scoffed and folded his arms casually. "And how much help do you expect your dear colonel to be in this state?"

The question was rhetorical, but Roy couldn't ignore the pang he felt at seeing the dubious glance Edward automatically sent him. There was a thick silence for a moment, but Envy did not allow it to continue on for more than a few seconds.

"But that's besides the point. I'm actually glad we ran into each other again, Pipsqueak!"

Edward's gaze snapped back to Envy, shoulders immediately taut. "What!?"

He easily ignored the kid's outburst. "I've been meaning to thank you, actually. You remember the night Roy Mustang was found dead in an alleyway? Well the whole plan only went as smoothly as it did because of you," he said, a deep grin in his face as well as his voice, flavored with a touch of arrogance.

The rage that built up in the blond like a suddenly active volcano simmered, then was forgotten entirely as the conversation took a sharp turn, masking his anger with a newfound shock and, if
Roy was looking closely, fear. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, I'm so glad you asked! I thought I'd let you know even though you later tried to ruin everything. You see, snatching Mustang was entirely thanks to you drawing him away from that clearing, and away from prying eyes! If you two didn't have that little argument and if you hadn't run off, then it would have been much harder for me to swoop in. And you also gave me the idea of appearing as you, the mighty Fullmetal Alchemist, to make everything just a little more interesting!"

"I... what?" Edward murmured, the defensive stance gone the moment the reality of Envy's words sunk in, stilling him to the core as he stared into place for a moment. Roy too was shocked, but he couldn't bring himself to be concerned with how he ended up getting captured. He was far more focused on the fact that Edward seemed to know the person responsible, and vise versa.

Or at least, he tried to be. As it were, the pain that coursed through his body made it painstakingly difficult to focus on anything.

"What is it, Shrimp? Speak up! What do you think about that?" Envy gloated, holding himself above the kid who had been stunned into silence. That was, until his height was called out, successfully shaking him out of his trance and lowing his eyes back into a death glare. But even as he willed some strength back into his comportment, there was a shadow of doubt underneath the surface.

"I think that you need to get the hell out of here," he hissed and clapped his hands together. Edward swiftly drew a blade from his arm, stretching out the intimidating metal and aiming the point forward as a silent threat.

Envy, undaunted, chuckled at the display. "Well, I have lost the element of surprise," he mused easily. "Maybe it's time for a tactical retreat."

Edward growled and lunged forward, swiping the blade through the air. Envy had jumped to the side, drawing far too close to Roy than he would have preferred. But by the time his lagging mind told himself to do something, Envy had already passed into the hall as if to make his escape.

"Don't worry Mustang," he began with an amused grin in his voice as he had noticed the alarm cross the man's face. "I'll be back for you soon enough. And don't think any of your friends are getting out of this either."

Edward ran to chase after him once Envy had reached the hall, but the intruder was out the door a moment later, disappearing from view with ease. With a snarl on his lips, Ed moved to pursuit him, but Roy stuck out his one good arm and latched his bruised fingers around the kid's sleeve before he could get far. He paused more from shock rather than any force strong enough to keep him back, wide, uncertain eyes scrutinizing him.

"Don't go after him," Roy said in a voice that came out in a tone far more hushed than he had expected.

Please- don't go.

His own words echoed in his head. Words he had completely forgotten about until then, returning a familiar memory to the front of his mind. Just after Edward had chased his team- his friends- away, Roy still begged him to stay, in fear of being alone yet again.

He shook the thought away, telling himself that it didn't matter- that it was only a hallucination. It
had nothing to do with the present. It simply wasn't safe, he tried to insist. And yet the vast majority of him shuddered at the thought of being alone- or even worse, allowing Edward to leave again, possibly never to return.

Roy looked back at his searching eyes, being able to actually see them with enough clarity for the first time in what felt like a lifetime, only now able to make out what a dark fog had been hiding from him. He could see the years that experience and loss have added to his short life. He could see the concern that glinted on the surface, and the fear that shadowed beneath. He could see traits that could not be mimicked- traits that made Fullmetal who he was. For once, he knew exactly who he was looking at with upmost certainty, and couldn't squash the fear that he wouldn't be able to find him again if he were to disappear.

"But he'll get away! I-" Edward cut himself off as he caught sight of Roy's other hand, which was held up close to his body protectively as if keeping it close to him could somehow reshape his bent, abused fingers. "Did he do that to you?" he asked needlessly as a flash of rage slithered through his expression. He pursed his lip as a battle waged in his mind.

Roy found no reason to answer him as Ed's shoulders forcefully lowered, signifying that he at least wasn't going to run after Envy. He just cursed under his breath and looked away for a moment, returning his arm back to its original shape.

"I need to uh..." he paused and his visage focused on something Roy could not see, concentrating on his own thoughts. "I need to call Hughes," he then announced and moved to rush back into the other room. However, the grip Roy almost forgot he had on his sleeve tensed, forcing the kid to stay and give him a questioning glance.

"Not yet. Just- wait a moment."

Edward hesitated, casting him a worried look that made something in his chest coil in shame. To him, Roy still appeared to be unpredictable, forcing him to be more cautious around him. It wasn't right.

"There's no time," he answered slowly, standing rigidly as if he expected the man to lash out at him at any given moment. "We need to deal with your injuries before they get worse, and Envy could come back and- and Hughes will know what to do." He began to pull away again, eager to get into the other room.

Ed had slipped out of his grip, but a desperate voice jumped and spoke for him. "Wait!"

Edward stopped, startled by the sudden alarm and distress in his voice. Roy couldn't let him out of his sight just yet. Just looking at the kid through the turmoil that twisted uncomfortably in his gut, reminding him yet again of how he had attacked him the night before. He tried not to look too carefully, but he thought he could see a bruise forming on Ed's cheek. The smallest of glances felt like a stab wound in Roy's lungs, forcing him to choke over his own breathing rather than actually explain why he was holding the kid up.

"I- uh..." He cringed from his own stuttering, mutely damning himself until he could get the words out, albeit as he failed to hold eye contact. "I'm sorry- for everything. He- Envy tricked me, and I... I fell for it. I'm sorry, Edward- I'm so sorry."

"... Knock it off, Mustang," Edward muttered, looking equally as uncomfortable and guilt-ridden as a fragile, grim smile was plastered on his expression. "You don't have any reason to apologize. Especially to me." Roy opened his mouth to contest, but the blond continued before he could. "But you uh... you seem to be doing better. Seems like Hughes finally got through to you."
Again, he struggled to get the words out, unsure what he would even say. Edward didn't understand. He needed to understand, but Roy found himself speechless, powerless to convey the thoughts that he couldn't understand himself. Ed took advantage of this moment and used it to continue, attention downcast.

"I came back to apologize to you, actually," he murmured, idly scratching at the back of his head. "I shouldn't have left last night. And- shit, Envy had been watching this entire time. He must have been waiting for you to be left alone. And I- I gave him the perfect opportunity." His confession was followed by a bitter laugh as he turned away and waerily rubbed his eyes, then intertwined his fingers through his bangs in distress.

Roy had not yet allowed himself time to think about it, but Ed was right: the situation could have been so much worse. He would have been knocked out and dragged back to Hell if it wasn't for Edward appearing when he did. But as he contemplated that, the blond took that moment to slip into the kitchen, out of view.

Roy started as soon as he vanished and quickly pushed himself to follow, almost forgetting about the aches and pains that circulated his body until he was moving and stopped by the kitchen's entrance, desperate to keep the kid in view even as spikes of agony shot through his arm from his mangled hand. As ridiculous as he knew it was, Roy could not shake the feeling that who he confirmed to be the real Ed would be replaced by that thing that resembled him the second he wasn't looking. For the first time in too long, he knew for certain what he was looking at and couldn't risk losing it.

If Edward noticed his reaction, he didn't show it as he crossed the kitchen until he reached the phone.

Roy had to fight to keep himself from whimpering pathetically when it became apparent that the kid did not want to talk to him. There was too much left unsaid; too much he needed to discuss. Too much he didn't know how to discuss, but he still had to try. If only Ed would look at him for more than five seconds...

But he had a point, Roy reasoned with himself again. Envy said he would be back. He could have meant in an hour, later that night, the next day, in a week- there was no way to know. The knowledge that they were being watched was far worse now that it was confirmed to be true. Before, Roy just had a nagging feeling. As relieving as it was to know that he wasn't quite crazy- that he was right- it somehow made everything far worse.

But at the same time, he didn't care about any of that. His only concern was how he had wronged Ed by attacking him- by doubting him and turning his back on him. He needed to make it up to him, but the apparent futility of that mission tied knots in his gut and flooded his mind with panic, only serving to make it twice as hard for him to figure out how he would go about it.

Edward had dialed in a number and held the handset up to his ear, back turned to Roy as it rang and was eventually answered. He could hear a light muffle that had to have been Hughes as the two spoke, retelling the events that had just occurred. Roy wasn't listening to the words that were exchanged, as he was rather focused on other, more important issues.

But as he stood back and watched, ignoring his muscles weaken as the pain sapped out his already wavering energy, Roy wondered for a moment if that was really Maes he was speaking to. What if Envy could steal the appearances of others as well, and had intercepted the call to keep the original from hearing what Ed had to say? What if he set up another trap? What if-

No, no, no, that was ridiculous. Envy couldn't get to the office that quickly, and surely he didn't
know how to break into the phone lines...

*Calm the hell down, Mustang,* he internally hissed at himself as he leaned into the wall, silently battling the weight that wanted to drag down the awareness that kept him awake.

"We have to hide him somewhere else," Edward announced, raising his voice with a conviction that Roy has not had the pleasure of hearing in quite some time. He tuned into the one-sided conversation at this point, primarily just to give himself something to focus on. "Wait, I have an idea."

There was a pause, in which Roy felt himself slump further down the wall. He grumbled some nonsense under his breath as he slowly readjusted his stance, holding his damaged arm close. In fact, he thought for a moment that he could have fallen asleep right then and there, having been drained from the fight. But what Edward said next dissolved any and all hope of relaxing.

"We need to call Hawkeye."
"Alright, see you soon."

The line disconnected with a quiet click, but Edward did not lower the handset from his ear, just as he purposefully did not say goodbye before Hughes ended the call. He did not yet feel ready to turn around and face the man who he knew was watching. He could feel Mustang's eyes on him, albeit not very intensely. During the phone call, he heard him shuffle into the room and all but collide into the wall. He didn't need to turn around to know that Mustang was exhausted but not willing to just lie down in the living room- not that he expected him to do so, anyway.

There was so much he had to wrap his mind around, and so little time to do it. He begrudgingly returned to Mustang's house, expecting to walk in on him sulking in the corner, mumbling to himself, then throw a hysterical fit as soon as they made eye contact. But instead, he walked in to see the man being attacked by *him*. A doppelganger had broken in and was standing over Mustang's fallen body, grinning like a madman. Seeing himself like that was a sobering and obviously shocking experience that left him still in the door frame for several seconds too long. It was only thanks to sheer force of will that he was able to get himself moving and fight back against *himself* despite the abject absurdity of it all.

At least it made a *little* more sense when the copy transformed into another person- one he had met once before under very unusual circumstances. Edward had nearly forgotten about the Lab Five incident and meeting the stranger who called himself Envy once Mustang was reported dead, and he had not once thought it could all be related.

That had to be why they were using Scar as a convenient scapegoat, Edward mused internally as he slowly lowered the handset back down.

Too much to do, not enough time to sit down and take it all in.

Ed steeled himself and turned around, eyeing Mustang as he slumped against the kitchen wall, staring back at him wearily. He realized that this was probably the first time in weeks that Edward had seen him in a properly lit room. Being forced to look at him only in the dark since finding him under the cemetery helped him to forget how pale and gaunt the man had become as they all believed him to be dead.

The bandages that were wrapped carefully around his arm and neck had been loosened in the scuffle, but the man looked far too drained to notice. His dark eyes were as heavy and tortured as ever, but there was some lucidity that was not present the night before. He had to wonder what Hughes did to wake him up...

But the longer Ed looked at him, the louder Envy's voice echoed in his head. He grew numb at the very thought of it: that he unknowingly helped cause Mustang's imprisonment. He had already blamed himself, but it could only go so far given the circumstances. But now he knew Envy was always there, always watching, just waiting for the opening that Ed had presented to him.

In a way, nothing had changed. But at the same time, it was now so much *worse*. He was the only person standing between Mustang and Envy, and he turned his back on him. And better yet, he had inspired that monster to copy his appearance in the process to feed the man terrible lies.

It was no wonder Mustang had treated him as if he had stabbed him in the back. He honestly thought that was what happened.
Edward stiffly turned away upon realizing that he was grimacing into space as the older man watched. With his back facing him, he willed himself to at least appear calm, then disguised the movement by looking for the medical supplies that Hughes had stockpiled.

He began mindlessly shuffling through cabinets and drawers, thoughts far too occupied by the recent events to think back to where his objective really was.

"I uh... I better take a look at your wounds. You should sit down," he mumbled, mostly just to get the man's gaze off him. It worked, thank god, as he heard heavy feet make their way across the kitchen and to the table, followed by the quiet screech of a chair's legs against the tile.

He could still feel himself being watched a second later, but at least he didn't need to fear the man collapsing at any moment.

Okay. Just do what you gotta do, and worry about the rest later. Edward stopped his pointless searching, sighed deeply, actually thought about it, then went to the correct cabinet on the other side of the room that held a kit filled with supplies.

Hesitantly, Ed turned back to Mustang, who had twisted around in the wooden chair to watch his every move. He wasn't looking at him particularly carefully, nor was there any of the distrust he had grown to get used to. Maybe it was just the pain Envy had caused that made him look so glossy and unfocused, but it was still miles better than how the man would watch him before. He would take tired, unfocused, yet adamant over the severely hateful lack of trust any day.

Fumbling through the kit to avoid eye contact, he made his way to the table, trying his best to ignore the tension that was surely flooding from him in waves. He eyed the abandoned bottle of medication that Hughes had bought earlier and brushed it aside without a second thought, careful that the older alchemist did not catch a glimpse of it inside the small box. As he began to unwind a roll of gauze, his eyes fell on Mustang's hands, which were limp on the table, one looking significantly worse than the other.

His right index and little finger looked bent out of shape, broken in unnatural angles. The glove that hid them was charred in some places, and the skin further up his arm was covered in red, almost glossy burn marks where the bandages from before did not already obscure. Meanwhile, his left side was not much better, but it was hard to tell through Mustang's heavy breathing and the subtle shivering that derived from his attempts to endure the pain.

Edward then forced his gaze up to the man's face, who had clearly dropped any effort that was previously made to mask his suffering. His eyes were heavy and there was a permanent grimace etched into his features even as he persisted in keeping an eye on the blond.

"... You need to take the gloves off."

From his previously hunched position, Mustang sat up straight with a start, reeling back in the chair and flinched as his own movements irritated his damaged arms. "No," he gasped hollowly, stopping himself from pulling further away by the pain it would cause. "No- no, I can't. I..."

Edward glanced down at the gloved hands again, furrowing his brow in thought. It would probably hurt just to take the glove off of the broken hand, and to what end? Unless he wanted to get creative, he didn't have anything to splint the fingers. He was probably better off waiting for Hughes to return. But he needed to do something.

He sighed through a set jaw. "Alright, fine. But at least let me look at your arms." This was ridiculous. Since when did he treat Mustang like he was made of glass?
The man seemed to relax marginally by this and settled back into the chair, allowing his shoulders to fall as some of the panic in his eyes faded. Edward got to work on examining his burned arms, thankful for any excuse to keep away from his eyes, and focused on unwrapping the bandage around his forearm, which also had been blackened by stray flames.

"Damn, Mustang; why can't you control your alchemy?" he asked under his breath, half to fill the quiet air with something. An irate groan sounded from the back of the man's throat and his lips tilted into a deep frown. "I'm not sure... I know how to do it- I know I do. But- but something's blocking it. And I can't get it to move... After being down there for so long..." he trailed off, the grimace returning as his eyes became distant for a moment, looking at mental images only he could see. Edward suppressed a shudder at the thought of the memories that were surely scarring.

"Yeah... And I can't believe Envy was behind the whole thing. And that he can... change his form somehow. Doesn't make any sense," he muttered, as he carefully dabbed the burn medicine onto Mustang's arms. The man didn't say anything in response, and Ed hesitated to continue. "Did he look like me the entire time?"

"I don't know. I'm still not sure when it was him, or just a- a hallucination," he replied softly, staring into space. Then in an instant, his eyes shot up to the kid, a sudden urgency in place. "I'm not crazy, Ed! I know how it sounds. I know how it looked. But I'm not. I'm not. And- and I can tell the difference now. I know who you are. But... I'm sorry I didn't see it sooner."

"No, it's fine," he forced himself to say past the shock that wanted to keep him paralyzed. "You couldn't have known before." But at least Mustang seemed far more clear minded now. That one truth was the only thing that gave him any peace of mind in the chaos that swarmed.

He finished covering the burns, or at least the ones he could see, and promptly screwed shut the small bottle, but kept it in his hands as his eyes fell to Mustang's limp hands once more. The man noticed this and tensed slightly, pursing his lip hesitantly.

"But I don't want to take the gloves off, Ed. They're all I have. If Envy comes back..."

"It'll be fine. He won't come back as long as I'm here." There was a reason why Envy waited for Mustang to be alone before appearing. He was a coward- afraid to take on more than one person by himself. Hopefully he wasn't getting backup. "But can you at least take them off when Hughes takes a look? You'll get them back right after."

He felt like he was cajoling a difficult child, trying to reason through making a compromise that shouldn't need to be made in the first place. He hated making such a comparison now that Mustang was visibly doing better, but there was no helping it. Especially since he secretly doubted he would even be able to wear the gloves after his hands get the care they required. But Mustang didn't need to know that right now. And quite frankly, he probably didn't have the strength to get much friction in a snap if the situation called for it. Chances were, they both knew it but neither dared to say so.

"Fine."

Edward sighed quietly with relief, but it was short lived as he spotted the bandages around the man's neck, loosened and bloody. "Whoa- hey, is your neck alright? What happened?"

Mustang shot him a look that implied he had no idea what the kid was talking about, then dropped
his gaze as a quivering hand rose to gently test the bandages. He pulled the limb back, eyeing the soft tint of blood that got on his fingers and left speechless by the sight of it.

"Oh... Envy... um... tried to choke me."

Edward blinked at him, nonplussed and gaping. "Tried? Looks like he damn well succeeded!"

Perhaps being able to have an actual conversation all of a sudden had made him cocky. He had almost forgotten that the man he was looking at wasn't the same Colonel Bastard he was used to, until his comment was responded to by only a despondent silence. The blond shook his head past it with a terse exhale.

"Let me see it," Edward stated as he drew closer, causing Mustang to scoot further back as a mix of uncertainty and dare he call shame crossed his face.

"I don't think that's necessary," he drawled carefully.

"Come on, I already saw the wound once before. I just gotta make sure it's not too bad."

"You- what?" He blanched, eyes gone wide and flickering with horror.

Edward almost did not want to give him an honest answer as he thought back to when the man explained to him how he acquired the parlous gash on his neck a few nights ago in a hysterical rage. The significance behind it hung in the background, so hard to ignore, and yet he always tried to every time it came to mind. He swallowed his reluctance.

"I guess you wouldn't remember when I first explained it, but I found you under the cemetery in that cell while you were bleeding out. That probably wasn't very long after it... happened."

Mustang only stared at him for a moment, mouth ajar, as the shame returned. "I see," he said at last, lowering his left hand back onto the surface of the table. After a moment, he bobbed his head in what looked to be a single nod. Edward had no choice but to accept it as permission.

Though he wasn't particularly excited to do so, Edward forced aside any indisposition and bowed slightly to peer at the bandages. Mustang clearly disliked it as much as he did, judging by the way he stiffly kept his gaze on the far wall. With a huff, Edward leaned forward and gently yet hastily began unwinding the bloodied bandages, pursing his lip in concentration as he focused solely on maneuvering his arms around the man's head with as much accuracy and speed as possible. He then took a step back to abandon the bloody strip of gauze on the table, and directed his attention to the gash itself.

The two inch long laceration had began to scab and heal itself, but was red and irritated from Envy's attack, which prompted blood to break through what had started to close. If he didn't know what had happened, he would have feared it was in the early staged of an infection.

Thankfully, it looked to be doing fairly well despite everything. Edward nodded marginally to himself and reached for the clean bandages, deciding to smear some more antibiotics on the bandage rather than actually touch the wound himself, certain that Mustang would appreciate that too. He turned away for a moment to unravel the new strip of gauze, not noticing just how stiff the other alchemist was until he turned back to him, attention grappled by how every muscle seemed to be pulled taut, and the conflict raging in his dark eyes. Silenced by uncertainty, Ed proceeded to wrap the bandage around his neck without a word.

He could feel Mustang swallow strenuously as he finished taping the bandage, and caught his gaze for a fraction of a second when he took a step back to inspect his work.
"I'm sorry," Mustang whispered with a subtle quiver in his voice as the words passed his lips. He looked physically incapable of turning to meet Ed's startled eyes, giving the blond mixed feelings. He wasn't sure what he would see if he did catch his gaze, and wasn't sure if he wanted to find out. The silent air that followed his apology was cold and heavy, loaded with unsaid meaning.

Edward would have asked him to specify what he was talking about, but some dark part of him already knew. The shame that radiated off of him when the self-inflicted gash on his neck was mentioned, as well as the way his eyes hardened when Edward changed the bandage told him all he needed to know. Mustang was apologizing for doing that to himself- for allowing Envy to drag him to that level. It had to have been an act decided on pure desperation and the certainty that no one would ever find out what he felt forced to resort to.

Ed bit into the inside of his cheek as he started to pack up the supplies but ensuring to leave out a bottle of pain killers, his movements lethargic from distracting thoughts. There was no good way to respond to him. He couldn't bring himself to lie and say that it didn't matter, because it did. The fact remained that Mustang had attempted to end his life, and they were now dealing with the consequences. Maybe nothing else needed to be said.

In fact, nothing was said between them for what felt like minutes, but was more realistically only a couple of seconds.

Mustang eventually broke it in a voice that sounded empty, sucked dry by regretful sorrow. "You shouldn't have to put up with this."

"It's fine," he murmured without thought. Whether or not it was true, watching Mustang wallow is such despair churned something uncomfortably tight in his chest. The deeds that have been done might not have been fine, but Edward owed it to him to tolerate the situation at the very least, and do what he could to help.

"No it's not!" The words burst out so suddenly that Edward jumped, staring at the man with wide eyes. "Nothing about what I did was fine. I- I hurt you. And last night, after you left, I- god, I wanted to..." He cut himself off and turned away, leaning over the table with his one good hand pressing into his heavy eyes, only partially hiding the distress that pulled at his expression. He bared his teeth as if whatever he was going to say fought against him with an overpowering strength, leaving an insipid taste in his mouth.

He couldn't help but wonder what he was going to say, but a quiet warning voice told him not to pry. "None of this is your fault, Mustang."

"Yes it is."

"No it's not! It's not your fault that you were kidnapped and tortured and- and hallucinating because of it."

Mustang growled irritably into his palm. "I should have been able to know. Even now, I don't know what to believe. They're nothing but my own damn imagination. And I keep letting them blind me."

Edward opened his mouth to make a retort, but stilled his tongue as something dawned on him. He stood up straighter, allowing his shoulders to relax as he studied the man for a moment. "I know what you're trying to do, Mustang; and it's not going to work." The alchemist shot him a confused look, but Ed continued before he could speak. "You're trying to make light of this so you can blame yourself."
The look Mustang gave him was the silent equivalent of him exclaiming that Ed was right. The man opened his mouth to say something- defend himself, probably- but the kid wouldn't have it.

"So knock it off," he demanded, pointing a stern finger at him for emphasis. "I know it's not that simple, so don't pretend like it is." Mustang kept his head down, staring at the ground as if he had been chastised by a parent. "But," Edward added with a cough. "To be fair, I... I didn't treat it seriously before. I didn't understand. With hallucinations, a dark room, and someone like Envy for company, it makes a lot more sense now."

What right did he have to suddenly start acting so empathetic now that Mustang was doing better? Where was he when the man was suffering through the worst of it, curled up in corners, sobbing to himself about images that haunted him with no end in sight? While Hughes was always right by his side, Edward was never anywhere near, always finding some way to not be present when it got too bad.

He had been a selfish coward, and he doubted there was anything he could do to make up for it.

Edward curled his hands into fists, staring holes into the ground. "As I said, I... I came here to apologize. So..." He willed himself to look straight at Mustang, unwavering even as guilt coiled and writhed inside. But as he continued, that determination to keep a straight face quickly died as his voice cracked and stuttered and he felt the weight of all of his actions pile up, then come crashing down. "So I'm sorry, Mustang. I'm sorry that I left last night. And for always doubting you. And for giving up on you. A- and leaving weeks ago. For l- letting Envy get to you and causing all of this a- and- and everything that's happened. Everything- I'm so s- sorry."

His apology broke off the rails and spiraled downhill, losing all control. He felt the walls crumble without any warning or forethought, giving him no time to prepare as his eyes began to water, adding a loud static to his scrambling thoughts as he cursed them for turning against him, and rubbed at the unshed tears hastily as if it wasn't far too late to hide the signs of an impending breakdown.

The litany of words spilled out without filter, disallowing Edward to realize when the seemingly permanent sadness on Mustang's expression faded away. The further Ed was forced to embrace the pit of remorse that had sneaked up on him, the less distressed the other man appeared. He couldn't notice through his blurring, teary vision, but as he coughed out another apology, Mustang blinked rapidly for a moment as if to confirm what he was seeing was true, then a small smile began to form.

"Ed," Mustang started in order to cut off his stammering. There was a quality to his tone that the blond would have first mistaken for misery, but as he tried again to clear his eyes and risk a glance at him, saw it was the complete opposite. There was a relief there- uncertain and afraid it would soon be chased away, but relief and something akin to happiness. It was fragile and ready to flee at any moment, but it was the first glance Edward had been gifted in what felt like years. The sight of that thin smile shocked even the tears into staying still as Edward stared, momentarily forgetting about the shame of losing his composure yet again. "I don't care about any of that." A shuddering cough followed his words and turned into a broken chuckle of sorts from the smile that lit his dark eyes.

"... What?" Edward muttered thoughtlessly and brushed a sleeve past his eyes again as he tried to dissect the words.

"I was sure of it before, but-" he paused and just looked at Edward for a moment with an expressive comportment that was impossible to decipher. "But it really is you. For a while, I- I thought I'd never see you again. Maybe that's why I didn't want to believe it for so long."
Ed had been shoved off of his train of thought, left to only stare back like a fish with no direction. Mustang seemed to be on another topic entirely, and the blond was forced to try to catch up, despite being helplessly stranded in the conversation. Mustang seemed to have noticed this, and actually laughed at him for a moment, even more to Ed's confusion.

"The hallucinations never apologized," he said simply, perhaps hoping that it would explain everything. And maybe it did, but Edward was still trying to keep his eyes from tearing up to give much of a reaction. "I know you're really you. I know that. But... but it's relieving," he explained vaguely, dropping his gaze with that soft smile still in place.

"But- but I- but this is my fault. I-"

The words were wisped away when Mustang's good hand lunged forward and grabbed his sleeve, pulling him over before he could think to protest. And as he was forced to take an uneven step forward, both arms wrapped around his torso and he felt Mustang's head press against his ribs. Despite the broken fingers jostled by the movement, despite the burns that rubbed against coarse fabric, despite the pain that it must have caused him. His embrace was surprisingly strong for someone who couldn't bring himself to even stand up from the chair. Edward wanted to tell him to stop- to don't irritate his wounds any further. But as it were, he couldn't bring himself to say anything or move or even breath for that matter.

"I don't care, Ed," he said again, his arms tightened slightly as he forced the words out, tinting them with the arduous effort that it was to speak. "I don't care about any of it. You came back. After all I've done- after how... horrible I've been to you... you came back."

"But- but I-"

"Just be quiet, Ed," he interjected warmly, further bewildering the kid he clung to.

He didn't understand it. Mustang had been nothing but hostile towards him for weeks now. Yes, it was because he was convinced he wasn't himself, and now that that was cleared up, it would make sense for him to treat Edward differently. But he wasn't prepared for such a drastic change. In fact, he wasn't prepared for any of this. Not in the slightest. And it probably showed, judging by the way he could only stand still, mouth ajar and eyes still red from tears, staring down at Mustang like an idiot.

And how could he not care? Ed had stated it several times before; that it was his fault for leaving him alone where Envy was able to capture him. Mustang seemed to care a few days ago when he was vehemently accusing him of such. But now that rage had disappeared, replaced by the joy that prompted him to trap Edward in a tight hug. Even before he went missing, Edward would have been seriously concerned for his mental health if Mustang were to ever pull him into a hug. With that in mind, but given the circumstances, he had no idea what to think.

Unable to process what was happening, Edward grappled desperately for something else to focus on, which came to him in the form of Mustang's shivering. It began too softly for him to notice at first, but as he remained pressed into the blond, his taut arms quivered more violently from the burns and the fractures that surely tore a fiery pain through his body. It was a mystery how he was able to keep quiet about it for this long.

"... Mustang, your arms," he started, voice thick with something he didn't know how to identify. Stiffly and with every motion consumed with uncertainty, he placed his mismatching hands on the other man's shoulders with a gentle push; not strong enough to move him even fractionally, but just enough to send him a message. "You shouldn't strain yourself."
Mustang didn't move at first—refused to move, more likely. He knew he was heard, so as he digested Ed's words, the blond continued to work on composing himself again, rubbing at his eyes and swallowing the emotion that decided to break free without his consent.

Then at last: "I suppose you're right." If it wasn't for the slightest toil in his voice, Ed would have thought he sounded entirely content as he was. As if a lock was released, his arms from around the kid fell and were gingerly placed back on the table's surface, but leaving their warmth with him.

The smile had faded, but the traits that had taken up residence thus far did not yet return. The constant fear and paranoia, the nervous ticks—they were all gone, at least for the moment. Edward ingrained the sight into his mind, unsure but dearly hoping that it wouldn't be the last time he saw the man in such a state of peace. It would all vanish as soon as Hughes returned to drive them to Hawkeye's apartment.

Speaking of which...

He cleared his throat, eyes darting between the other alchemist and the wall behind him. "Hughes will be coming back soon. We need to move somewhere else in case Envy comes back." Edward was sure Mustang had figured that out for himself, since he was in the room for half the conversion, but he couldn't endure the meaningful silence any longer.

"That's right," Mustang breathed with a start, like he had forgotten everything that had happened until Ed reminded him. "You said... Hawkeye..."

Edward nodded slowly. "Yeah. Hughes said her apartment is small, but it should work at least for a little while. Although he probably won't be staying there, and I don't know what I'll-"

"Wait," Mustang gasped abruptly with wide eyes. "You talked about this on the phone? What if someone was listening? They could be onto us already-"

"Relax, Mustang," he cut in before the man could become hysterical. "We were being vague. Weren't you listening?" Although, he supposed he could have avoided using the woman's name altogether, but it was too late for that. The chances that someone had bugged the line was already slim regardless.

The man paused mid-rant, then settled back into the chair. "Not really," he muttered in response, sounding slightly disappointed in himself for not paying attention. With a sigh, he turned in the chair to stare blankly down at the table, leaning on his less scuffed elbow. "Riza- I don't know how I can face her... I tried not to think about her. After- after-" he trailed off with a shuddering exhale that sent shivers down his shoulders and spine.

Well that at least explained why he never brought her up. Edward knew Hughes was wondering the same thing, but neither of them wanted to say anything and risk triggering something.

"Do you know if-" Mustang paused and swallowed, then glanced up at the blond. "Have you talked to her?"

"Um... No, not really. I've kinda been avoiding everyone recently. Hughes would be a better person to ask," he admitted, trying not to uncomfortably shuffle his feet. "But last I saw her, she seemed pretty sad." It was a gross understatement, but Mustang didn't need to know just how severely his death had hurt her. And hell, he couldn't even say that he knew the full extent of it. But if they were to find out, it would probably be in just a few hours.

The older man made a soft acknowledging sound as his focus trailed into the distance. He was
smiling just a few minutes ago, and now had a brand new set of worries. Poor guy couldn’t catch a break. Edward wasn’t entirely sure when it started, but seeing the man so upset was greatly upsetting and demanded action from him. Ed took a quiet breath, determined to somehow bring that smile back, if only just for a little while.

The sun had begun it’s descent, but still shined brightly above Central, burning the streets with a hot summer air as Hughes drove over them. He had spent the past ten minutes flexing his knuckles as he gripped the steering wheel, mindlessly letting his skin fade to white as nervous spirals of possibilities occupied his thoughts.

He only got the gist of what occurred at the Mustang house while he was at work, but immediately after ending the call, he fled his office in a whirlwind to hunt down Hawkeye. He didn’t particularly like the idea of keeping her and the rest of the team away only to change his mind in an instant, but they were given no other choice in the matter.

And besides, Riza was more than happy to harbor Roy at her apartment, despite the risks he laid out for her. Of course, this was just what he expected. She was nearly speechless when he first made the request. But as he continued to explain the situation, her relief became almost palpable in a way that only the stoic Hawkeye could manage. She remained calm and spoke with ease, but there was an underlining energy to her words that could not be contained- even the guise of a heartless soldier could not entirely bully it back under the surface. And as she turned away to make preparations, Maes caught a glance of a small smile tugging at her lips that reached deep into her eyes and gave life into the very way she walked out of the room.

It was heartwarming for a moment- until he remembered that this would be the first time she would see Roy since he was discovered to be alive. He had only marginally gone into the topic, but Riza was far too excited to be prepared for what was to come.

But then again, maybe he would be surprised. Roy seemed to have understood something the night before- and maybe Edward's appearance that morning had served to further cement him back into their reality.

But as far as such optimistic thoughts could take them, they did little to quell his worries as he pulled up to the house. As he walked up to the door, Maes began to wonder what he was going to say, bitterly realizing that he should have been thinking about it since the plan was formed.

Hopefully, Edward had prepared Roy for what was about to happen.

Maes exhaled deeply as he reached the door, and swiftly unlocked it the moment he gathered the nerve. The house appeared to be as dim as always when he stepped in and closed the light off from behind him, half expecting to see blood splatters across the floor and holes in the walls.

His phone conversation didn't tell him much besides someone breaking in and attacking Roy when he was alone, only to be sent away when Edward appeared. Thinking back on the utter uncertainty and lack of information rekindled the paralyzing fear that razed his insides and launched his heart into his throat.

But everything was fine now. He had to keep reminding himself over and over again.

The living room was empty and nothing seemed to be particularly out of place. It was difficult to tell with the poor lighting, but he thought he saw the dark indicators of flames staining the walls. But for the sake of his own sanity, Maes ignored it for now and continued further down the hall, following the sound of voices. Although the two alchemists being stationed in the kitchen- the only
room with any lights on- was a very good sign.

He did not know what to expect when he walked into the room, but it certainly wasn't what he saw.

Roy was sitting at the table with his back turned to him, facing Edward who was leaning against the nearby counter. While admittedly shaken, they both looked relatively alright. He even caught a smile on Ed's face before his presence was noticed. But when Roy followed the kid's gaze and turned around to face him, the single motion shook the wind out of his lungs.

Roy looked almost happy. There was still something jittery and nervous about him, but there was the slightest of natural smiles pulling at his lips before his eyes landed on the lieutenant colonel. And the clarity in his eyes left him speechless. So much in fact that Maes did not quite realize how much time had passed as he stared at his friend, and more alarmingly, Roy stared back at him, his eyes narrowing in focus.

"Um..." Edward cleared his throat as he watched the two, quietly clearing his throat. Whether it was intentional or not, Maes was able to shake himself out of whatever trance he was in.

"Good to see you're alright, Roy." He could hear the relief flooding from his tone, only now beginning to recognize the suspicious looks he was given.

Roy didn't respond besides leaning further in his chair, squinting his eyes as if he were struggling to see something.

"It's alright, Mustang," Edward eventually reassured after a quiet moment.

Roy opened his mouth to protest, but no words came out as his focus continued unhindered. Though he had suspicions, that was when the reality of the situation dawned on him.

"Ah, I see," Maes said under his breath, then shot his friend a grin. "Do I need to remind you of what you did when you got drunk at that party after we graduated? Or what I got you for your birthday last year? Or-"

"Alright, I get it," Mustang announced, reeling back slightly as though he was appalled and offended by Maes' words. But even through this, there was no mistaking the obvious relief that sucked the tension from his shoulders and allowed him to shift into a more comfortable position.

He couldn't help but chuckle softly at the desired response, unsure how else to express the joy he felt upon seeing his friend act in a way that was so familiar. He was starting to figure it out. He was really figuring it out.

"Are you ready?" He the asked, reluctant to say goodbye to the blissful sight, but having no desire to remain where they were for any longer than necessary.

Any trace of ease fled from Roy the moment the words left his mouth, allowing a nervous rigidity to take its place. "No."

"Didn't think so," Maes sighed with a tired, empathetic smile. "But we have to go."

"I know."

As Roy began to pull himself to his feet, Edward unfolded his arms, sticking his hands in his pockets instead. "I'll tell you what you missed in the car."

Maes nodded and was about to respond, until Roy turned to fully face him and his eyes fell to the
burns that swirled around his arms, and the unnatural angle his fingers fell at on his right side, as well as catching the pained grimace that flashed across his face when they did so.

"Wh- god- Roy, what happened?!" The words broke through his unsuspecting lips before he could fully understand what he was looking at, reaching a useless hand forward as if to do something helpful, but lacking any way to help.

"I... think it's broken."

"Yeah, I can see that!" Maes ran an exasperated hand through his hair as he stared at the mangled limb. "Why didn't either of you mention this right away? And- we need to splint your fingers with something. And- and I'll find some pain killers and-"

"Hughes, calm down," Edward shot in. "I already gave him some. And we don't have the supplies to properly deal with his hand. The sooner we get to Hawkeye's the better. You mentioned she was looking for a doctor, right?"

Maes withheld the stressed groan that wanted to sound, opting to instead shake his head and cross the kitchen to usher Roy to the door. "Alright, let's hurry then," he sighed as he urged the Flame Alchemist into the hall with Edward quick on their heels. He forced the many, many questions to the side for the time being as he cast Ed a significant glance that said he as expecting a very detailed recount of what he missed.

Meanwhile, Roy let himself be guided out for the most part, only visibly hesitating when they reached the door. They all knew he had not been outside since he was found in the cemetery, and had to have been especially nervous to see Riza again. But he kept quiet, knowing that he wouldn't get a say in the matter regardless.
Chapter 19

The adrenaline built from his recent fight with Envy, as well as the conversation with Ed both served well in distracting Roy from what should have been a much more immediate matter. But after he was unceremoniously shoved into daylight for the first time in weeks and then directly into a car, he was finally able to sit back, shut his mind off for a few moments, and mindlessly let the pain sink in.

And god, was there a lot of it.

While he and Ed sat in the kitchen waiting for Maes to return, the kid had convinced him to swallow some pills that he claimed to be pain killers after much reluctance. It's not that Roy didn't believe him, but the fearful, distrusting voice in the back of his mind that still wondered if he was experiencing nothing more than a dream chose that moment to chime in. Roy accepted Edward's offer if only just to spite the detestable voice.

He trusted Ed, damn it.

But regardless of whatever medication he shoved down his throat, it couldn't completely numb the searing burns that covered his arms, which he had done an admiral job at ignoring until then. They weren't as bad as some other burns he had suffered from in the distant past, but it wasn't something that anyone could easily adjust to. He was given no choice but to hold his arms up just above his legs as he slouched against the car door, ensuring that the red skin did not touch anything besides the air that was already too warm for comfort.

Despite burns being difficult to ignore, his body was confused about which injury to focus on more. His broken fingers lightly brushed his knee to keep them from moving, primarily limp and aching terribly. He could still lightly flex his hand if he tried, but doing so caused a sharp pain that Roy preferred to avoid. And after a few minutes, movement became more and more difficult as he could feel his fingers swell. His left hand was no where near as bad and was likely only bruised. Although Roy couldn't help but consider that the best case scenario, considering how much abuse his hands had already endured during his imprisonment.

The voices of Edward and Maes floated in the air around him, but he couldn't quite care to make out the words as he wallowed in a lump of growing pain, staring blankly at the passing scenery, grimacing whenever the sun shone through the buildings. He would have liked to think he was managing to hide how much everything hurt at least somewhat, but he couldn't help but doubt he was successfully fooling anyone.

The physical pain was the worst of it, but when he stopped to think about it, it wasn't the most distracting. He still felt a phantom hand gripping his neck on occasion, threatening to choke the life out of him, but even that was nowhere near as straining as the internal pain. While Roy wasn't sure when it started, a pit had formed deep in his stomach, coldly washing down everything like a drain, leaving only an uncomfortable void behind. It wasn't until Roy reluctantly turned his brain back on did he realize why this was.

A familiar street corner, one of his favorite coffee shops, a park statue gleaming through the passing trees- all sights he would see in this exact order when special occasions called for it.

They were going to see Riza Hawkeye.

He was going to see Riza Hawkeye.
Her face appeared in his mind's eye and he immediately felt something lurch in his stomach, forcing him to curl into a tighter ball in the backseat of the car. He would be happy to see her, he told himself. He repeated it over again, but it did nothing to quell the painful churning and the harsh ripples of anxiety. Roy knew he was being ridiculous. It was just Hawkeye. He should have been overjoyed. He should have been ecstatic!

Roads became more familiar.

Roy turned away from the window.

But even as he closed his eyes and blocked it out, he could feel himself drawing closer to her. He had missed her of course- so much in fact, he had to force himself not to think about her; or about how meaningless their last interaction was. He gave her orders to watch the scene play out from a tower, and she followed those orders with upmost confidence in them. She believed he made the best choice, and she left without a second thought. He glanced as she left their makeshift command center, and that was it. No final words, no goodbyes, no significant eye contact- nothing. Roy remembered very little from that night behind the tedious fog that had taken residence in his brain, but that powerful regret remained, even when he couldn't always recall the memory.

So much was left unsaid when he thought he was going to die down there.

But now she knew he was alive, and he was going to see her again. He could speak to her, tell her how much he missed her. But even with that in mind, Roy had no idea what he would say, or what she would say. And with all of this uncertainty, how could he knew what to believe?

Roy cracked his eyes open and looked up at Edward, who was sitting in the front seat, animatedly speaking to Maes.

Ed was real. Therefore, Maes had to be too. And if they both were, then surely Riza would be as well. Envy wouldn't do something so bold as to disguise himself as her and break into her apartment just to get to the three of them. At least, that's what his unstable grip on logic told him. But mentally working through such problems did not always result in an accurate answer. But if he couldn't trust what his mind came up with, then he would just have to trust the few things he knew to be real, like the people sitting in front of him.

He wished he could ask why he was so nervous, but in truth, he already knew the answer. The habit of second guessing everything around him lodged itself into every thought that passed through his mind. Doubting everything had become natural. It was a defense mechanism- something he clung onto too tightly to simply release now that he had reason to think otherwise. His broken, scarred hands would need to be forcibly detached from it.

The car pulled to a slow and steady stop just as Roy felt a jolt of panic flare through him. He shot his eyes open and turned to look out the window. A tall apartment building towered over them, darkened by the setting sun that had fallen behind it. Rows upon rows of windows lined each wall, all staring down at him with a daunting intensity.

"Roy?"

For once, he was incredibly glad that her window did not face the main road, or else he would have to wonder if he was being watched. The sensation was rarely not squirming in the back of his mind anyway, making it unreliably difficult to know when to take it seriously.

"Roy!"
He jumped as the voice broke through and his eyes snapped forwards, falling on Maes, who had swiveled around in the driver's seat to watch him expectantly. By the look of the concern that laced his expression, it was safe to assume that he had called out to him more than once. Edward was turned around and looking at him too, but remained quiet.

"What?" he said in a voiceless whisper, nearly winded by the shock mixed with his overlaying panic.

"Are you alright?" the man asked slowly. "You look ill."

Roy couldn't muster up a lie, but admitting the truth seemed like a useless effort. They were all well aware that he was not alright. So instead, he lowered his gaze, then closed his eyes when they began to sting.

The other two exchanged some hushed words with each other. Roy halfheartedly tried to understand what they were saying, but gave up after a few seconds. It was plain to see that they were being quiet for the purpose of leaving him out of it. Contrary to how he would usually react, Roy had bigger concerns on his mind and had no energy left over to devote to worrying himself with their conversation.

But that certainly was short lived. Moments later, he heard the click of a car door opening, and he looked up just in time to see Maes pull himself out of the vehicle and circle around towards the apartment building. Roy sat up further despite the quiet cries of his ribs, following his friend with his eyes as questions circulated too quickly to comprehend. Why was he going ahead? Was he going to come back? Would he bring Riza down instead? What was he doing?

After Maes disappeared inside the building, Roy's eyes darted back to Edward, expecting him to get up and do the same. But the kid remained, giving no indication that he planned on moving. He leaned on the seat's armrest, turned to watch him with his focused, golden eyes.

"You gotta go in there, Mustang," he supplied calmly, seemingly unfazed by Maes' retreat.

Roy's mouth cracked open as if to announce how part of him wanted to just turn around and get as far away from that building as possible, but his stubbornness muted the words before they could form. He was so sick of acting like a coward. It was only Hawkeye! Everything would be fine.

But his attempts to motive himself did little good, only serving to increase his heartbeat and quicken each breath. He didn't quite notice until Edward spoke up with a furrowed brow.

"Hey, calm down. What are you so afraid of?"

Afraid? He wasn't afraid. Something coiled irritably at the suggestion, but the words whispered with truth in the back of his head, almost softly enough for him to ignore completely. Almost. Not quite.

In truth, Roy wasn't sure. The possibility remained that the woman who waited up there for him was not truly his lieutenant. As slim as it might have seemed, he could not ignore the chance. But even so, facing off against Envy or looking like a fool because of hallucinations were neither his greatest concerns. If anything, he was afraid that it really would be her. The Riza Hawkeye who he had sworn to protect and who had pledged the same to him. It was her job to watch his back, but it was his job to watch all of theirs. He had disappeared, and he had let her down.

As Edward watched him, waiting for an answer, Roy knew there was nothing he could say that would get him out of this. He needed to go up there and face her and apologize for being a failure.
And for a moment, he thought that he could do just that, if only it was really that simple.

"I don't want her to see me... like this."

For once, Edward didn't appear to have an immediate response, though Roy desperately wished he did. He stewed on the words for a moment, then pursed is lip. "You're overthinking it. She's just going to be happy to see you." The words sounded hopefully, but nothing else. Even Ed did not know how she would react to seeing the nervous wreck he had become.

"Maybe," he muttered in response, if only just for the kid's benefit. Although the response did not sound convincing to either alchemist, it was all they had.

"Come on, let's go. Hughes is probably already up there."

Maes was there, Ed would be there, and most important, Riza would be there.

It was fine.

Everything was fine.

He was fine.

Roy smiled grimly at himself. His mental chant left a bitter taste even though it was all internal.

Glancing back at Ed, he nodded hesitantly, hoping the distress did not shine through his expression as clearly as he felt it did. The blond immediately piled out of the car, and opened the back door for him, letting the warm summer air spread inside.

Strenuously trying to keep his arms from bumping into anything, Roy managed his way out and onto his feet, biting fiercely into his lip as the movement jostled his broken fingers and and every other damn thing that was wrong with him.

He managed to stagger into the building with Edward hovering besides him. The kid must have picked up some of Maes' mother-hen tendencies, as well as the belief that Roy would shatter the moment he stepped on a crack in the sidewalk.

Although he could hardly blame them, Roy reminded himself as he glanced around the lobby, shamefully catching the gazes of curious onlookers. He had not seem himself in quite some time and wasn't entirely sure what made him stick out like a sore thumb, but it probably had something to do with how obviously sore and beaten he was. Or at least, Roy hoped that's all it was.

Edward ushered him to the elevator without much more than a muffled "come on". It was a miracle Roy managed to get inside on his own. His legs were shaking, forcing him to lean against the wall as the kid pushed the button that would carry them to the correct floor. If Ed asked why Roy has struggling, he wouldn't know how to reply. Maybe it was the lack of sleep and food. Maybe he was getting sick. Maybe it was the pain. Or maybe something else entirely.

The arrived to the correct floor with an ease and a gentle ring, but the moment the elevator settled, Roy felt his stomach twist and drop back to the first floor. When Edward looked back at him curiously, he took a deep breath and pulled one leg in front of the other. Ed had said that he was overthinking it, so all he had to do was not think about it. Don't think about anything. Just walk into the right room without a fear in the world.

That idea got him through the hall and around the corner, but any conviction to keep it up came crashing down the moment Roy's eyes landed on her front door. He stopped dead in his tracks, legs
unsteady and head spinning.

"I can't do this." He only vaguely heard himself speak, and would have thought it was his imagination if Edward did not respond.

"Sure you can. Everything's gonna be alright." Roy glanced down at him dubiously, but the blond had decided to grace him with a small, uncertain smile. He was just as unsure as Roy, but Edward was at least confident that he could make it through the door.

Roy grabbed onto the reassurance and held it tight, repeating it to himself in his mind. Then at last, he nodded and Edward opened the door.

The first thing to hit him was the smell. The moment the door opened, the subtlety soft scent that followed Hawkeye like a shadow greeted him like an old friend, staggering his feet and forcing him to stop as if a wall had appeared in front of him. Edward was unaffected and gave him a curious glance, silently urging him onward. As much as Roy would have liked to stand there and soak it in, he willed himself to take another step forward, blinking rapidly as his eyes adjusted to the calmer lighting of the apartment.

So far, everything about the place had served to relax his flaring nerves in a matter of seconds. From the smell, to the lighting- simply being in the apartment had the opposite effect that he had expected, making him far more comfortable than he had been even in his own home.

However, he wasn't given very much time to enjoy it. When Roy moved further in with Edward trailing carefully behind, his wandering eyes fell on her. Riza Hawkeye stood in the middle of the main room with Maes by her side, both paused as if he had interrupted an intensive conversation. He could feel her eyes on him, piercing and intense, but the few meters that stood between them was too far to make out the details he craved.

She was still in her uniform, missing only the heavy jacket as if she had arrived not long before them. Her hair was still professionally tied up and she was facing him fully now, gaping mouth snapping shut once his presence was registered. He could make out the sherry brown of her eyes, but not the power in which she looked at him. He couldn't make out the emotion that hid below the surface or the thoughts that surely stormed within.

Whatever Hawkeye saw when she looked at him, he couldn't read it. Was she disappointed? Horrified? Roy was too preoccupied to sculpt his face into something more composed. Whatever he ended up looking like, he was sure it did not invoke much confidence.

But regardless, she straightened her back and took a few decisive steps closer to ease the gap. Roy, paralyzed by apprehension, could only watch when she came into focus, allowing him to better make out the sickening worry that hung behind her composed mask. She then stopped and stood at perfect attention, drawing a hand to her forehead, preforming a salute with absolute perfection, if it wasn't for the ever-so-slight shaking of her hand that he found only by knowing where to look.

"Welcome back, sir."

Roy hesitated, too stunned to move or close his mouth as it hung slightly ajar. He could only stand still as the words cycled through his mind, ringing with a familiarity that he did not expect. Those same words were said so often, accepted without a second thought and then brushed aside for more important matters. But this time, they were said with an overwhelming amount of importance and meaning. So familiar, yet the life in which those words derived from felt so far away.

Thoughtlessly, his feet moved forward, but his legs were ill prepared to take the shifting weight.
His knees buckled almost instantly and his entire body panicked as the world spun and gravity turned on him. Roy felt himself fall and immediately braced himself for the expected pain as his knees made contact with the hard floor. The room around him flinched and gasped, but before he could collapse completely, he felt hands appear on his shoulders, gentle yet reassuringly holding him steady. His eyes remained shut, but the air around him suddenly became warm and that blissful aroma calmly swirled. Its quiet whispers of safety slipped through the white hot flares of pain and hysteria, grounding him and calming his heavy breathing to something more manageable.

He pried his eyes open to see exactly what he expected: Riza was kneeling in front of him, her arms outstretched and face inches away from his. He could see every detail, every crease, every emotion and thought that shined brightly in her deep, insightful eyes.

He saw so much pain beneath the surface, leaving scars in their wake. But beyond that, an unbelievable relief shined brighter, even as she held a worried expression in place.

"Sir- Roy, what's wrong?" Her voice, though laced with concern, flowed through him like silk, easing the pain if only for just a moment. But no matter how much he missed hearing her voice and desired to enjoy it, he couldn't block out the weight that he felt behind her words as well. The strain she must have endured while he was gone. The uncertainty, the confusion, the guilt...

He opened his mouth to reply, but lacked any response as he was silenced by the very sight of her eyes.

Roy caused her so much pain. She suffered because of him and his foolish decisions, and he couldn't even muster up the courage to apologize. He tried again, but his mind went blank, betraying him in his time of need.

Riza watched him for a moment, hands held onto his shoulders unyielding. Roy had to pull his eyes away, crippled by the sorrowful spear of ice that shot through him at the sight of the lamenting ghosts that haunted her expression. His gaping mouth closed as his injured hands tensed as much as the pain would allow. He had no idea what to say or do- nothing could make it up to her. Nothing he could do could possibly fix anything. He made her suffer. He-

As if Riza could see the demons that circled above Roy's head like vultures, her grip around his shoulders tightened just enough to grapple his attention back to her. Before he could so much as consider stuttering something, she gently guided him closer, pulling him into a hug. Her arms coiled around his back securely, but loosely enough to avoid hurting any of his many wounds and bruises.

A cold shudder ran down his back before her warmth could fend it off. He didn't deserve this. He didn't deserve her.

But with that said, Roy was too selfish to keep himself from pressing further into her embrace and wrapping his scarred arms around her, but leaving his hands in loose useless fists.

"I'm sorry." Roy paused, needing to take a moment to discern whether or not the words he heard were truly said. But that question was quickly answered for him when they continued. "I'm so sorry," Riza said again, her voice shuddering. "I failed you. I couldn't protect you. I thought you were dead. I-" she cut herself off, leaving a miserable silence in her place as she suppressed whatever burst of emotion wanted to break through.

But Roy was glad she stopped when she did. He wasn't sure how much more he could hear.

"S-stop," he chocked out before Riza could continue. "Stop, please... Don't talk like that. You don't need to-"
"Don't try to excuse this, Roy," she interjected, further burying her head into his shoulder, as if he was the one supporting her when he was sure it was really the exact opposite. "Nothing can excuse this."

"Riza-"

"I let you down, Roy. I had one job, and I failed to do it." Roy opened his mouth to oppose, but she shook her head, her hair brushing against his jaw, silencing him. "But if you'd give me another chance..."

His weak arms tightened around her waist. "Enough, Riza. I never blamed you for this. So stop blaming yourself." He wasn't expecting to get an apology when he never wanted one in the first place. Hearing the lieutenant agonize over something that was his mistake tied knots in his gut. He wanted nothing more than for her to not blame herself.

"With all due respect," the blonde said quietly. "I don't know if I can follow that order."

"You'll just have to try then."

"Roy-"

"Please, Riza. Please try." Somehow, knowing that Riza placed the blame on herself hurt more than any injury that Envy could have inflicted.

But at the same time, there was something reassuring in the way she clung onto him. Roy was not the only one truly suffering, and suddenly felt like he had something else to focus on besides his own misery. He didn't need to try to be strong for himself when he had someone else to be strong for instead. The people he had to support him were not just sitting on the sidelines- they were affected and involved and all wanted the same thing.

Roy was well aware that he had many more trials to face, but it never seemed less daunting then when he held onto Riza for dear life. He always felt invisible when she was near. Even as he clung onto her, miserable and in pain, he was able to see the light of their future shining for a moment. He had already gotten so far; Roy had to see it through.

It took some convincing, but they were finally able to get Roy back on his feet long enough to situate him on the couch. Not long after, there was a knock at the door which turned out to see a doctor that Riza had called the moment she learned Roy would be coming over and needed medical attention. While Maes didn't like the idea of a strange, possibly not medically certified person inspecting his friend's injuries, it was a relief all the same. If Roy had to go any longer without splinting his hands, Maes would have picked up the nearest stick and done it himself.

To give them some space, Maes and Riza retreated into the main bedroom. Edward remained in the living room with Roy and the doctor so the other two could speak more about the situation without being a distraction. Thankfully, his friend was only reluctant about the agreement for a moment, and seemed to have calmed slightly when Ed assured him he would remain.

A great sigh that Maes was not aware was coming broke out the moment he was in the other room, but Hawkeye's dog served as a nice distraction for a moment when he bounded over to greet him.

"I figured it would be best to keep Black Hayate away until Roy becomes more comfortable," Riza explained before ordering the dog to lay down. He did so, lowering his small furry body to the ground, but keeping his excitable eyes on them as his tail continued to wag.
Maes gave him a fond but weary smile, before drawing his attention back to the lieutenant.

Riza closed the door behind them and sat down at the corner of her properly made bed with her hands tightly held and eyes staring down in focus.

"Is he always like this?" she asked quietly, her voice low and riddled with unsaid sorrow.

It was amazing, really- how she was able to understand so much about Roy's state just by looking at him. Overall, their reunion did not go nearly as badly as it could have. It went quite well, actually. But that's not what Hawkeye was talking about. She was able to see far deeper to Roy's mangled subconscious.

"It was worse before. He's gotten better recently. And he's going to keep getting better. I'm sure of it."

She looked up and examined him for a moment. "What exactly happened?"

A wry smile wormed its way onto Maes' face as he leaned back against the wall. "It's a long story."

"The others- they have a right to know as well."

"I know."

"We could bring everyone together to discuss this and figure out where to go. Roy needs all the help he can get to find the cause of this." Maes nodded slowly as he digested the words. "The sooner the better. I don't want to put any more strain on Roy, but... maybe tomorrow they could come over for dinner."

"I don't know how much he'll like it." The glance she gave him spoke with an unsaid question. "He's only just now beginning to figure out the difference between us and his hallucinations. I'm worried that crowding him will make it worse."

"I understand your concern, but we don't have much time. If the people who did this have ties in the military like you said, we might not be able to afford missing work. Edward will have to return soon as well. We need to get as much done this weekend as possible."

Maes sighed. He knew she was right. He didn't like it, but there wasn't much he could do. "I'll ask him about it tonight."

"We still need to speak with the team even if he doesn't want to see them. Besides, it's not healthy to keep avoiding them. They care about him and want to help."

"I know," he breathed as he folded his arms. The best way to make progress was to get as many hands as possible. He was still concerned about word getting out, but there was no group of people more trustworthy that Roy Mustang's team. Besides, it was worth the risk. It had to be.

Nothing was said between them for a few thoughtful seconds as they both battled with their own sets of concerns. Until finally, Hawkeye broke it.

"Maes," she began, drawing his attention back onto her. "Have you put any thought into what's going to happen once this is over?"

"You mean assuming we put a stop to the people who wanted Roy out of the picture?"

She nodded. "As far as anyone else is concerned, Colonel Mustang is dead. It won't be easy to tell
the world otherwise without putting a spotlight on him. People will look into the matter."

"Not unless we give them something else to look at. I think the only way to do it is to spin a story. Something that won't further involve the military. If people with enough power are in on this, taking them on right now might be biting off more than we can chew. Hopefully the battle won't be worth it to them either."

"Whatever we do end up going with will influence how easy it will be for him to return to his rank."

Maes hmmmed in contemplation as he idly drummed his fingers against his arm. It was clear that they would not come to a perfect conclusion that night, but the two continued to discuss possibilities, seeing as they would soon have to make a decision. Or at least, Maes hoped they would. Despite how much maneuvering such a plan would require, he would have liked nothing more than to see Roy back in his office, business as usual. As things were, such a possibility felt so far away.

But they were getting close. With every day that passed and every step Roy took forward, they grew closer and closer to reclaiming the life that was taken away from him.

But all hopes of progress came to a halt when raised voices were heard from the other room. Maes and Riza gave each other a quick glance before they both hurried through the door to see what the commotion was about.

Roy had apparently pushed himself into the corner of the couch with his legs up definitively, and exposed arms wrapped around himself. The doctor stood a meter or two away, on-edge and skittish as if someone had tried to attack him, while Edward remained between the two with his arms up in something that resembled a mix of being prepared to forcibly separate the two, and the universal sign of peace.

"I told you you'd get them right back," Ed exclaimed. "Come on, Mustang, don't-"

"No, I won't let him take them," Roy snapped back, pulling himself into a tighter ball. "I have no reason to trust him! Especially not with my gloves!"

The doctor, a thin, lanky man in his later years with whitening hair and worry marks sketching across his distressed face, began carefully. "Sir, I have no interest in stealing anything from you. But I need to look at your hands before your injuries worsen."

Roy did not respond, but his teeth were bared and eyes narrowed in a glare that could kill. It was at this moment that Hawkeye moved to break up the scene, but Maes quickly shot a hand out to her shoulder once he saw Edward turn to face the alchemist. The lieutenant gave him a questioning glance, but he remained quiet, wanting to see if they could dissolve the situation themselves.

"Mustang," Edward began, shoulders still and arms lowering back to his sides as he faced the man. "Listen. You don't need to trust him. Not really, anyway. But you trust me, don't you? And I know that he's not going to hurt you. He already looked at the rest of your injuries, so just let him finish so he can leave." Roy stiffened at the kid's words, and all signs of animalistic defensiveness that Maes had caught glances of in the past disappeared. "I'll hold onto the gloves if it makes you feel better."

The hesitation and second-guessing was clearly evident on Roy's face as he bit into his lip and further hunched his shoulders. For a moment, it looked like he was going to argue, but then his dark eyes landed on Maes and Hawkeye, and something else washed over him. It was almost akin
to terror, but more closely resembled a deep guilt. It was there for only a moment before he tore his eyes away and forcibly slackened.

"Fine," he relented through clenched teeth as he reluctantly loosened himself. The doctor managed to hide his relief relatively well, holding onto a natural comportment as if all of this was simply routine.

The tall man picked up a clipboard which had been abandoned on a side table, glancing at the two onlookers as he did so, but making no comment. While he slowly approached Roy, Edward had released an inaudible sigh that Maes could only see when he turned around to take a seat on the couch besides the other alchemist. His presence there seemed to further reassure the man, even though the kid immediately went to work on convincing him to lay out his damaged hands.

It took a few minutes, but they were at last able to calm Roy enough for the doctor to slip the gloves off, which was not made to be easy by how much his right hand had already swelled. At this point, Maes and Riza joined the group through curiosity, if nothing else. Although Maes wasn't sure if it was worth it when he was able to see the injuries. All four fingers were a forewarning purple, some worse than others almost as if it was spreading into the rest of his hand. The fingers in question had a slight bend in unnatural sideways angles. It would be a stroke of luck if he regained full control after healing.

His left hand was badly bruised; the skin was covered in an array of purples, greens and yellows, but even Maes could see that they were likely not broken. The doctor did not give him any more time to observe before beginning his own investigation.

Maes stepped back to give them more room, quietly eyeing his friend over by the sidelines. Both of his arms had been completely covered in bandages, leaving almost no skin showing. The neck wound as well, Maes noticed, was already re-bandaged. He was sure that too was quite the ordeal that required a lot of coaxing on Edward's part.

Speaking of Edward, the lieutenant colonel switched his focus onto the blond, who was far too occupied by watching the doctor to notice. The kid had been noticeably more involved now and suddenly acted like he actually wanted to be here. In comparison to how he was just the other day, eager to leave and hard pressed to even look at Roy for more than a second, it was a dramatic change that Maes did not expect to see, but was unbelievably glad he did.

Roy inhaled sharply and pushed himself further into the couch as the doctor began fiddling with his hands, but had otherwise remained quiet as he allowed the man to do his job.

"As far as broken fingers go, this doesn't look too bad," the doctor said as he worked on splinting the uncooperative man's hand. He- Doctor B-... B something. It began with a B. Maes didn't spend much time talking to him. It was Hawkeye who found him and got him to make a house call but making a promise that none of them would look too carefully at his record. They had bigger fish to fry anyway. "His index and little finger both have fractures, but leaving them tied to his middle and ring finger should make them heal in four to six weeks."

Roy grimaced as his broken fingers were forced back into place.

"However," the doctor continued and he finished his work on one hand and began to wrap the other. "I'd try to keep him from doing anything to strain himself. His hands are still badly torn up and were not given much room to heal from wearing those rough gloves all the time."

"Right," he replied numbly without much thought. He wasn't sure how eagerly Roy would agree to the doctor's suggestion, especially given how severely he glared at the man. It would be a
conversation for them later, he supposed. "What else can you tell us?"

Doctor B-Something finished with what he was doing and straightened up to face the two, then glanced down at his clipboard. "Well, the wound on his neck was my biggest concern, but it seems to be healing fairly well. That goes for the dog bite on his forearm as well. And-"

"Wait," Maes abruptly cut in. "So it really was a dog that bit him?"

"Looks like it."

He stewed on this for a moment, looking Roy over as he pursed his lip. He wasn't sure what else it would be, if not a dog, but he struggled to make sense of it. Roy still had not explained that one, or much of what happened during his imprisonment at all, really. Another topic to be added to the list.

"Anyway, it's difficult to know without the equipment, but I'd say he has some fractures ribs- at least three- and more that are bruised. Not much can be done about this. They should heal on their own in about a month or two." He looked back down at his notes again, lightly tapping the board with a pen. "Let's see, what else... Thankfully no internal bleeding... Oh yes- it appears that he has bee malnourished."

"Yeah, we've been working on that."

The doctor nodded wordlessly, then lowered his clipboard to his side. "Well I've done about all I can for him."

"Alright, thanks for coming," he willed himself to say, albeit wearily. Part of the arrangement is that they paid upfront, but at least it saved time in getting the man out. Roy was still glaring daggers at him, and something told him that everyone would feel more comfortable the sooner they were alone.

They exchanged some more pointless pleasantries before the doctor finally left the apartment and the four of them by themselves.

"Alright, now give me my gloves back," Maes heard Roy waste no time to turn to Edward, who held the bloodied white fabric in his hands.

"Uh well you know you can't wear them, right?" the blond asked, shooting the older man's hands a quick glance. With one of them braced and the other heavily bandaged, little room for more fabric was left.

"I realize." There was something snappish in Roy's tone, leading him to realize that he had only recently accepted this fact and was still a little hung up on it.

Riza approached the couch and knelt down beside him, laying a hand on the armrest, only inches away from the man. "You're safe as long as you're here, Roy."

Roy visibly softened at her words and his shoulder slackened slightly. He then glanced at Edward again with an air that suggested he was forcing himself to relax.

"I still want them back."

The kid scrutinized him for a moment, but eventually held the gloves out, allowing Roy to gingerly take them with his left hand. He didn't move to put them on, but simply slumped in the couch, staring down at them wearily.
Maes watched the scene for a moment longer, but no one moved from where they were. So instead of trying to bring up the many, *many* topics that he knew they had to discuss, Maes walked over to the open armchair and sunk into it with a heavy exhale. They would have plenty of time to discuss the future later that night. But for the moment, he would much rather just sit back with the knowledge that Roy was getting better both physically and mentally, and leave the rest for another time.
Chapter 20

Edward found himself torn between feeling grateful and uncomfortable.

Hours have passed since their arrival at Hawkeye's apartment. She and Hughes had been deeply intertwined in a conversation since the doctor left, leaving Edward to just sit on the couch next to Mustang, throwing in his two cenz whenever something caught his ear, but primarily doing the first thing: sitting.

The factor that had him torn was that Mustang was staring at him seventy percent of the time. Grateful, because the man spent the past week glaring daggers at him, or avoiding all eye contact completely. The looks he was given now were easily better. But uncomfortable, because he wouldn't stop. However, in comparison to the alternative, Ed would have to say that he preferred it. Every few minutes, the man's gaze would fall and his face would steadily contort into a tale-telling grimace. The weak pain medication he took earlier were surely wearing off by then, suggesting to him that they should invest in something stronger.

Hopefully Mustang would be given something else to cure the pain soon. Edward considered asking Hawkeye if she had anything, but he wasn't too keen on interrupting their important conversation. So until he could, he settled for staring at the ground, or looking over to the older alchemist from time to time to see which of two expressions he wore.

Even as pain occasionally pulled at his face and his eyes were shadowed by an unsaid exhaustion, there seemed to be a content air around the man. But based off of what he had suffered through so far, Edward supposed that was still understandable.

But the atmosphere that could almost resemble peace did not last long. While Ed was lost in his thoughts, the other conversation had somehow come to a natural end, only apparent to him once he noticed Hughes approach the two alchemists. He was clearly tired and worn, but that did not detract from the careful focus behind his glasses.

"Hey Roy," he began casually, but there was a note of caution behind his voice. Edward wondered if Mustang noticed. "Did you hear what we were talking about?"

The man looked up at him from the couch as his arms were crossing limply in his lap. His expression grew more vacant as time passed while exhaustion and pain slowly became too much to hide. He stared at the man for a moment, then shook his head.

"That's alright," Hughes answered softly, shifting his weight to obscure his unease. "We were thinking about having the rest of your team come over. We need to discuss the situation, and I'm sure they'd love to see you."

Edward watched from the next seat over as Mustang's gaze fell to stare into space, expression unreadable besides the painstakingly obvious uncertainty. His shoulders tensed slightly as he pursed his lip. For a moment, Ed almost wanted to scoot closer to him as if his presence would help to reassure the man, but he held himself back from doing so.

"Okay," Mustang managed to mutter at last, surprising the three spectators. He looked far from convinced, as if he had forced himself to say it and was forcing himself to believe it, but doing a poor job at it.

Hughes took only a second to mask his shock before allowing a thin, tired smile to overtake it.
"That's great. We were... thinking about doing it tomorrow."

Any semblance of self composure that Mustang previously had immediately dissolved in stages. Edward was easily able to watch his eyes widen, mouth gape, and even see the tremor of his hitched breath.

"T-tomorrow?" he stuttered, quickly followed by a subtle grimace at the betrayal of his own voice. "Isn't that a little... soon?"

"It needs to be soon, Roy. Once the weekend ends, Riza and I will have to return to work and we can't afford to let anyone there see all of us together."

Whatever response Mustang wanted to say, it was stuck in his throat as his dark eyes shifted from Hughes, over to Ed, up at Hawkeye, back at Ed, then settled on Hughes again. He looked like a cornered animal as he subconsciously pushed himself closer into the couch, and probably felt like one too.

But as his eyes shifted between the three again, the resistance seemed to die out of him with an elongated exhale. "Don't let me stop you," he said in a voice that was far too subdued and sullen for the words that tried to give off a more casual appeal.

This unconvincing response seemed like enough for Hughes, based on how his shoulders slackened and his smile returned. "Thanks, Roy."

Mustang's only response was an incomprehensible mumble.

Hughes glances at an invisible watch on his wrist, then turned to a clock that was posted on the wall behind him. "Well, we better get going. I trust you can take care of everything from here?" he asked, directly his eyes onto Hawkeye.

"Of course, sir," she answered without a second thought. Back to business, even in her own home.

"Great. Come on, Ed; I'll drive you home."

"Mkay." He began to push himself back onto his feet, but a stunned jolt shot through him, stilling him to the spot when a bandaged hand reached out and grabbed him by the wrist. He glanced up at Mustang, more concerned with the fact that he was using his bruised hand rather than the action itself.

Mustang, returning his gaze, almost looked just as surprised, but understood full well why he automatically stopped him.

"Don't go. Y-you can't-"

"Roy, it'll be fine. It's only Hawkeye. No one can protect you better than she can," Hughes eased with a small frown. Edward glanced over to her just in time to see the slightest hints of something dark and painful flicker across her face. It was gone so quickly that he thought he had imagined it.

"I know. I know that," Mustang grumbled through his teeth, narrowed eyes locked on the floor. Ed could practically see the cogs turning, working desperately to find an excuse for his actions. "But I-I-" Then his head shot up, the struggle gone and replaced with some kind of relieving realization.

"But it's not safe! You-" He swiveled his head to address Edward. "You should stay here. It's not safe. Right, Hawkeye?" Mustang added, eyes trailing up to the lieutenant who stood just a foot away.
"You used to be a much better liar than this," he thought grimly as he followed Mustang's gaze over to the blonde to see signs of her mask slipping yet again. It was brief and subtle, but Hawkeye seemed incapable of forming a response, silenced by a deep sadness. But in seconds, she had swallowed it and forced a small smile that Ed might have believed if he didn't know better.

"If Edward wants to, that's fine with me."

Then suddenly, all eyes were on him, some heavier than others, all expecting an answer. But none were as intensive as Mustang's, who was staring at him with a plea in his eyes that he likely wasn't aware of, looking not too far off from an abandoned puppy. The pure unnaturally of it hollowed out Edward's chest with ice cold claws as he suppressed a shiver and the grimace that wanted to tug at his expression.

"Uh- sure. Sure, I'll stay... It's getting late anyway," he added with a hopefully casual smile, though he wasn't sure for who's benefit.

Mustang stared for a moment longer as though he wasn't sure if he imagined his words or not, but he eventually slackened and released Edward's wrist, then leaned back into the couch. He didn't look nearly as relaxed as he did earlier, which wasn't saying much, but he didn't seem like he would have a heart attack at any moment.

Hughes too seemed to be a little more reassured now, and his smile looked to be just a bit more genuine. "Well, not everyone can spend the night here. I'll get going now. And I'll call the others when I get home."

Mustang was visibly uncomfortable with his friend leaving, but must have not wanted to push his luck, because he kept quiet, settling for simply following the man with his eyes, that were shadowed with evident discomfort. Hughes noticed this and graced him with a reassuring grin.

"Don't worry, Roy; I'll be back tomorrow morning long before the others get here."

He nodded solemnly.

Hughes watched for a moment longer, hoping to get more of a response but eventually settling for that. "Alright then. Goodnight, everyone."

"Goodnight, sir," Hawkeye replied as Edward waved. Apparently satisfied, the lieutenant colonel cast the others one last glance before showing himself out, leaving the three alone in the apartment.

Hawkeye wasted no time in turning away from the door to examine the two alchemists, deep in thought and difficult to read. Her eyes trailed around the small living room as the other two simply watched and waited.

"You're sure that it's alright? I don't wanna be any trouble," Ed spoke up as he mindlessly folded his arms.

"Not at all, Edward," she replied easily with a warm smile. But despite how composed she held herself, she still had not quite recovered from the emotional reunion that occurred only a few hours ago. She was doing well in acting like it, however. A good night's rest would serve all of them well. "Are you alright with taking up the armchair?"

Edward glanced over to the large plushy chair that was pushed into the corner. It had a foot rest besides it that could be used to partially lay on. It wouldn't do for a fully grown adult, but for him... Edward resisted from commenting on the length by biting down on his tongue. "Yeah, that'll be fine. Thanks."
"And... sir? Roy?"

Mustang tensed and blinked rapidly as he shook himself out of his thoughts to look up at her questionably.

"Hughes told me that you've preferred couches lately. Is that true?"

He nodded, apparently not finding any problem with that. Edward assumed it was something about being able to lay against the back cushions that he found so appealing. He only ever saw Mustang there, or sitting in the corner of a room, and never with his back exposed.

Edward let the other two try to figure out the details as he stayed quiet in the background. He wasn't sure how comfortable Hawkeye was with how things had progressed, but he was sure she was more than willing to do whatever she could for her commanding officer's sake. Both of them probably would have liked more time to get used to the idea of suddenly spending the night under the same roof after Mustang had been reported dead for so long, but there wasn't really any other way around it.

Mustang remained rather quiet as the night carried on, letting his eyes be far louder than his voice ever could. His gaze was always searching no matter where he looked. Searching for confirmation-assurance that he could believe in what was in front of him, and fearfully watching for any reason to have doubts.

That stare would always stay on Edward a few seconds longer than anything or anyone else, but if anything, it was because he found whatever he was looking for, rather than continuing the search. That have to have meant something good, right? If Ed were to guess, he'd say that he was one of the few people that Mustang didn't have to second-guess, if not the only one.

He thought back to the conversation they had earlier that day; it felt like an eternity ago. For the first time since before he went missing, Mustang had spoken to him with a clarity and sense of self that he had missed dearly. But that side of him had since dwindled from the exhaustion. After all that had happened today, it was to be expected. Mustang must have been spent, especially considering how butchered his sleep schedule seemed to be. As little as Edward liked seeing these strange little quirks reappear, he wasn't going to judge the man too harshly for them. Hopefully the staring contests and uncharacteristic stammering would go away in time.

But he wasn't sure what was safe to assume when such a threat loomed overhead. Mustang was suffering from trauma and stress, and likely wouldn't completely heal until he was given peace. Even as he ate and talked with people he trusted in a place that was safe, Ed could feel a storm coming. Did Mustang feel it too?

And what could he do about it?

Nothing was how he had originally thought. But going head to head against Envy must have given him somewhat of a confidence boost- one that he obviously needed. But then again, Edward also had to wonder how much if it had to do with what Mustang had said to him.

Everything he said about being certain that Ed was who he had was, and that he didn't care about all he had done that caused his imprisonment- his torture... Part of him didn't want to believe the merciful words. It was too much- much more than he deserved. But another part- the selfish side of him- wanted to absorb every word and hold it close to finally release the great burden of guilt that had been weighing him down, pulling him closer and closer to the cold ground with every passing day.
After all was said and done, it just seemed too easy.

But if Edward had any hope of making it up to him, then he had to hold strong and remain where he was, doing the only thing he could to help. If that meant sitting on Hawkeye's couch and being a silent source of certainty, then so be it.

He was so adamant about avoiding Mustang earlier. In a way, the situation had not changed between then and now. All that changed was the way Edward viewed it. He always knew that he had to make up for his mistakes, but only walking into what could have been a second kidnapping did he gain the determination required to do it. His guilt was crippling. It still remained and likely would until Mustang was on his feet again, but he refused to let it slow him down any longer.

He was going to fix this.

But first, he had to call Al and tell him he wasn't coming home again.

The night drew on, and the moon rose higher into the sky, casting dim rays of muted light through the windows. There was a solemn quality to the air, which was not at all helped by how painfully little Roy had to say. What was there to talk about, anyway? He would much rather just listen to the lieutenant speak.

Hawkeye had mentioned again how happy she was to see him, how badly she and everyone had missed them, and so on. Her words probably should have cheered him up, but they only served to remind him that he wasn't there for them when they needed him.

She explained what had happened at the office during his absence. Apparently, the team had been split up to work under different superior officers, but they had every intention of coming together again once Roy was up to stepping out into the spotlight. There was something bittersweet about how she said it, however. It made him wonder if such a thing was even possible. How badly did these people want him gone? He was sure there were more than just Envy who wanted him out of the way. How far were they willing to go? Would he ever get his old life back?

And still, Roy wasn't sure why. The answer was in his mind somewhere, he was sure. He must have learned enough in his time there to piece it together. But as things were, the truth avoided him, tantalizingly mocking him just beyond his reach.

Until then, he tried not to let it become yet another thing to keep him up at night.

Hawkeye went on to tell him that Edward had taken as many weeks off work as he could justify. She suspected that it was because he couldn't stand to work for anyone else besides him. Roy wasn't sure how to take it. Hearing that the kid technically answered to someone else now was disconcerting, to say the least. He shouldn't have been surprised, in hindsight, but he still didn't like it. Although it gave him a tinge of satisfaction to hear that Edward's new boss was annoyed by how much time he had taken off. Ideally, he would get his life together by the time the kid's extended vacation time came to an end.

She continued to fill him in as they sat facing each other at the kitchen table. Edward looked like he was going to pass out after they ate, so he had disappeared into the living room. There was a voice that demanded he not let the kid out of his sight—anything could happen. But at the same time, there was a constant assurance of safety here in Hawkeye's home that could not be easily ignored. For once, he managed to block out some of the constantly cycling worries that always clouded his mind, and focused on the woman in front of him. She could say anything at all, and he would still listen with everything he had.
The air was primarily filled solely by her gentle voice, with his mixing into it only every now and again. But eventually, the foreign sound of small paws against the tile trailed into the kitchen. Black Hayate looked up at him with a wagging tail, which he had to return with a small smile, then continued on his way.

He paid little mind to Hawkeye's small dog as he surveyed the room, sniffing around with his ears up. Roy didn't think anything of it until a small growl suddenly sounded from his throat, head turning to glance around the room in search of something. The lieutenant called out to him, but Black Hayate completely ignored her, which should have been enough of a red flag.

Carefully, far too carefully for a dog, he stepped over to one of the windows, staring up at the darkness behind the glass.

And then he barked.

The sound shocked Roy worse than it should have, immediately forcing his limbs to tense and eyes widen as the breath was dispelled from his lungs. While dogs had little ability to vary their voices, there was a message hidden in that bark- one that froze Roy to the core and warning him of a threat- preparing him for harm. It was all too familiar.

Another bark, though small, rung in his ears like a drum, setting off alarms and setting fire to his nerves without him quite realizing why. He stared, boring his eyes into the scene to decipher its meaning, even as his vision began to darken and a headache pounded too painfully to bare. Then again, another abrupt growl tore through the air just as the dog jumped, scratching his front paws against the window's frame. Claws dragging across the concrete, closer and closer, heavy steps drawing near, far too close.

Loud, hungry breaths echoed in his head as they panted eagerly. Deep growls reverberated just behind the sharp teeth that wanted to tear into his flesh, taste his blood, finally deliver the killing blow that they had promised so long ago.

Roy?

Dark, sinister eyes gleamed, focusing in on him as they quietly assuring that there was no escape. No one to save him. No way to fight back. He was outnumbered, he was weak, he had nothing to live for.

The dogs wanted him to just lie down and accept death- greet it with open arms.

He didn't want to. The powerful insistence that he wanted to live ripped through even the suffocating fear. For a moment, he wasn't sure where that strength came from until faces flashed across his mind. The people he cared for surrounded him. But they were only memories of the past, or hallucinations.

Mustang!

No, that didn't feel right.

They moved in closer and opened their jaws, exposing their yellow teeth and masking his sense with their putrid breath.

No, no, no, it wasn't right! Something's off-

Something warm brushed over his arm, swiftly hitting him with an onslaught of vivid memories.
A long row of sharp teeth sunk into his forearm, shocking all fearless confidence out of him with a heavy blow. The teeth ripped through his skin with ease and fresh blood began to drip down his stunned hand. An agonizing scream muddled with surprise shattered the silence as Roy tried in vain to pull back while using his unharmed hand to yank his arm free from under the unavering hold of its jaw.

Not again.

He reeled back and swung his arm away, kicking out with his legs blindly in the darkness.

Stern hands appeared on his shoulders and shook him before he could fight back. Light blinked back into his eyes and suddenly, he had returned to Hawkeye's apartment where there were no dogs to be seen. She was staring at him with a worried intensity burning in her eyes, shoulders stiff and hands tense, anchoring him onto reality. Roy could only stare back as the image registered. He hadn't realized how heavily he was breathing until he began to calm himself, and only then realized that he was sitting on the floor and had pushed himself into the corner of the room.

"W-what- what's..." He swallowed thickly in an attempt to return some composure. "What happened?"

"You were hallucinating," she answered. Her calm voice gave him something to grab onto rather than the splitting headache and his chaotic mind. But as he thought on it, the aches of his body began to sink in, reminding him that his ribs and arms were already badly beaten and did not appreciate the movement they endured when he blacked out.

"Relapse." Roy blinked and looked behind Hawkeye, only now noticing Edward's presence. He was standing just out of arm's reach with an expression that was difficult to read, like he was trying to hide something. Disappointment, perhaps.

Looking at the kid struck him with a tinge of shame. Relapse was the only word for it, he supposed. He had been doing significantly better today, but was shoved back down the moment he heard barking.

But at least he knew that was really Edward. Roy was sure of it. He wasn't still hallucinating. This was real. His eyes fell back onto Hawkeye, further confirming his thoughts.

Roy exhaled deeply and laid his head against the wall.

He was barely aware of it when he heard a grim laugh in his own quivering voice. "God, I'm a mess."

"... Don't let it bother you, Roy," she supplied, perhaps just out of a lack of anything else supportive to say.

"But doesn't it bother you?" he asked abruptly, prying his eyes open to watch her.

"I-" She had not expected the comment to be turned around on her, and didn't have an answer quick enough for Roy's rapidly firing mind. But that as fine by him. He already knew the truth.

"I'm sorry you have to see me like this, Riza. I wish you didn't have to, but..."

But I'm far too selfish to be alone any longer.

He shook his head with an ashamed, irritable groan. "I don't think the others should come over." Roy couldn't look up even when he heard surprised questions rise up from both Edward and
Hawkeye. "I can't have them see... this," he growled with a weak one-handed gesture to himself. "Please don't underestimate how devoted they are," Hawkeye said quietly, her voice just barely above a whisper. "I'm not. That's- that's the problem. They'll see me and realize how weak their so-called leader is."

"Roy, that's enough. Few people can endure what you've gone through."

"They don't know what I've gone through!" he exclaimed, only to immediately regret raising his voice.

"No, but they will. And when they do, they will not look down on or pity you."

"They'd have every right to..."

"Roy," she interjected with a terse tone that warned not to push too far. "I've said it before, and I'll say it again. You are easily the strongest person I have ever met, and I know that none of them would disagree."

Roy wanted to wonder how she could possible think that after he had just lost his mind over a small dog, but a voice in the back of his head insisted that Hawkeye would never lie to him. There was no deceit or lack of certainty to be seen.

He wasn't quite convinced, but Roy had learned long ago that there was no winning an argument against Riza Hawkeye, especially when she had that gleam in her eyes.

"If you say so," he replied absently, merely relenting rather than agreeing. He certainly wasn't fooling anyone into thinking otherwise, but that fact failed to bother him. He had much greater worries on his mind. After all, if it wasn't one thing, it was another.

He had somehow managed to drag himself over the hurdle that was his first lieutenant, but now four more remained in the form of the rest of his team.

"Good morning!" Hughes' jovial voice traveled quickly through the apartment the moment Hawkeye opened the door for him the next morning.

Edward stirred in his makeshift bed and shuffled until the pillow was covering his ears. Meanwhile, Roy was paralyzed to the spot, but idly envious of the kid's relaxed comportment. Edward clearly did not share his concerns regarding what it meant for Hughes to be here.

Since being rescued, he was always glad to see his friend, but still spared a moment to stare him down until he was satisfied that he wasn't Envy in disguise. But with that out of the way, it only left the matter at hand for him to think about.

"Today's the day," Hughes announced as he stepped into the living room with Hawkeye following behind. "Are you ready, Roy?"

"... not really."

"Well, at least you're being honest," he said with a sigh. "But try not to worry so much, alright? We still have some time before they get here."

Try not to worry? Roy quietly scoffed at how ridiculous the request was as his eyes trailed up to
the front door.

It would be fine. It was fine. Everyone said so, so it must be true.

But even so, as Roy watched the door, half expecting anyone to burst through at any moment, he couldn't quite shake the feeling that he was waiting for an ax to drop.
Chapter 21

We still have some time before they get here.

That is what he had promised Roy, but that time seemed to have flown by far faster than his friend would have preferred. He grew visibly more anxious as the minutes passed, all but oblivious to their attempts to reassure him. Roy seemed slightly more relaxed when Edward finally woke up, but it did little good in the long run.

Hawkeye had pulled Maes aside and told him what happened the night before. And for a moment he had fooled himself into thinking that maybe Roy's hallucinations had disappeared completely. It was a foolishly optimistic thought to begin with, he knew, but he was desperate to see his friend progress. At least he didn't seem to be bothered by Black Hayate himself. The small dog was pacing around the room, sensing the anticipation in the air, ignored by Roy. It was only the barking that triggered him and sent his mind back into the depths of the manic hell he had done so well in dragging himself out of.

At least this too was only temporary. If their enemy had as many connections as it appeared, it would not take them long to figure that Hawkeye's apartment was the most convenient location after Roy's own home. They would need to find another place to hide, and soon. But that was a matter for later.

For now, he was left to just uselessly observe even as distinct lines of distress stained themselves onto Roy's face until he looked sick. Maes had half a mind to sit besides him on the couch, place an assuring hand on his shoulder, and tell him everything was going to be fine, but surprisingly enough, Edward beat him to it. The kid had slid off the large armchair and crossed the room, plopping himself onto the couch besides Roy without saying a word, scarcely looking at anyone as he did so. He didn't do anything else, didn't say anything, only sat there casually besides Roy as if his movement meant nothing at all. And somehow, this single action eased some of the distress that swirled in Roy's eyes as he stared into space.

It was strange to think that just days ago, they could barely stand to be in the same room together for an extended amount of time.

Maes smiled softly at the two of them, certain that Hawkeye felt the same was as she watched from the next room over.

But unfortunately, it did not last long.

A knock at the door. Not particularly loud, but ringing with intent as a fist hit the wooden surface. Every occupant in the apartment jumped, but none as violently as Roy.

"No, no, no, it's too early. I- I thought-" Roy stammered as he pressed himself into the couch, arms tense, stopped just short of wrapping around himself purely by the pain it would have caused him.

"They're not due here for a couple more minutes," Hawkeye said under her breath as she hastened across the room and peeked through the small hole in the door. "It's Havoc and Breda. They're early."

"W-what? No, they-" Roy paused, wide eyes darting around the room wildly, alarmingly similar to how he would look for a way to escape a situation back when they first brought him home. "I can't do it. I'm not- I thought I could do it, but I- but I can't face them. I can't."
"Roy-" His friend had pulled himself to his feet, his movements tracked by the others as he stumbled further away from the door, ignoring the bolts of pain that surely shot through him at every motion. Edward had stood up as well, but remained by the couch, stilled by uncertainty.

Withholding a sigh, Maes glanced over to Hawkeye, who gestured towards the door as she rested her hand on the handle, tersely telling him that she was going to talk to the two outside. He had better calmed down Roy soon, for all of their sakes. She then quietly opened the door, slipped out, and closed it behind her.

Turning back around to face his friend, he purposefully positioned himself in front of Roy's closest escape route, forcing himself to stay where he was. His yearning to discuss the matter with everyone and finally make some progress burned too brightly for him to go easy on Roy this time.

"Roy... I didn't want to do this to you, but- hey, listen," he urged until Roy's dark eyes fell reluctantly back onto his. "You owe it to them to show your face. Understand?"

"But- but Maes, I can't-"

"You don't get a choice in the matter. They went to your funeral, Roy. They mourned for you for weeks, thinking you were dead. I've been keeping them in the dark for the most part, but we can't keep doing this to them. They deserve to see that you're alive," he said, resisting from ending the statement with an untruthful and well.

"They'll be disappointed."

"Nothing will compare to how happy they'll be to see you."

"But-"

"I wouldn't lie to you, Roy," he insisted, taking a step forward to lock the man's shoulders in his hands, not to trap him, but to hopefully share some of his own courage when his friend desperately needed it most. "You trust me, right?"

"Yes, but..." He had answered without hesitation; that was something, at least. "I let them down, Maes. They needed me to hold them together, and I wasn't there! I-"

"If you feel bad about whatever you're trying to blame yourself for, then make it up to them by being here for them now."

He didn't have a comeback this time, resorting to simply stewing on the words. Something he had said must have struck a cord judging by how abruptly the will to fight gave out. Gritting his teeth, Roy reluctantly nodded with his narrowed, furrowed gaze dead set on the ground. Maes let the agreement sink in before finally taking a step back. He turned away to approach the door, catching Edward's eyes as he did do, then crossed the room to let the others back in.

Pausing with his hand on the door handle, he let out a steadying breath, wondering in the back of his mind if he was about to trigger a tornado by opening the door. But whatever happened, there was no way around it. Mindful not to turn around and look at Roy, he pulled the door open.

In the hallway, Hawkeye had her back turned to him and was speaking in a hushed tone to Breda and Havoc, who were both thankfully dressed down to blend in for the occasion, and both looking visibly uneasy. Their eyes flickered up to him just as Hawkeye turned to glance back. He wasn't sure how much the blonde had managed to prepare them for, but more time would not really do them much good at this rate.
"Morning," he began simply with a wry smile, painfully aware of Roy's gaze burning into the back of his head from across the room.

"Hey," Breda greeted back as Havoc gave him a stiff nod. "Sorry for getting here early. We figured it would be better than crowding him with everyone all at once."

"You're probably right," Maes replied solemnly, then gave the three a quick look. No point in stalling any longer.

His poor friend seemed to be using him and Edward as a reference when deciding how to react to people and things after losing faith in his own perception. With that in mind, Maes stepped back inside and opened the door for them, and willed his expression into something more neutral. He didn't want his writhing nerves to show and further stress out Roy more than he already surely was.

Following the silent command, Hawkeye walked back inside and shot Roy a reassuring smile as he was standing rigidly in the back of the room, looking like an escaped hospital patient, nervous and covered in bandages. Edward had moved to his side, partially to keep him from fleeing but also as a source of support.

Then Havoc and Breda walked in, unintentionally pausing the moment their eyes landed on their boss. But the second they appeared through the doorway, Roy's comportment had changed exponentially as he willed himself to slap on a more familiar mask. His shoulders stiffened and the uncertainty in his eyes was cast away and replaced by false confidence.

Maes wasn't sure how he felt about the sudden change, and certainly wasn't given time to consider it as his attention was drawn from a quiet, sharp gasp from Havoc. Breda was equally as stunned, but not quite as astound as his friend, who was gaping with wide eyes, struggling to find the proper words.

"I- they said you were alive, but- but part of me couldn't believe it," he said under his breath as he stared at Roy. Maes could see he was fighting not to squirm, but at least doubted that the two noticed. Havoc's nonplussed gawking was broken by an abrupt, weak chuckle that was accompanied with a slanted grin as he mindlessly ran a hand through his hair. "Shit," he breathed. "I still can't believe it. I saw you in the alley. I don't know how it's possible-"

"It's good to see you again, sir," Breda cut in, undulating an overwhelming relief that his voice alone could not portray, and apparently not wanting to yet discuss the corpse they found so many weeks ago. Maes too was glad he cut the blond off; that was something they would need to talk about later, but he was sure Roy wasn't too eager to hear more about how someone had posed like him to stage his death.

Roy was silent for a second too long, then eventually forced himself to slowly bob his head in a single, short nod. "Yeah," he replied simply, but his eyes failed to agree with his words. He looked none too happy to be in this situation. "Good to be back."

"Really, you have no idea." Breda's shoulders slackened marginally as if he had just released the tension and doubt that was holding itself up inside of him. Despite Roy's fears of being a disappointment, the reality seemed far from it as both men were enshrouded with relief and an underlining joy that was confined purely by the uneasy air that radiated off of him. Even someone who had not known Roy as long as they did could see how unwilling he was to even stand there, prevented from inching out of the room only by Edward and Maes.

Something about the way Roy held himself made everyone else feel like they were walking on egg shells. Havoc and Breda likely did not understand why this was, but perhaps that was for the best.
After hearing about the incident that occurred last night, Maes was grateful that Roy automatically instilled caution into those around him, lest they underestimate the situation.

God, he hated acknowledging it even in his own mind. He would have loved nothing more than to continue on as if nothing had ever happened.

For a moment, he felt like a simple spectator, miles away from the show that played out before him. It took him a moment to realize that he could actually jump in and come to the uncomfortable Roy's rescue if he chose to. But a shared glance with Hawkeye reminded him that his friend needed to worm his way through it by himself, or they would risk him depending on them for everything. Roy needed to regain his confidence, one way or another.

But at this rate, that outcome seemed so far away.

Havoc took a few steps into the room to approach Roy, appearing almost hypnotized by the man's very presence. Breda thought better and looked like he wanted to reach out to stop him. He held himself back and resorted to simply watching with a tension that was also shared with Maes and likely everyone else who watched.

Roy stiffened at the movement, but didn't flinch or sprint out of the room. While maybe unaware of the way he shuffled closer to Edward, he didn't shy away or break the fragile eye contact, clearly doing his best to hold up the confident mask that he used to wear with such ease. He may not have been doing a great job, but Maes couldn't deny the swelling pride he felt at watching his friend made the effort. He wanted to get better just as badly as they did.

Havoc must have noticed the reaction as well, because he stopped midway and kept his mouth mindlessly ajar for words that would not come. Too many questions without the voice to ask them.

"Ah- sorry," he muttered through a grim smile, as if he knew exactly what he was apologizing for-as if he knew what was happening here. "I just- I can't believe it. This is amazing..."

Unless Maes was imagining it, the words seemed to somehow ease traces of the caution that contorted Roy's expression. He almost wanted the guess that the man didn't realize just how awestruck his friends would be until it happened before him.

Hawkeye, who remained by the door, suddenly turned back towards it and peered through the peephole, attracting the attention of every occupant in the room. Now that he was listening, Hughes could hear faint murmuring coming from the other side.

Wordlessly, she opened the door, allowing Maes to see past her to Falman and Fuery who looked just as tense as the other two when they first walked in. She quietly said a few words to them, which they returned with more whispering, then stepped aside, giving them a perfect view of Maes and Roy through the doorway.

Uncertain and carrying a faint air of unease, Falman stepped inside, followed by the young master sergeant, who wasn't doing quite as good of a job at hiding his thoughts.

At the sight of Roy standing rigidly against the wall, Falman paused and stared at him for a long second, motionless and stunned into silence. Then similarly to Hawkeye's first reaction, he hastily drew a shaking hand up to his forehead to salute his superior officer. He didn't have anything to say, but the single gesture spoke volumes.

Fuery, standing besides him with unshed tears building behind his glasses, saw the salute and was quick to imitate it. And in turn, Havoc and Breda also noticed this and did the same, all sharing the
desire to honor the man who had climbed out of hell to return to them. Frightened, yes- but they could see what it meant for Roy to be there, and maybe even he could not quite understand how much it had to have meant to them.

But Roy was clearly not expecting such a response. The salutes had him taken aback, shocked out his own dubiety, and left him nothing more to do but stare back with wide eyes and a set jaw, too tense to make out a response.

Hawkeye stepped up in line with them from behind and joined them, acting as yet another punch towards the wall that Roy had tried to build. He looked physically staggered by the five of them offering them such a recognizable symbol of respect.

"I- I don't-"

Maes didn't need to hear him try to construct the rest of his faltering sentence to know that he was going to try claiming that he didn't deserve it. To cut him off, Maes wasted no time in patting him on the back, just hard enough to put an end to that self-demeaning train of thought.

Roy huffed as if the action had expelled some air from his overworked lungs, but frankly, Maes was willing to bet that he had been holding his breath. But for what it was worth, he seemed to get his point across.

His friend, still shrouded by uncertainty as well as the unrelenting dread that constantly hung around him like a vulture, managed a thin smile.

"At ease."

By the time it took their guests to finally settle down and order Xingese food, Roy had not managed to relax once. They were all seated around the living room, with him sitting in between Edward and Hawkeye, while Hughes sat across the coffee table. The others filled in the gaps, creating a circle around the table, all munching away on their takeout noodles.

Roy was truly happy to see them. He was. He regretted being unable to properly portray that, however. He couldn't speak beyond their stares. He felt every quick glance that landed on him, each one overflowing with unsaid questions and concerns. They could see right through him no matter how tightly he tried to block it out. Hawkeye had said that they wouldn't pity him, but believing that was too optimistic when they had the right to. The very way he sat guaranteed pity; he was incidentally asking for it.

The rest of his team was quietly talking amongst themselves, gathering the files they had brought and organizing their notes. All besides Edward, who's eyes were scanning over them in thought as he mindlessly finished his lunch, and Hawkeye, who had gently placed a hand on his arm. The assuring warmth of her touch had calmed him marginally, but that brief moment of solace scurried away when Maes cleared his throat.

"Alright, we're ready to get started," he announced, clasping his hands together as his olive eyes surveyed the scatter of papers and folders that covered the coffee table, then the people who circled around it. Again, Roy felt some hasty glances in his direction, but kept his head down. Maes was doing his job by leading the meeting. He didn't look too happy to do it either, painfully aware of the same fact. "First matter of business: Breda, did you find the information I asked you to look into?"

"Yes," he announced in response and straightened up in his chair that had been dragged in from the
kitchen as he reached to set down his Xingese food and pick up a folder, flipping through it. "It was just as you thought. Out of the team of people tasked with handling... Mustang's autopsy, the head of the group left the military the day after the funeral. Apparently, he had suspiciously insisted that the autopsy would be done solely by him, not allowing anyone to even see the body. After he left, he disappeared and hasn't been heard from since. Kurtis Braun is his name," he finished and handed his file out to Hughes from the manila folder.

The lieutenant colonel scanned the file over and asked "did anyone file a missing person's report before he was found?"

"No. The most we got was his ex-wife inquiring about him a few days after he disappeared. She said that leaving so suddenly was very uncharacteristic of him, but made no further attempts to find him."

The ever-present pit in Roy's stomach seemed to fall deeper at he listened to them discuss his autopsy and the man who preformed if as if he really was dead.

"This only further proves that whoever orchestrated this has power in the military. Enough power to make people disappear at the flick of the wrist," Maes stated surely, gesturing to the file before setting it back down on the coffee table.

Havoc chimed in just as he moved closer to the edge of his seat, mouth tilted in a frown. "Hold on, how did they even stage his death in the first place? Who or- or what did Hawkeye and I see in the alleyway that night?"

"Envy."

All eyes fell on Edward as he growled the name that sent a prickling shiver up Roy's back. He too glanced at the kid to see him leaning forward with his hands folded, forearms resting on his knees as he looked down at nothing in thought, eyes narrowed and reflecting memories. But as the weight of the many stares became too much to ignore, he carried his gaze up to them.

"I don't know how it's possible, but he can change his appearance to look like anyone," the blond explained, unfazed by the incredulous looks he earned in response. "He managed to capture Mustang in the first place by... looking like me."

"Wait," Fuery began, uncertainty lacing his voice. "That night when we were trying to find Scar; was this Envy person there with him instead of you?"

A chill swept over Roy as he pulled his eyes back over to Ed, Fuery's question spinning around in his mind. Was that Envy? He remembered being being attacked in the alley, but he couldn't remember enough of that night to know when they switched places. Did he actually have that argument with Envy instead of Edward?

Ed caught his questioning stare, but swiftly pulled away, his mouth pursed into a thin, uncomfortable line.

"Uh, no, that was me. Besides, Al was with me. But anyway, Envy must have disguised himself to gouge himself to be convincing. I wouldn't be surprised, since he seems to have weird healing abilities too."

"So we're talking about a shape shifter who can heal himself on command?" Breda asked dubiously. And why not, when the story seemed so ridiculous. At least for Roy, this explanation made the most sense after all the shit he had seen.
"I know how it sounds, but it's true," Edward assured as he straightened up on the couch, overcoming whatever thought had made him look so uncomfortable before. "The other day, he got into Mustang's house by making himself look like me again. I walked in to see him heal a burn on his face in seconds."

The explanation hung heavily as the team tried to wrap their minds around what they were up against, leaving a cold silence in the air for several long seconds.

"I've never heard of anything like this," Falman mused under his breath, followed by a few murmured agreements from the others.

"If all of that's true," Havoc continued slowly. "Then who's in Mustang's grave?"

"Maybe Kurtis Braun is in there," Breda replied darkly. Again, this was followed by a tense silence as the statement was absorbed.

"Edward," Hughes started, his voice acting as a beacon to guide the group back onto their main topic. "You said that you've met Envy before all of this happened. Is there any way the two incidents could connect?"

"Hope not," the kid growled under his breath. "I met him at Lab Five. They use the place to create philosopher's stones, which... required human souls. Real messed up shit. He and this woman walked in like they owned the place and started talking about how I was interfering with their plan and that I was some kind of sacrifice."

Sacrifice.

Roy closed his eyes, but saw nothing but darkness when he opened them again. He was back there, where the air was stale and cold, and the echoes of barking dogs bounced off of the walls, interminably cycling through his mind.

Envy's sadistic laughter rung in his ears. Roy was a sacrifice.

No, he was a potential sacrifice. That's what he called him. A safety measure for their plan-whatever it was. But regardless of what they were doing, it had nothing to do with keeping the lights off. Envy had trapped him in the dark for his own personal pleasure.

It was meaningless torture.

Fear constricted around his heart, but his blood boiled with rage. The itch to incinerate him tingled on his finger tips. He wanted to burn Envy alive, and he wanted to burn that whole damn prison down into ash.

A touch of warmth on his arm, and his vision exploded back into the well-lit room of Hawkeye's apartment, pulling a sharp gasp from his throat. He stared out numbly for a moment, then realized the many concerned expressions directed his way a second later. The gentle, soft hand on his arm—Riza.

He exhaled slowly, unsure what he missed, but not too interested in asking.

"They said the same thing," Roy willed himself to say mostly to play off his brief flashback, unsure if he only imagined the pathetic waver in his voice. The words felt heavy and reluctant on his tongue, and with every second that he continued speaking, the memories wanted to flood back and bring him back there. Roy held them off the best he could, and steeled himself.
"... They?" Edward asked, his tone ringing with an intent that Roy could not yet pick up on until he elaborated. "Did you meet the woman too?"

Roy blinked blankly into space again, torn between diving back into the endlessly dark memories that bubbled just beneath the surface. "I think I heard her at some point. She was talking to Envy about..." he trailed off as his mind drew a blank. So much of his time down there merged into one suffocating blur. He shook his head and mentally pulled back, knowing that he wouldn't find anything in the state that his mind was in if he tried to dig too deeply. He'd just get lost in it.

"They said that I was close to figuring out their plan. But he called me a potential sacrifice, and that's why they couldn't just kill me," Roy replied, reciting the few details that he did remember. He could still recall the wall that he had covered in words for this very reason. Sacrifice was one of the few that shone brightly through the fog.

"Even you," Edward muttered, falling back into his thoughtful reverie. "How could you have gotten close to their plan?"

No one could provide an immediate answer to the question. Most looked like they believed there was no hope in answering, but Maes was staring down at his intertwined hands, eyes hard with thought. Then he looked up and caught the alchemist's gaze with an unparalleled strength.

"Roy," he started slowly as he continued to spin his thoughts around in his mind. "The night you went missing, you found me in the archive room. Do you remember that?"

Not until he mentioned it, anyway. Everything that came before their hunt for Scar seemed so irrelevant to him now. But regardless, Roy nodded slowly.

"... Did you keep researching after I had left?"

*Researching what,* Roy had to wonder for a moment, mind churning to return to that night so many weeks ago. But when he worked the cogs in his brain, he could remember sitting down in the archive room after shooing his friend away. He could remember the concern sprout from whatever he was looking down at, but it lasted only a few minutes before Hawkeye appeared and his life took a downhill turn.

"Yeah," he breathed, scarcely aware of the declaration.

To answer the questioning glances that were dancing between the two friends, Maes cleared his throat and began to explain. "The riots in Liore." Edward stiffened. "I stopped thinking about it when... when I heard about Roy, but I had discovered that the military purposefully induced the chaos to break loose there. The question was why. Maybe Roy got closer to figuring it out than I did. Maybe that's why they needed to stage his death."

Roy stared at his friend from across the coffee table, silenced by a wave of nausea and dizziness caused by his pounding head, aching from the overpowering memories that began to flood back too quickly for him to comprehend. He could feel the answers swimming around him, but just out of arms reach, swerving out of his way as he grasped out blindly.

As if he had been plunged underwater, he could vaguely make out Hawkeye asking how Liore connected to Lab Five, but Hughes could only admit that he didn't know before drawing his attention back onto the alchemist.

"What did you find that night, Roy?"

Again, all eyes were on him. He gaped, pleading with himself to come up with something to tell
them, but lacking the ability to form the words. "I- I'm not sure," he admitted, bowing his head away from their gazes as the shame weighed down on his shoulders. "I can't remember- I can't think," he growled and raised his bruised, bandaged hand to his head, stiff fingers combing weakly through his bangs. "Liore... something about Liore."

He huffed exasperatedly at himself and the useless information that was all he could offer. He could feel the old realization that had stunned him back then in the archive room, taunting him as it stepped further away the closer he tried to get.

"It's okay if you can't remember right now, Roy," Maes said, but failed to hide all of the disappointment in his voice.

No it's not. His stomach churned at his inability to be useful, only serving to make him feel worse.

"Wait, back up." Havoc's voice garnered their attention as he squeezed the bridge of his nose. "You said the military caused the riots?"

"That's right," Maes confirmed with a nod. "It was not long after Ed and Al went there and exposed that corrupted priest. The Eastern soldiers were sent in to quell them, but were soon replaced by Central troops. I found records stating that they were given orders to use violence on the people there. None of it seemed important once Roy was reported dead, but..."

Roy's fleeting attention was yanked away from his friend as Edward stood up from the couch and silently slipped into the hallway. His escape was done so casually that he didn't earn more than a glance from the others, as they were all wrapped in what Hughes was saying. Roy, however, watched him as he left and was immediately hit with turmoil. The kid had grown quiet and withdrawn the moment Liore was mentioned. The others did not seem concerned, but his absence set off alarms in his head. It had to have been the paranoia talking, Roy assured himself. He was nervous that anyone could be replaced by Envy the moment they left his sights. That was not something to worry about at the moment, he knew, but the worry remained.

With far less stealth than Ed, Roy pushed himself to his feet, and gave Hawkeye a look when she sent him a questioning glance. He wasn't sure what kind of look he returned it with, however, but didn't care to analyses it before following Edward around the corner.

The short hallway was dark, lit only by the light that sneaked in from the living room. The doors that lined the two walls were all shut, giving Edward nowhere to go but to slide down onto the floor against them. The leaned forward and burred his head in his heads with a deep exhale that sent tremors into his shoulders.

Roy almost felt like he was intruding by being there and watching him, but the waves of misery that seemed to radiate off of him vanished any hesitation.

"Ed?" He took a few steps closer, masking the kid in his shadow as it stretched down the hall.

He didn't respond, didn't seem surprised by his presence in the slightest, didn't react whatsoever. Roy took it as an invitation to approach him as he drowned out the voices from the other room, and didn't stop until he was in arms reach. Still, Edward did not move even as he sunk to his level and sat down besides him.

Nothing was said for several seconds. Edward had been acting as a silent source of support for him, whether they acknowledged it or not. For whatever reason, he had not needed to have any doubt in the kid since he fought off Envy, nor has he had any hallucinations try to deceive him. He may still have been struggling to fend off the demons in his own head, but that moment served as a
stepping stone for him, and it was all thanks to Edward.

As he looked down at him, Roy knew he was finally given a chance to return the favor.

"What's wrong?" he asked quietly. But in the back of his mind, whispering voices questioned if he had any right to ask that when he himself was plagued by so many problems.

Edward did not respond right away and did not show any sign that he had heard him until he lowered his arms to fold over his knees, allowing his eyes to stare vacantly out at the floor. Roy was almost tempted to repeat the question, but urged himself to keep quiet, certain that the kid was considering it. He half expected him to disregard the concern and halfheartedly say that he was fine; Roy wouldn't put it past him, anyway. But to his surprise, Edward released a pent up sigh and slackened his shoulders, allowing a deep rooted sadness to show through.

"I've been blaming myself for all of this. Since I was told that you had been... killed, I've just been telling myself that it was my fault."

Roy shifted his weight against the wall to better face him, the pain in his ribs feeling like nothing more than a distant memory as he gave all of his attention to the kid besides him. He wanted nothing more than to insist that that wasn't true.

A wry smile pulled at Edward's lips as he stared ahead, resting his chin on his arms. "People kept telling me otherwise. I tried to stop thinking about it and just focus on doing something helpful for once, but..." the smile fell, chased away by a miserable frown that he tried to hide by lowering his head further into his arms. "But I can't hide what I've done. All of this started because of Liore. I- if I had know-"

Roy pursed his lip, mind scrapping for something to say. Clearly telling him that this wasn't his fault was not effective. And to be quite honest, Roy wasn't even sure if it was true or not. He didn't think it was- he certainly didn't want to say it was, but going so far back into the past was a little beyond his ability at the moment. Everything during or before his capture fazed into each other and locked itself behind a wall of distorting glass.

"You couldn't have known," he supplied at last, watching closely for any reaction.

"That doesn't make it okay."

"That makes it understandable."

Edward let out a broken, mirthless laugh. "I must look pretty pathetic if you're trying to console me."

Roy was unsure if he said that because he too was an obvious mess, or because of their history, but he shrugged it off all the same. "Well... you make a good point. I probably don't have much of a right to console anyone right now."

"No, that's not." Edward interjected as he brought his head up to look at him. But the fight in his eyes was weak and fading fast. "That's not it. I just-" his downcast gaze fell to his feet."I keep wondering what would change if I did things differently..."

"Ed-"

"I'm a magnet for trouble. Liore wouldn't have torn itself apart if it wasn't for me." Those wounds rung with a chilling familiarity that dug straight into Roy's core. Voices demanded to know where he had heard those words- they screamed it in his head until he felt deaf.
"Then you wouldn't have been... tortured by Envy."

And then it hit him. He and Ed were standing by an empty plaza, lit only by the ring of street lamps, but hiding around the corner. Those incrimination words- he had said them to Edward during that argument; the one that chased the kid away and led him into open waters. The blow of the oncoming memories staggered his thoughts until he managed to stutter a fragmented response.

"I- no, Ed, none of that is true. I didn't mean it- I-"

"The problem"-Edward cut into his stammering-"is that it is true. You said it, you meant it, and it's true. I'm reckless. Everyone knows it. But I never wanted others to get hurt because of it." He sighed and lowered himself back down onto his arms. "But it doesn't matter. I already told you all of this anyway, didn't I."

Roy was at a loss for words. Nothing he could say seemed like it would do any good. Edward wasn't opening up because he wanted to be told that he was wrong. He just wanted to talk. As touched as he was that the kid was telling him his thoughts, each word was another bloody spear through his heart. As much as it hurt to hear, he wasn't about to shut him out.

But at the same time, there was else nothing to say.

With a soundless sigh and only a hint of hesitation, Roy shifted himself, again ignoring the stabs of pain that flared through his ribs, and wrapped an arm around Ed's shoulders, lighting pulling him closer. Edward lowered his head in his arms again, making no move to pull away.

"You and I- we're quite the pair, aren't we?"

Though he hid his face under his folded arms, Roy could feel a faintly amused chuckle through Ed's shoulders. The response alone brought a small smile to his face that he wasn't entirely aware of. But in a way, it didn't make much sense; just moments ago, he could barely look at his team- his friends- in the eye for long before needing to turn away. He fell back into flashbacks and listened to the voices in his head and jumped every time a dog barked. But the moment he saw Edward facing his own problems, he managed to forget about all of that for at least a few minutes, naturally setting his issues above his own. It was never a matter of what was more important than what. He just hated to see him so upset.

"Yeah," Edward's muffled voice said through his arms. "Yeah, something like that. Guess we're both crazy."

There was something comfortably familiar about his tone- something that reminded him of older, simpler days. They felt so far away, and he almost wanted to mourn them. But as he glanced down at Edward, an idea began to form that he didn't plan to act on until more and more thought was put into it.

Then slowly, his smile grew just a little wider.

"It could be worse," he mused, injecting something that tried to mimic a careless tone into his voice. "At least I'm not short."

Just as he had expected, Edward immediately stiffened and snapped his head up to stare incredulously at him as though he didn't believe what he had heard. Slowly, that shock shifted into understanding that, in turn, slid into a grin. He lowered his head onto his folded arms again, but only in an attempt to stifle the laughter that quaked his shoulders against his will.

"Shut up, I'm not short," he said through sharp, amused breaths. "No one asked you, bastard."
This only served to broaden Roy's own smile as he instinctively pulled him closer and fondly leaned his head onto Ed's. And they remained like that for a moment longer until the laughter died down into silent, lingering smiles.

Roy was certain that he would have been perfectly content staying there all night, listening to the quiet voices of his friends in the other room, and holding Edward close, feeling as if he could actually protect him despite everything that has happened, and knowing that the kid no longer had the desire to distance himself.

Minutes had to have passed on, allowing Roy to appreciate one of the now rare and few stress-free moments he got to experience. Somehow, he was willing to bet that Edward had been the same way recently.

Then finally, after a moment of bliss, Edward broke the silence.

"Hey Mustang?" he said quietly, his voice light and peaceful, a noticeable juxtaposition to the sorrow that was present there just minute ago.

He *hmm*ed questionably in response.

"Thanks."

Roy blinked at nothing as he drew a blank. "For what?"

"... For calling me short."

The words sounded too intentional to be a slip of the tongue, and too slow to be sarcasm. Roy couldn't utter a response for what felt like several seconds, and didn't dare question the statement, lest he try to take it back. Hundreds of possible response cycled through his head, making it nearly impossible to settle on one.

"I never thought I would hear you say that." But in a way, it made perfect sense. There was a sort of symbolism to their usual bantering that neither would ever care to acknowledge.

"Me neither."

"I'll never let you live it down."

Edward chuckled again and leaned further into him. "I know."
Chapter 22

There wasn't much left to be said once he and Mustang returned to the others later that night. They were just beginning to wrap up, and no one ever asked what had taken them so long. Edward thought he noticed a few smug, knowing glances, but for the sake of his withering dignity, he tried his best to ignore them.

The four guests left not long after, having completed their business. While reluctant to go, Hughes and Hawkeye had apparently given them more tasks to complete before their next meeting, and they were eager to get started. Once they were gone, Mustang had shuffled back to the couch, clearly drained by the activity that he had slowly become unaccustomed to over the weeks. Edward considered following him, but he stayed back, remaining by the wall to examine the scene.

Hughes was in the next room over, compiling whatever files had been left over. Though there was still a few good hours of daytime left, he looked almost ready to fall asleep. Perhaps it wasn't the toll of the situation or the long conversation that he had just finished; Edward was willing to bet that a large portion of his exhaustion came from needing to step up and take command right in front of the person who was usually the one to do so.

Meanwhile, Hawkeye was much more conscious about keeping whatever plagued her thoughts and weighed her down hidden. If anything, there seemed to be a re-energized light in her eyes and a confidence in the very way she walked that Ed had not seen in quite some time. Finally having a clear path in front of them must have been all she needed to get her feet back underneath her.

She walked past him after closing the front door on the other's way out and disappeared down the hallway. Seconds later, a door was opened and small paws were heard on the flooring, pacing excitably into the main room. Black Hayate took one happy look at the more dour occupants, all but unaffected as he began to give each of them a greeting.

Hawkeye rejoined the room just as the dog approached Mustang. Ed too was watching carefully, in search of any kind of reaction from the man. But he just sat there and followed Black Hayate's movements with his eyes as if he if expected him to blow up if he got too close. But contrary to all of their fears, the dog did not make a sound, and Mustang did not have to suffer from any flashbacks.

While it may not have been difficult to do so, Mustang somehow managed to convince Edward to stay another night. If he didn't already travel so much, he would have started to miss his own bed. But the room, the bed, the extra company- none of it mattered. All he missed was Al. It was suffice to say that his brother was not too excited to hear that Ed would be gone for another day when he called, since Hawkeye and Hughes had to return to work soon. He had apologized to Al, but they both knew he couldn't get too upset with Mustang's well-being on the line. Edward tried to make it up to him by promising he'd see about having Al come over as soon as possible. He would have suggested tomorrow, but one look at the older man made him wonder if he would be up to more guests so soon.

On the bright side, it was warming to know that he had become such an exception. But at the same time, Mustang had also gotten a little clingy. He seemed to panic whenever Edward disappeared from view, and appeared willing to go to lengths in order to correct it. However, Edward couldn't say that he really minded. Anything was better than him being dead, after all.

And their talk from earlier certainly seemed to have helped. They discussed Ed's petty problems more than Mustang's, but perhaps it was the hint of normalcy that worked its way out near the end.
The sarcastic remarks, the banter- it all seemed to help. Anything that didn't remind him of the time he spent in that underground prison seemed to have helped. But that made him wonder: wasn't it bad to ignore the past, and go on as if it didn't happen? Yes, he was guilty of doing the same thing before, but Ed couldn't shake the uncertainty. All he wanted was to get it right, but it was much easier said than done when there were so many moving parts.

The night came and went the same as before. Edward curled himself up on the armchair as Mustang took the couch with his arms wrapped limply around himself. But when he stopped to think about it, Ed wasn't sure if the man was actually getting any sleep. When he was first rescued, Mustang seemed to be on a forty eight hour schedule. It had naturally gotten better since then, but he wasn't going to let himself get too optimistic for his own good. However, at least for now, there was nothing to be done about it.

Regardless, Edward was very glad he stayed when he awoke the next morning to Hawkeye shuffling through the kitchen, nearly on her way to go to work. If he wasn't there, then Mustang would have had to be left alone. As much as he hated treating the fully grown man like a child, things did not go well last time no one was there with him. And frankly, it wasn't his fault in the slightest. Mustang simply needed people to watch his back as things were, and Ed would be damned if he didn't step up to the plate.

There was something that seemed a little backwards about the whole thing. Edward, a fifteen year old kid, had to protect the adult who had reached the rank of colonel and mastered flame alchemy because he couldn't do it for himself. But as unorthodox as it was, Edward decided that he was quite alright with it. For once, it was his turn to be the protector.

But of course, there was more to staying there than just watching out for attacks. They had all day in an unfamiliar house, and nothing to do. Luckily, Edward came up with an idea.

"Hey," he called after he spent some time shifting through the kitchen not long after they had been left alone. He walked into the living room to see Mustang lazily hugging a throw pillow, head turned to look in his direction. "What are the chances that Hawkeye owns any alchemy books?"

Interest piqued, Mustang shifted to sit up, grimacing lightly as he did so. "I doubt it. I suppose she might have kept something from when her father passed away, but... Why?"

"Well," Edward drawled as he stepped further into the room and stuffed his hands into his pockets. "You've been having some trouble with your alchemy lately, so I thought it wouldn't hurt to brush up a little bit."

Mustang quirked an eye brow at him with a thin, bemused smile. "You want to re-teach me alchemy?"

"Well that's one way to put it, but yeah."

"I haven't forgotten how alchemy works, Ed." I just-" he cut himself off to stare at nothing for a moment, the small smile falling. "- it's like a can't access it."

"All the more reason. Doesn't Hawkeye have a study room or something?"

"Yes, but-"

"Come on then! It's not like there's anything else to do here."

Mustang sighed and began to roll himself off of the couch, groaning as he lethargically pulled himself to his feet. "I don't think it'll be that simple."
"Worth a shot," Edward fired back as he ushered the man down the hall and into a smaller room.

The study was tidy and well lit with an open window. Though small, it felt roomy thanks to the origination and lack of clutter. Contrary to what he was used to after spending so much time at Mustang's house, he didn't see a single piece of paperwork. Probably because she actually finished her work before the end of the day and had no need to bring it back with her.

Edward approached the neat bookcase and scanned its contents, eyes landing on a leather bound journey and pulled it out. It only occurred to him then that he might have been snooping in the lieutenant's personal belongings, but flip through the pages proved it to be exactly what he was looking for.

He caught a few telltale words scattered through the pages that thanks to his years of research, he guessed to be code words for alchemic ingredients. Knowing that Hawkeye's father was Mustang's teacher, he was probably looking at flame alchemy.

"Here, this looks good. Do you know how to decode these?" he asked, handing the old book over to Mustang, who accepted it gingerly, careful not to irritate his strained hands. He looked it over for a moment, then sighed.

"Ed, this isn't going to work."

"Why not?"

"I already know all of this," he huffed as he moved the chair out from under Hawkeye's desk and sat down.

"Then why can't you do it?"

"It's- it's like..." He trailed off for a moment before growing silent, fighting to form the words in his mind. "The information is there, but I can't reach it."

"Then wouldn't it help to go over it?"

Mustang closed the book and looked over the cover, running a tightly bandaged thumb over the leather binding.

Edward watched quietly for a moment, mind churning. He couldn't quite understand why Mustang wasn't jumping to figure out what the problem was. Or if anything, it already understood it and accepted that there was no point in fighting it. And was also doing a crappy job at explaining.

"Fine. Then... then maybe we can just start with the basics."

"Ed-"

"Come on, it's fine," he cut in and slipped across to the desk to open a drawer and dig until he found a blank paper and a pen. Hawkeye wouldn't mind. He slammed the paper down and leaned over it as he quickly drew a circle. Inside of it, he drew a square, then another circle, then another tilted square. It was one of the simplest arrays out there, and one of the first he ever attempted to use. He moved out of the way for Mustang to see and tapped the page with his pen. "You can tell what this one is for, right?"

Mustang hesitated, then reluctantly glanced down at the array. He stared at it too long for comfort.

"I'm not in any mood to be tested," he muttered, dropping the book down on the table as he cast his
eyes away from the circle.
Edward stared at him for a moment, frowning at his lack of effort. He clicked his tongue and tapped the pen down on the circle again.

"The circle," he began as if reading from a textbook, "represents the flow of power and energy."

"Ed, I know."

"The first square," he cut in, moving the pen accordingly, "has all corners touching the circle, but not going outside of it. That means the transmutation will be kept inside of the array. Squares also refer to the four elements, making it extremely versatile."

Mustang had given up on stopping him and resorted to pouting instead.

"This next circle here means that the transmutation will extend to another object. So in this case, it'll effect the table underneath instead of the paper. And then this last square- hey, are you listening?"

Mustang was staring out at the walls around them, off in his own little world. Upon hearing Ed's complaint, he finally found the decency to turn back to him. But as he watched the irked kid for a moment, his expression softened.

"I appreciate what you're trying to do, but it's not a matter of remembering. I already know everything you're saying, but as soon as I walk away..." he trailed off with a sigh and dropped his head into his bandaged palm.

Edward released the pen from his grip and allowed it to roll over the hastily sketched array. From what he described, it seemed like a wall was dividing Mustang from the information in his head, refusing to let him call on it. He had to wonder how long it would be there, if it would ever go away, but he was almost afraid to ask.

"Eh- well, I... I bet it won't stay like that forever."

Mustang exhaled slowly through his hand, then looked up at the kid with a weary smile. "Thanks, Ed. It's just... humiliating."

He wasn't sure if the man was unconvinced, or just tired of thinking about it. But whatever the case was, he was sure they were both equally frustrated by it. Hopefully, the problem would deal with itself after Mustang got more rest and got his life back. Edward made a silent promise to himself to ensure that it happens.

Just as he did so, a low growl sounded from down the hall, causing both alchemists to jump. Ed's mind immediately feared for Mustang, who was staring at the door, eyes wide and dreadful. Neither spoke, too stunned as they waited to see if it would continue, or if they both imagined the same sound.

But then the growling grew louder, more vicious, then morphed into a tirade of barking. As if a flip had been switched, a horrified expression overtook Mustang's visage as he rose unsteadily from the chair and backed away to create as much distance between himself and the door as possible.

"Not again" he breathed as he forced his eyes shut and hid them behind a shaking hand.
Edward kicked himself into action as soon as the initial shock wore off. "I'll take care of it," he promised and sprinted down the hall, following the continuous sound of Black Hayate's barking,
all while cursing under his breath.

*This dog was supposed to be trained, damn it. What could get him so riled up?*

He turned the corner into the living room to see the small dog crouching by the front door, growling and barking madly.

"Hey!" he exclaimed, hoping the sound of disapproval would get him to stop, but the dog completely ignored him, far too enticed by whatever was behind the door. He continued on, fists curled and temper boiling, but as he reached end of the room, the barking shifted back into a low, angry growl, he willed himself to take a breath and think.

Hawkeye wouldn't let her dog bark at just anything.

On edge with Black Hayate at his side, Edward slowly reached forward and curled his metal hand around the door handle. Then without any hesitation, he yanked it open.

Who stood behind surprised both him and the dog.

Hawkeye looked back at him with a hand held out as if she was reaching to open the door herself. Her expression held the same stoic professionalism that it always did, and she didn't even appear surprised by his abrupt reaction. Even Black Hayate quieted down in confusion, but remained distressful as he sniffed the air.

"Uh what are you doing here? Shouldn't you be at work?"

"Something came up," she answered stiffly and walked in, forcing him to step to the side. Once she was in and the door closed behind her, she glanced around the room, then turned to Ed. "Where's Roy?"

"He's in the study."

"Could you take me to him?"

"Uh sure," he shrugged, unsure if he was supposed to be feeling so uncertain, or if he was just getting jittery from recent events. Then again, hearing that something had driven her away from work certainly called for concern. "What's going on?"

"I'll explain everything to both of you."

Edward *hmmed* contemplatively as he began to walk down the hall, but another warning growl hit his ears just as blaring alarms turned on. His nerves were set on fire as his heart rate jumped, and he turned back just as a heavy thud hit him on the head, and the world spiraled around him. His vision was consumed by black before he hit the ground.

The dogs stood their ground, surrounding him as they growled and snapped in his direction. The room around them was dark and empty, but he could still make out the shapes of the walls. Every inch of his body quivered with the knowledge that he should not be there. His mind screamed at him, telling him that it was wrong, that it was the worst possible time, that he needed to *get out now*, but it did him no good when all he could do was back further into the corner and hope nothing got bit off.

Then a figure appeared behind the dogs, silhouetted by a nonexistent light. He might have been relieved, if it didn't stand over him like another daunting threat. He curled in on himself tighter,
certain that a foot would collide into his rib cage at any second.

It reached a hand forward and he looked away, shutting his eyes to prepare for the worst. But instead of causing any harm, a hand softly landed on his shoulder. "Hey Mustang." As if those were the magic words, his vision exploded into light with such force that he had to keep his eyes shut and rub with with his least injured hand. "Come on, get up."

It was just Ed. He was in Hawkeye's study. He was fine. Just another damned hallucination.

After blinking some recollection back into himself, Roy sighed and looked up at the kid who standing in front of him, but glancing away and out the window. A tired grumble that he was scarcely aware of sounded from his throat, catching Ed's attention. An automail hand was extended down, and invitation to take it.

Roy did so and was quickly pulled up to his feet, too quickly for his healing wounds. But once he was up, he could clearly see Edward and the way he watched him, expression devoid of the complexity that made him him. And for a long moment, he could only mutely stare back.

Then just as Ed opened his mouth to say something, Roy reeled back, violently shoving himself into the bookcase with enough force to cause some from the top self to fall to the ground around him.

"Hey, what the hell is wr-"

"What did you do with him!?"

Edward stared back, eyes wide and confused. "What are you talking about?"

"Don't play dumb," Roy snapped, pushing himself further away even when there was nowhere else to go. "I know you're not Edward. So what did you do with him?!

The kid tilted his head in what had to be mock concern. "You just had a flashback, didn't you? It's alright now, Mustang. Just take it easy," he cajoled with two hands held in the air defenselessly, slowly stepping closer to him.

But as much as he tried to convince him otherwise, Roy knew without a doubt in his mind that this was not Edward Elric. It was Envy. It had to be. And he did something to Ed. A mix of rage and the fierce desire to keep him safe and away from Envy burned savagely, held back only by uncertainty and a hint of fear and he hated to acknowledge.

Roy hastily stuffed his left hand into his pocket and pulled out one of his gloves. Envy's wrongfully golden eyes flashed towards it for a moment, and his legs paused in hesitation. "Come in, Mustang, let's just talk this through."

"Cut the shit," he growled as he clumsily pulled the glove over his bandaged hand, ignoring the pained cries of his mangled fingers. "Tell me where he is before I burn you to ash!"

Just as easily as it came, the hesitation and fear vanished to be replaced by a smug smirk. "As if you're even capable of burning anything besides yourself," he remarked, giving up the performance. "I still can't believe they let you keep those things."

Just as Roy was about to make another demand, Envy slid out of the door and out of view. The alchemist charged after him, gritting his teeth as his ribs objected to the movement.

He followed him out into the living room, finding no signs of the real Ed, or Black Hayate for that
"Stop!" he demanded, posed to snap despite the risk of having it blowing up in his own face.

But Envy only glanced back at him and snickered. "You don't want to burn the whole building down, do you?" And with that, he fled into the hall.

Roy stopped himself before he could chase blindly, casting another nervous glance around the room. Surely Envy couldn't have taken them far. Roy couldn't have been out of it for more than a minute, after all. (As far as he could tell, anyway.) But if he didn't chase Envy now, then he would risk never knowing for sure.

With a frustrated groan, Roy charged out of the apartment and down the stairs, hearing Envy's steps only a flight ahead of his own. He stumbled as he raced downwards, almost tumbling onto his face, but willed himself to stay upright by what must have been sheer desperation.

Roy earned himself several curious glances when he burst into the apartment lobby, all of which he tried to ignore as he saw his target run outside. He hadn't gone out into public by himself once since getting rescued, and didn't realize how heavy the stares of strangers would feel. Hundreds of thoughts raced through his mind, but all were deemed irrelevant in comparison to finding Envy-the piece of shit who started all of this.

He hastily followed Envy outside and around the building against his better judgment, simultaneously worried and thankful for the lack of spectators once they got off of the main road. It seemed like he had chased Envy into a dead end, but when his false golden eyes turned to face him, he didn't look concerned in the slightest.

"Change back," Roy demanded as soon as it became clear that Envy had nowhere else to run to.

"Change? But why? I kind of like this form, actually. Comes with so many perks." Envy sneered at him; a sinister, condescending smile on Edward's face that had the suppressed memories of the night this all began come rushing back.

"Now!" He tensed his fingers, created small sparks to erupt eagerly around his hand. Even if it meant harming himself, he would do whatever it took.

"Hmm I think I know what it is: you just couldn't stand the thought of hurting your dear subordinate- is that it?"

Roy growled, torn between asking questions that he knew would not be answered, and jumping straight into attacking him. "That confidence will be your undoing."

"Ooh scary," Envy sung as if this was the highlight of his day. He soaked up every moment of it, enjoying the scene far more than what Roy preferred. "I guess we'll just have to see, won't we?"

He was just asking for it now. But that was fine; Roy didn't need him to find Edward. He would scour the entire city if he had to.

"I guess we will." And with that, he snapped.

Oh god, no, please, no...

Roy was missing. Again.
Maes was dropping Hawkeye off at her apartment after work and decided to come up and say hi to the two awaiting alchemists. But the front door was left ajar and the inside was deserted. His heart leaped into his throat when the reality of the situation sunk in, allowing every possible fear to rip through his mind. So many things could go wrong. So many horrible, grisly endings...

Only after some searching did they eventually find both Edward and Black Hayate unconscious in the coat closet. Attempting to wake Edward only earned him a few incomprehensible mumbles. Hawkeye called an ambulance and had to accept that she would have to take her unconscious dog to get checked out later. Finding Roy was their top priority.

They left to search as soon as Edward was carried away. As much as it pained him to leave the kid alone, they would ideally find Roy safe and sound before he even woke up.

He should have known better than to stay there. He should have known that Hawkeye's apartment wouldn't have been safe for long. But he didn't; he foolishly let his guard down, and now they were all paying the price.

But thankfully, they had some clues to go off of. The receptionist in the lobby reported that a man and a child burst out of the staircase, apparently chasing each other, then tore out the building and down the sidewalk. But learning that this happened some time ago did nothing to help quell his festering nerves.

By some power that could have only been a miracle, finding him wasn't as difficult as they both feared. They wandered around the area, asking people if they have seen anything, but it wasn't until they decided to circle the building itself did they find anything of promise.

A lone figure was slumped in the alley, motionless and terribly familiar, his form cast in shadows from the setting sun. Before he could move or react in any way, he noticed Hawkeye stiffen besides him. Her eyes were wide with an unsaid horror and even after trying to coax her, the reluctance and fear of what she would see stifled her movements, keeping her nearly cemented to the spot.

She did begin to move, of course, but each step was slow and unwilling. Maes had no idea why, until he realized that this scene was probably starkly similar to when she first saw Roy's "corpse" so many nights ago. As quickly as it appeared, he banished the thought away and approached the body.

Lo and behold, it was Roy sitting with his back against the brick wall, arms limply by his sides, and one glove tightly hugging his hand. Maes did not see any new injuries, and he was definitely breathing. Hawkeye collapsed besides him with a resounding exhale. He was quick to follow, albeit a little more steadily.

"Roy," Hawkeye stated softly, not quite recovering from the fright. She gently held his hand in her own, perhaps hoping the warmth would shake some awareness into him.

"Come on, buddy, time to wake up," he urged, placing a stern hand on his shoulder for the same reason.

They heard a brief mumble from the man as consciousness slowly returned to him. He groggily lifted his right hand, fingers still held in splints, up to his head before realizing that it couldn't do much in its sorry state.

"What... what happened?" he asked slowly.
"We should be asking you that," Maes replied with an unsteady chuckle, too wrapped in relief to comprehend much else. "Was it Envy?"

"Envy?" Roy echoed the name to decipher its meaning, then pushed himself to sit up. "Envy. Right, Yeah. He did something to Ed, so I chased him out here."

Maes wasn't quite sure what kind of response he was expecting, but that certainly wasn't it. After seeing how Envy worked in the past, leaving Roy unharmed and alone in an alley so close to home certainly didn't seem like his style.

"Roy," Hawkeye spoke up, returning her usual strength into her voice. "You need to tell us what happened to him."

He tilted his head in thought. "I guess I finally got my alchemy working again, and chased him off with it."

"You... really?" Maes asked incredulously.

"What, you don't believe me?"

"No, I just- wow. That's great news."

Roy nodded with a small smile and shifted to stand up. They both jumped to help him rise to his feet and remained for balance if he so needed. Maes wasn't sure about the lieutenant, but his veins were still pumping with adrenaline after having geared himself up for a fight. But there was no need; Roy successfully finished the fight for them.

"So did you find Ed?" Roy asked after clearing his throat.

"Yeah. He must have gotten a pretty bad concussion though, so we had to send him to the hospital. I know you'll want to visit him, but I'm sorry Roy, we still can't let you be seen in public. We'll have to figure something else out. And he probably won't be in there for too long anyway."

Roy frowned and shrugged despondently. "That's fine."

"That's... fine?" He wasn't sure why he was questioning it, but after watching Roy for the past few days, Maes expected him to put up a fight, especially after what they had just gone through. Perhaps defeating Envy had calmed him down? But still it didn't quite make sense.

Roy seemed to notice the uncertainty that he and Hawkeye both shared, and sighed. "I mean, I'm not happy about it, but Ed's safe there. That bastard won't be able to get to him in the hospital, at least."

"Perhaps we should assign him some security just in case," Hawkeye mused solemnly.

"Do what you think is best," Roy replied easily. "But he's after me, not Ed. I doubt it's necessarily."

"Maybe not, but it's worth considering," Maes said with a quick glance to Hawkeye.

In response to this, Roy just shrugged and began walking the way they came, each step slow and precise. "Whatever the case, let's go home."

Maes released a deep breath that he didn't realize he had been holding as he watched his friend walk off. Whatever had happened while they were at work, it was a close one. Too close. Too easy. Or maybe it was just luck. He should just be grateful. But whatever it was, it seemed to have some
kind of effect on Roy. Whether it was for better or for worse was yet to be seen.

With an uncertain shrug, he and Hawkeye began to follow.
Chapter 23

The first thing Roy noticed once consciousness began to return to him was that everything hurt. Everything had been hurting consistently for weeks, but it now felt like someone had taken a mallet to his existing wounds, beating on them mercilessly until they ached twice as bad. The hard ground that he felt underneath certainly did not help, pressing into his bruised shoulder blades. His only comfort was that the surface was fairly warm- the only warmth in the otherwise cold room. He must have been laying there for a while now.

Roy kept his eyes closed, wanting more than anything else to stay asleep and avoid whatever reality was awaiting him. He recognized these conditions and knew to stay away for as long as possible without having to give it a second thought.

But something was wrong, his subconscious whispered, worming its way through no matter how stubbornly he tried to ignore it. Open your eyes.

He shut his eyes tighter, half out of spite, half out of fear. He could wonder and theorize for hours, but he wouldn't know for sure until he looked- and that was exactly what he wanted to avoid. Through the thin slits between his eyelids, he knew it was too dark.

Too cold, too empty, too alone, too dark.

But the insignificant little piece of blissful ignorance lasted only for a second or two before his consciousness steadily grew more aware, and opened the floodgate of memories with enough force to wind him, leaving him gasping for stale air.

He remembered the setting sun fading into moonlight just as clearly as he remembered the flames. They hissed and snapped in the air. His ears rung with screams, but he didn't know if they belonged to him or someone else. Ed was in danger. Envy was there, with the audacity to disguise himself again. Hughes and Hawkeye- they were all in danger!

Roy's eyes flew open to get a grasp of where he was, but was immediately hit with the desire to open them again, to rub his eyes, throw off whatever was covering them, because he couldn't see a single thing.

Pitch black all around, just as he had dreaded to discover.

His lungs compressed tightly in his chest and his breath was caught in the midst of panic that raged like a vengeful hurricane, body still and eyes wide, staring at nothing. The pit in his stomach dropped ten stories and every inch of him grew cold- far colder than the air or the wall besides him that he could lightly brush with his frozen fingertips. He was far too shaken to realize that the bandages around his hands had been removed, tying the present one step closer to the past. It was all so similar- far too similar.

And just as he was when he first found himself down here, denial burst to life, roaring like a bonfire, fueled by a powerful fear that dislodged his mind from any comprehensible thoughts.

No, no, no, no, no, please no. There has to be a way out; there must be!

Stricken with an impulsive rashness, Roy pulled his elbows underneath himself to push to his feet, but his attempts were quickly interrupted. His head collided into a surface after rising only an inch or two above the ground, easily forcing him back down to his back with a surprised gasp.
All of the fear and panic that swirled in his mind froze to a halt, consumed by sheer confusion. His eyes naturally strained to see what was too heavily shrouded in darkness as he remained still in a bewildered daze. Then hesitantly, he rose his aching hand up to inspect whatever surface stood above him, ignoring the cries of his broken fingers.

A sturdy wooden plank sat vertical to him, barely allowing him enough room to bend his arm. He followed it to the side, finding what he had previously thought to be a concrete wall, but now discovered to be more smooth wood.

Understanding hit like a truck and he immediately stuck out his other elbow to the side, only to be met with another wall, far too close for comfort. No thoughts could differentiate through the mute screams that howled in his head. A hysterical dread held him still, but he could feel it build and build and build until it became too much to contain. A rough, shuddering breath broke through his clamped mouth and he struck his arms out on either side, movements terribly restricted by the proximity of the walls. One hand trailed up to above his head, confirming just another fear. He tried to kick his feet out, barely brushing the end with the tip of his boot.

Then again, he struck the walls, the ceiling, with his elbows or forearms, tried to break through the wood with his feet, only faintly aware that he was yelling now—screaming for someone to help, because he wasn't supposed to be here! Whatever here was. Whatever this was. This... box.

This coffin.

He was in a coffin.

That realization sucked the fight out of him, and he ceased in his struggling— that was all he could do and tried to sort through his wild thoughts through the chilling terror that tied rivulets of fear through his stomach.

Did they really think he had died this time?

Or maybe all of it really was a dream. He had died in the alleyway the first time, and had finally woken up, perhaps.

Roy shook his head with a groan, his arms still stiffly held up against the surrounding walls as if it was enough to keep them from compressing on him.

_Calm the hell down, damn it!_ Images of Edward and Maes and Riza and everyone else flashed through his mind before quickly fading into the inky blackness, but it was enough; he knew they were real. Everything that happened was real. He knew it was. It had to be.

He wouldn't let himself spiral into those thoughts again.

Or at least, that's what he wanted to believe. Last time he found himself in such conditions, he thought he would break out or get rescued in no time at all, but it stretched into weeks— maybe months. He was already beginning to forget. How long would it take this time?

When he couldn't even move? When he couldn't _breathe_?

And just as his treacherous mind drew attention to it, the claustrophobia sunk in and suddenly every breath of air he could suck down his lungs was precious. His body instinctively began to seize as he curled in on himself— or at least tried to.

He pushed himself onto his side, grimacing as his shoulder brushed against the ceiling, and wrapped his arms tightly around himself, bowing his head into his chest as if it would somehow
make it easier to breath.

Why? Why did this have to happen to him again? And why did Envy need to make it significantly worse this time?

He gave you another chance.

A chance to do what? Scream until his throat tore itself apart?

A chance to do something—anything.

There was really no other alternative, at least.

And what exactly was he waiting for this time, anyway? Was he waiting for Envy to show up and hope he was feeling merciful enough to answer some questions? Or was he hoping the shape shifting demon could be tricked into killing him? He certainly wasn't waiting to wake up from a bad dream, nor could he stand to wait for someone to rescue him.

He couldn't just sit here and writhe, waiting for whatever fate drew closer. No, he had to do something, even if it was all in vain.

Recent memories of Edward going on about alchemy were still accessible, dangling on the line between what he could clearly recall, and what became too faded and distant.

He could easily call upon the images of Edward pointing a pen at the piece of paper he had scribbled on, staring back at him with an intensive motivation, determined to get the information back into Roy's head. But it was already there— it was always there. He just needed to break down whatever wall was concealing it.

But what hope did he had of doing that in these conditions? He could only continue a train of thought for a few seconds before a violent, claustrophobic shudder would tear down his back and remind him where he was.

He had to do something. It was do or die.

Roy forced air into his lungs and lightly pressed his bruised hands up against the side of the coffin, and shuffled himself slightly closer to it, ignoring the uncontrollable shudders that ran down his body. While it had been failing him recently, alchemy was all he had to rely on. Clearly, Envy still doubted his ability to do it, otherwise he would have tied his hands up. Not that Roy would really blame him...

But as he examined the solid wood, he was reminded that his nails were still very short after having bitten them down. The pain that came from it was nothing in comparison to broken bones, so he ignored it easily, but the thought of clawing into the wood did not appeal to him in the slightest.

But nonetheless, he didn't need to make the lines particularly deep; they just needed to be there.

With a sharp inhale through clenched teeth, Roy positioned himself to begin etching into the wood, but as soon as his ragged fingernail made contact, he forced himself to stop.

Rushing into it was exactly why he never successfully drew a circle last time. If he were to have any hope of escaping, he would need to keep a cool head. But telling himself that was one matter, and enforcing it was another.

Roy closed his eyes, or at least thought he did, and took another deep breath as he tried to call upon
Edward's words. The kid was talking about a versatile transmutation circle. And it was versatile because of the square... The square touched the outer circle, but didn't go beyond it. He was pretty sure there was another circle inside of that one. Did the size of the inner circle even matter? God, it's been so long since he had tried to hand-draw an array, excluding his attempts during his last imprisonment.

His hand began to move along with his thoughts, guided by the other in hopes to keep each line straight and as perfect as possible.

There became a point during the last time he was here where everything he did was a chaotic blur even as he did them. He couldn't think or process anything- his brain was on a wild track that he had no control over. But thinking back on it, Roy wanted to say that he did get more trained in drawing on the dark, but this new skill did him little good when his mental state simultaneously dwindled. There became a point where he simply did not have the mental capacity to active a transmutation circle. It it wasn't for that, he might have been able to escape.

As it were, Roy hoped he still had the acquired skill to draw decent circles without looking, and still have enough of his wits about him to keep up the concentration required.

He etched in one shape after another, using only a faint memory of Edward's instructions for guidance. But as he got the first few down, the rest of it followed naturally without needed to think. He hand moved almost on its own, etching in the final square as if he knew it all along- sine he did almost know it. Edward was right, then: he just needed the memories to be jogged a bit.

But would it work? Did he really do it successfully? Perhaps his circles were not complete. Maybe it was just a line or two off and would send stray wood shards flying in every direction instead of bend out of the way. Although at this point, it was not like he had anything to lose.

Roy tried to hold back his eagerness with a deep, shaking breath, and pressed his scarred hands against the circle.

Blue sparks sizzled and snapped from the circle and he could feel the wood give way under his fingertips. Roy was left breathless by the familiar energy, the power of shaping a material to his will rather than have it blow up in his face, the limitless possibilities. He could hardly believe it even as he pushed his arms out blindly when the reaction finished, or when his body fell forward until he felt the cool concrete of the floor under his palms and the cold air air hit his skin.

Roy dragged himself out as a sharp hiss sneaked out of his teeth from the aching of his hands. Ignoring it, he rolled onto his back once he was out, breathing heavily and staring up at the equally dark room around him, wondering if he should have been questioning the sensation. But no- he had gotten out. He had used alchemy. He was going to save himself. He could do this. Now all he needed to do was...

get out.

A daunting chill ran down his spine, but he ignored it, plastering on an uncertain grin that no one could see. Even he wasn't sure if it was there or not, but nonetheless, Roy pulled himself to his feet, using the coffin besides him as leverage. But as his hand made contact with the solid wood, he felt metal brush against his fingers. He confirmed it to be chains wrapped meticulously around the coffin, telling him that no matter how much he fought and struggled, he never would have broken out by sheer desperate force.

With a deep inhale of the stale air, Roy straightened up and took a hesitant step forward with his arms out. After having spent so much time in a dark room, he at one point did not need to guide
himself with his hands. He had memorized those walls, and eventually stopped caring when he rammed himself into one of them. But after his few precious days of freedom and finding himself in a similar yet surely different environment, he had to begin from the beginning. But hopefully this time, he wouldn't be able to grow accustomed to it.

Of course, that is if he even could say that he ever grew accustomed to anything down in that dark, miserable pit- the same one he found himself in now- where each second was an hour and each hour was an eternity; where there was no day or night time, but only a thin line between the torture that was consciousness, and a sleep he never wished to wake from.

*Snap out of it!* Roy growled to himself and shook his head violently, jumping slightly when his hands made contact with more metal. Feeling around, he found it to be a door, closed tightly.

Well, no matter. He would just do the same thing he did before.

Easy.

...

Roy stood there for several long seconds, slowly absorbing the fact that it was impossible for him in his state to scratch a circle into this door.

Well, desperate times called for desperate measures.

With another deep breath, Roy brought his hand up to his mouth- his left, so he wouldn't disturb his already broken fingers. And after only a moment of hesitation, he bit down into the tip of his index finger until he could taste the metallic hint of blood, then quickly drew his hand to the door and willed his arm to move as slowly as possible, hoping to somehow calm the nervous shaking of his arms.

He pictured the array in his mind again, each meaning of each line as Ed went over them. He knew this stuff. He had to keep telling himself that until his brain realized it was true.

Roy was forced to move slower this time, too shaken by the realization that he actually had a *chance*. As he traced his bleeding finger across the cool metal, he had to stop for a moment to calm himself down.

When blue sparks lit the room followed by the sound of bending metal, Roy was frozen stiff, fighting to accept that he had successfully completed two transmutations after weeks of failure. Too good to be true. Maybe it was sheer luck. But regardless, he would count his blessings later.

He followed the dim artificial light that stretched in from the hallways and stepped through the awkwardly sized hole that he had formed in the door. Outside was a long hallway heading in either direction with rows of lights hanging from above that were either dead or dying. The halls were lined with doors, similarly to the one he broke through, and each end seemed to extend forever, disappearing into shadows.

*Where the hell was he...?*

Roy vaguely remembered Edward talking about where he had found him, but none of the details made it through the haze. It wouldn't help him now even if it did, however.

He just needed to focus on getting out. Roy gave each direction a strained look, eyes thankfully re-adjusting to the dark with ease. Each path looked exactly the same, almost to a disorienting point. He was considering just picking a direction at random, but a faint sound down to his left halted his
thought process.

There was movement, he noticed as he pressed himself closer to the wall. But it wasn't that of a human, or anything remotely close. It was close to the ground, walking on fours—similarly to a dog. Roy would have thought he was hallucinating again, but the creature's strange shape put a pause to his worries.

It got closer, hesitantly so like an animal stalking prey. As it stepped underneath one of the blinking light bulbs, Roy was able to make out the bizarre conglomeration of colors and textures that did not belong together.

It was a chimera. With the head of what appeared to be a large lizard—maybe closer to a crocodile, and the body of a cheetah. Feathers ran down its spine, matching the bird-like claws. A deep, rumbling growl reverberated from its throat as it took step after step closer to him. Its empty reptilian eyes bore into him, giving Roy the impression that it could see every breath he took.

In that case, perhaps it was a good thing that he wasn't breathing.

The chimera opened its mouth, exposing its rows of sharp, razor-like teeth as both a warning and a promise. Its steps began to hasten, still growing, until he broke into a full-blown sprint towards him.

The unnatural creature rushing towards him sent a jolt through every single nerve in his body, setting him alight with the powerful desire to \textit{get away}. Without any thought, Roy turned in the other direction and ran blindly down the hall.

But hell, was that thing \textit{fast}.

Roy felt it on his heels within seconds, snapping at him from behind. He wouldn't dare risk looking behind, but he swore he could feel its breath on his ankles. He abruptly turned around the first corner he came across, hearing a satisfying skid behind him as the creature claws struggled to grasp the concrete floor. He knew that distance wouldn't last long, however, as the chimera began to catch up.

Further down the hall, Roy spotted a door that had light peeking through the cracks. Eager to get out of the open, Roy quickened himself, reaching a hand out to grasp for the door handle as he got closer. The very air of this place held a forewarning quality that he itched to get out of.

He pulled the much larger door open and slipped inside and shut it behind him. As he pressed his back against the metal surface with his eyes shut tightly in preparation, he felt a large \textit{thud} as his pursuer hit the door and heard claws scratching against it. A mix of a growl and a hiss echoed into the room as it cried in frustration, but didn't seem anywhere close to getting the door open. The scratching eventually stopped, but the chimera remained on the other side of the door, waiting for him.

A shuddering exhale fled from Roy's lungs as he allowed himself to open his eyes and release some of the tension that had constricting his chest since he woke up. But while he had no plans on braving the outside again so soon, any and all ability to move from the spot vanished the moment his eyes caught what was before him.

It was a relatively small room that struck him with a sickening familiarity like an iron pole to the back of the head. All cement walls, a sink in one corner, and the blood—so much blood.

The walls were painted with sloppy, jagged lines and patterns. Some resembled words that he
could not read, while others looked to be a conglomeration of circles, as if they created some kind of macabre timeline that steadily portrayed what it looked like to lose one's sanity. They started fairly clean and precise and he could recognize what each circle tried to do, but they were all off marginally. Lines wouldn't connect or would cross over each other when they weren't supposed to, obviously drawn by someone who was blind.

But as his eyes trailed further down the wall, the circles stretched further and further into madness until he could no longer distinguish their shapes. The amount of blood increased as well until he could clearly see the print of the hand that left it all there.

*His hand.*

There was no denying it.

He recognized these scrawls, but he never thought he would actually *see* them.

Roy remembered the feeling of maddening helplessness and the manic desire to do *anything* in order to get out of that hell, but the details eluded him. If anyone asked how he spent most of his time up near the end, he wouldn't have been able to give an honest answer simply because he couldn't remember. But to see what he had done- seeing the bloody scribbling felt like weights had been added to his shoulders, forcefully pushing him down until his back slid against the metal door and he found himself seated, unable to pry his eyes away, much like he was observing a car accident.

Seeing the physical representation of his own sanity made him nauseous and sapped the strength from his limbs. It was no wonder the others walked on eggshells around him. If the madness that surrounded him said anything about how he acted when Edward first rescued him, then...

Roy pushed the thoughts aside and covered his mouth with his still-bleeding hand to keep himself from getting sick. He wanted nothing more than to get out of that room and forget that it ever existed, but even with the chimera pacing out in the hall, he wouldn't have the strength to get up anyway.

He pulled his legs up to himself and rested his head on his knees, preparing to stay put for a while.

Maes could no longer ignore the terrible trepidation that had been steadily growing since they found Roy, and the uncertainty that became more prominent every time he looked at him. He tried to wave it off as lingering adrenaline or paranoia, but that excuse didn't sit right with him. When he and Hawkeye found Roy laying behind the building, they were both too relieved to think much of it- too overwhelmed by what could have been to consider any other possibility.

On the walk back up to the apartment, Roy had grown quiet, which was probably the most normal he had acted all night. It was during that silence that Maes tried to reason with himself, but he only managed to calm down for a few short minutes. Once they got back up, Roy immediately reclaimed his spot on the couch, but even then, it was done differently. Roy was always sure to keep his back to something, a habit that he was likely no longer aware of. He consistently strayed closer to walls and would surely not look as relaxed as he did then, paying no mind to Maes and Hawkeye as they watched in the corner of their eyes.

What really bothered him was how little Roy inquired about Edward. He had been protectively hovering around the kid for days now, and was far too okay with his admission into the hospital. Maes had tried to tell him about Ed's condition last he heard, said he'd be out soon, but when Roy was neither panicked or relieved, the desire to just stop talking to him quickly overpowered all else.
Still, he could not ignore the possibility that the fight with Envy had changed something inside of him. Perhaps a victory was all he needed to become more like himself again. But even so, the uncertainty remained.

"Would you mind carrying some things to the car for me, Maes?" Hawkeye's voice asked from down the hall just before she walked into the living room, holding Black Hayate in her arms. "I have a bag in the kitchen."

"Of course," he replied, casting the dog a sympathetic glance as he passed by. He couldn't quite tell if he was still unconscious or just dazed, but it would be best to get him looked at either way. "Are you going to be alright alone for a moment, Roy?"

"Alone?" he echoed dubiously. 

"Just for bit."

Roy nodded, and Maes took it as permission to go into the kitchen, all while over-analyzing everything the man said or did in hopes of discovering something. Waiting for him was a black duffle bag on the table. As he reached for it, Maes was thrown off guard by how heavy the thing was, and wondered what in the world Hawkeye was taking with her. Regardless, he readjusted his grip and rejoined her by the door.

"Be right back, Roy," he called again and opened the door, allowing Hawkeye to carry Black Hayate out. Closing the door behind them, he hurried to keep up with the swift blonde.

"Hopefully I can find a veterinarian that's still open at this hour," she sighed as they went down a flight of stairs.

"Yeah." He wasn't quite sure what else to say. He knew she was planning something, or at least had a strong suspicion. But it wasn't until they reached her car did they say anything more.

Riza first set Black Hayate down in the one of the seats, then straightened up to take the heavy bag from Maes and tossed it in the back. When she turned to look at him again, he could very clearly see the resolution in her eyes.

"Do you think that's really him?"

He sighed. "While it's still possible, I think it would be too good to be true at this rate."

"If Envy really is in there, then we won't be able to face him alone. I'm going to get backup," she stated just before her steeled expression softened somewhat. "But I can't ask you to stay here alone with him, assuming this isn't Roy. If you want to come as well-"

"No. He'll know that we're onto him if I don't go back."

"And if he already knows?"

"How could he? It hasn't even been an hour since we found him."

Hawkeye frowned, apparently unconvinced. "If he's bothering to disguise himself as Roy, then he's planning something."

"Well... if that's the case," he willed a smile that hopefully didn't look as wry as it felt, "then you better hurry."
Her eyes hardened with disapproval, but lacked the freedom to argue. "Hughes, if anything happens..."

"I'll be careful. And besides, there's still a chance that this really is Roy and he's just acting strange." He would still greatly prefer that to be the case, but he feared that the possibility was driven purely by denial. After all, if it wasn't him, then that meant... oh god- he hadn't allowed himself to wonder where Roy was if this was Envy. What would he have done with him? After the trouble they caused, how could he have known that Roy was even still alive?

He would take *anything* over that.

Riza clearly didn't like it, but he finally managed to usher her into her car, idly wondering if this was a terrible idea. Probably, a voice supplied for him

"Alright," Hawkeye breathed as she flexed her muscles on the steering wheel, then turned back to him through the cracked open window. "I'll be back as soon as I can. But if he does something... don't try to be a hero, Hughes."

To that, he could only offer a nod as he stepped back from the car. And without another word, the engine revved to life and she drove off, leaving him alone.

It still might be Roy. No need to worry if that was the case.

But the fact that he was putting so much thought into it spoke volumes.

Maes forced air into his lungs with a deep breath, remaining by the sidewalk for a moment longer before turning back to the apartment. The journey up the stairs was a slow and uneventful one, deluded by his thoughts and doing nothing to calm him.

When he opened the door with the spare key Hawkeye had lent him, he walked in to see Roy exactly where he had left him, lounging on the couch far too comfortably for comfort.

"Hey," he greeted, enforcing a hint of casual ease into his tone. "I'm back."

"I see that. What took you? For a moment, I didn't think you'd come back," he replied one arm slung behind his head. He should have been more careful with his hands, after all the abuse they've endured.

"Oh, I was just going over the directions to the nearest vet with Hawkeye." Maes crossed the room and escaped into the kitchen where he began to pull off his jacket, eager to avoid eye contact.

"Are there any vets open at this hour?" Roy asked from the other room.

"Yeah," he said, then continued in a quieter voice. "There's got to be one or two..."

In response, he heard a disinterested *hmm* followed by silence. But just as he thought the conversation has added, the man continued. "When will Hawkeye come back, you think?"

"Not sure. Not long though."

Then again, more silence. To anyone who wasn't paying attention, it might have even appeared to be peaceful. Maes knew better, however. There was a soft, subtle tension in the air. Unfortunately, he wasn't quite sure who was causing it: Envy, or his own paranoia.

But it wasn't until a little later that the bells started to truly ring.
Maes had mostly stayed in the kitchen as the night dragged on, trying to keep himself busy or at least *look* busy. But without any apatite to speak of nor the desire to go snooping through Hawkeye's home, he was left with painfully little to do, all while hoping Roy would just fall sleep.

As he sat at the kitchen table with his head held in his hands, his attention was brought up by the sound of footsteps. Just as he expected, Roy stood in the archway, leaning against the wall with his arms slung being his back and looking all too casual for his own good.

"It's getting late," he said after a moment. "Are you ever going to get some sleep?"

Maes smiled thinly despite himself. "I will when Hawkeye gets back."

When he didn't hear an immediate response, he bought his gaze back to Roy after allowing it to drift. The man looked almost disappointed somehow. "I see."

That stare- the eyes that expected something he did not provide- struck him with an uncomfortable sense of trepidation. He wasn't exactly sure what it was, but red flags were flying and forced him to sit up to appear not so defenseless. He was not eager to consider the reasons why.

In fact, he did not want to spend any more time out in the open like this. Perhaps he could just lock himself in Hawkeye's room for a bit. Surely that wasn't going overboard. Of course not. There was a chance that he was sharing the apartment with a shape-shifting monster; no measure would be too drastic. Maes just hated to act on that possibility- hated to give it any credibility.

"Actually," he began suddenly with a light cough as he slowly rose to his feet. "Maybe I will try to get some rest."

Roy was watching him with careful eyes as if he were looking for something. But whatever it was, Maes hoped to not give him enough time to find it.

"You should get some sleep too, Roy," he went on as he circled the kitchen table and walked past Roy to turn into the hallway. Chills ran up his spine the moment his back was turned to him. "Hopefully Hawkeye won't wake you up when she gets-"

*Click*

Maes paused mid-step, instinctively freezing at the painfully familiar sound. In that moment, the temperature of the room must have dropped a few degrees, and the scarce moonlight coming in from the windows seemed to have dimmed.

Slowly, he turned around, arms stiff at his side, to see Roy staring at him with a gun in his hand and the nose aimed for Maes. His expression had turned cold and alien with a type of apathy he would only see when his friend was facing down criminals.

The silent air was thick with tension, just begging to be broken.

"Finally playing your hand, Envy?"

Roy scoffed, his lip tiling in a crooked smirk. "Envy? I don't know what you're talking about."

"Drop the act."

"You're so certain, are you? Maybe your dear friend has finally lost his mind completely. Ever consider that?"
He withheld the urge to let his anger get the best of him, not wanted to test Envy's trigger finger. "You're a disgrace. Using others like this to get what you want; how cowardly."

"Say what you want. Doesn't change a thing. You're just trying to stall, aren't you? But it's too late for that. You'll bleed out long before anyone finds you."

Maes tensed, wishing now more than ever that he still had his gun on him. But as it were, his hand inched closer to the knife in the back of his belt as he stared back at Envy, watching for every signal and twitch in his stolen visage.

When he finally saw it, the bang of the gun was deafening and the knife was flying before he could blink. He shoved his own body to the side, using the momentum of the action to avoid the bullet and ram his shoulder into the wall as his eyes followed the knife. Its blade dug itself into Envy's head, creating a sickening mental image of Roy getting impaled to stain itself into Maes' mind.

However, he recalled only afterwards that Roy said Envy had an amazing healing ability, made even more apparent by the red sparks that seemed to spit the knife out to the ground and close the wound within seconds. At the very least, it slowed him down, allowing Maes to back down the hall and sprint into Hawkeye's room, slamming the door shut behind him, knowing it wouldn't stay there long.

He immediately searched around the bed and then the nightstand, knowing that Hawkeye would be careful enough to always keep a weapon nearby. And just as he prayed, he found a small handgun in the drawer. But again, he wasn't sure what good it would do him. He was acting on autopilot at this point, mind too frazzled and each second going by too quickly to come up with anything else besides survive.

In hindsight, this was a terrible idea. What could he have done differently? In the end, was there really any other way to avoid this? If he went with Hawkeye, then there was no telling that Envy could have done next. He could have followed them and attacked the rest of the team as well. At least this way, he was giving them time to formulate a real plan.

The door burst open and Envy sauntered in, grinning like a madman and holding the gun loosely in his hand as a trail of blood dripped down his face. He opened his mouth to say something, but Maes acted faster.

He had no options now. Mind running a million miles, he unloaded the gun, each bullet lodging itself somewhere in Roy's body, but doing little to slow him down whether it was a shot to the chest or the head. He only stopped after the useless clicks of an empty gun chimed in his ears multiple times.

The next explosive shot of a bullet almost surprised him. And for a moment, he stared down to wonder if it was from his own gun. Somehow, the impact of something ripping through his clothes and into his chest did not quite register until he saw the blood.

The revolver dropped from his hands with a muffled clang and his eyes fell on the red that stained his shirt and spread like a dark pool.

The complete and utter sense of uselessness was so overwhelming that he could think of nothing else as the strength drained from his legs and he slowly fell to his knees, then back to lean against the bed. A hand clutched at the wound, feeling the thick, sticky blood spread down his side and stain his fingers.

Maes, dazed and finding it more and more difficult to think, dragged his heavy gaze up to Envy,
who stood over him, still in the body of his best friend, still grinning manically.

"I wish I could stay and watch," his venomous voice sung, "but I have more work to do tonight. Although, I suppose I should thank you for making this so easy for me. At first, you had me worried that the woman would come back too soon and ruin everything." Envy knelt down in front of him, carelessly abandoning the gun on the floor- probably one that belonged to Hawkeye. "It's a shame you won't get to live long enough to see what I'm going to do to your friends."

"You b-bastard," he choked, fingers clutching harder around the bloodied fabric by both pain and rage.

And with that, Envy stood up again, holding himself above the lieutenant colonel and grinning victoriously. Without another word, he turned on his heel and strolled out of the room, leaving Maes by himself, bleeding, and too weak to move.
Chapter 24

Claws trailed down the other side of the door, reverberating through the metal and into Roy's back. He heard the chimera sniff through the thin slit between the hinges before turning to continue its slow, impatient pacing.

Roy couldn't bring himself to pay any attention to it, however. His limbs were shaking and each breath had to be ripped through his throat, lest he suffocate. Lacking the ability to do anything else at the moment, he continued to sit there- in his prison. He would shift between staring holes into his own hands, or glancing up at his surroundings, only to snap back to the former with yet another repulsed shiver.

The blood smeared walls around him told a story that he did not wish to relive, but wasn't given much of a choice as his memories screamed at him at the very sight of them, echoing for miles even as he tried to shield himself and block it all out. He knew he couldn't completely ignore it, however. Roy eventually forced himself to look up and take in the wave of nausea that flooded from everything he saw.

It was madness.

His chest tightened further and he felt uncomfortably cold. His lungs begged for air, forcing him to take deep breath after breath yet never feeling like he had enough to survive more than a few minutes. His shoulders heaved with every desperate intake as his arms rose so his shuddering fingers could curl around his bangs as stiffly as the pain would allow.

It was as if every breath of insanity that was created inside that damned room came rushing back to flood him underneath its painfully familiar weight. It was the intense pressure that had brought him so low as to want to kill himself, as he was reminded by the dried puddle of blood that remained in the center of the room, and the wound that remained on his neck. He couldn't stand to look at where he was, but closing his eyes only returned him to the suffocating darkness.

No, a whisper began in the back of his mind, cutting through the miserable static. You're better than that. Calm the hell down.

He almost wanted to scoff at it, but perhaps it had a point. He had gotten better since the rescue, after all. And he only got to that horrible point after weeks of endless torment. If he couldn't even stand straight after returning for only a few minutes, then what was the point of all the progress he had made since then?

The desire to prove it to himself began to burn until it convinced him to rise his head and lower his still-shaking arms. He looked up at the blood covered wall, breathing deeply and far too quickly through an insufferable tightness.

This room could not hurt him anymore. His time spent there felt so long ago, but the suffering he endured still tightly clung to him, familiar and intimate. But at the same time, it was as if it all happened to a different person entirely in a different reality.

He had gotten so far. He wouldn't let it hold him down any longer.

Roy, with a few more deep breaths, slowly began to rise to his feet, using the metal door for support, trailing a bruised hand up cold surface. Seeing as the door did not lock from the inside, he continued to press his weight against it, partially fearing he would fall without it, but mostly to
keep the chimera out. He looked up at the opposing wall, his head throbbing terribly as if it too did not want him to look at what he had done.

Even from there, he could see the deep scratches that littered the surface, most in which had dried blood seeped into the cracks. Most of the words that were there were illegible even at a second glance,

The largest of the readable words, though still harsh and sloppy, caught his attention first. Liore riots, it read. Then scattered around it were other phrases such as promise day and sacrifice. Roy scanned over them over and over again, but could not figure out how it all connected.

He knew that this all started in Liore, especially after hearing the team talk about it earlier. The intentional riots- perhaps the group that Envy was apart of was behind it, since Roy's abduction was somehow an effect of looking into the matter.

As for whatever the promise day was, and how he was a sacrifice, he was still clueless. Edward was apparently given the same title, but without more information, Roy doubted he would be able to single-handed figure out why. Maybe it was because they were both alchemists, but... there had to be more to it than that.

But speaking of Ed, his name has also scratched into the wall and violently underlined. Just besides that, was Maes.

Well that was easy enough to explain. He had been incredibly confused about Edward's involvement since the beginning. As for Maes- it took him a moment to jog his own memories, but once he did, the air suddenly felt just a little colder. They planned on killing him. He clearly remembered that one thought shining brightly among the utter chaos and consumed his mind. Roy's capture and 'death' was to distract the man from looking into their business any closer. If it wasn't for the route they chose to take, Maes would have already been dead.

And don't think any of your friends are getting out of this either. Envy's shrill, condescending voice ripped through his thoughts without warning, almost throwing Roy off balance with its force. Envy was going to get revenge. That was why he woke up in a coffin of all places. Roy had almost forgotten due to the trauma that came with his familiar surroundings, but he simply had no time to dwell on it any longer.

Maes, Ed, Riza- they were in danger.

Listening to the other end of the door, Roy realized that the sounds of claws clicking against concrete and the hungry pants had disappeared. The chimera must have given up, perhaps assuming that he had trapped himself in here.

With a new burst of fearful adrenaline pumping through his veins, Roy prepare to push the door open, but his body froze as soon as he caught a glance of the darkness through the thin crack. He didn't realize when he had woken up and was scrambling to escape, but the thought of willingly going back into the dark was far more terrifying than he would like to admit. The hesitation transcended all reason and refused to let his limbs move even as his mind told him it was alright. It wasn't even that dark in the hall; at least there were still some lights on.

Despite his previous aversion to it, a fully lit room seemed infinitely safer than a dark hallway.

But this was no time to hesitate. The others needed him, damn it! For all Roy knew, he was already too late.
Roy braced himself and pushed the heavy door open, its squeaking hinges being the only sound to fill the eerily quiet corridor. He saw no movement down either side as the ceiling lights blinked, but that one relief did little to settle his nerves or the tumbling in his stomach. Knowing that turning back would only be worse, Roy stepped into the hall and closed the door behind him.

With nowhere else to turn, he began to go right, hoping it would decrease his chances of running into the chimera again.

Roy had no idea where he was going, and no way of knowing the way out. Each turn looked the same as the last and each hall seemed to stretch further than he remembered. Lost without any sense of direction, Roy wasn't sure what force he was following. Perhaps it was intuition, just a hunch, a voice wishing to lead him astray- he couldn't guess. But whatever it was, it was all he had that suggested where to go, and that kept him from freezing to the spot.

Even as he quietly stepped through the halls, pace increasing with every passing minute. He began to fear that there would be no way out. But minutes later, he spotted something that was different at the end of a hall. He was too far to tell for sure, but Roy wasted no time on hurrying ahead to find out. Then finally, he could make it out: a staircase. A steep, metal spiral staircase.

His heart leaped out of his chest at the sight of it and he nearly stumbled to the ground as he rushed to reach it, fearing that every extra second he spent down there could mean the worst.

Roy scrambled to get across the hall, certain that something would jump out to stop him at any moment. He could almost feel a hand preparing to grab him by the leg if he dared to look back.

Faster, faster, don't look back, don't trip, don't-

The first metal step clang under his boot, then the third as he climbed the stairs as quickly and frantically as his tired, shaking limbs allowed.

But as he turned around the spiral as he neared the top, his bruised hands collided into a stone surface blocking his way. Panic erupted and he felt himself grow numb, horrors of being stuck so close to escape burst in his chest, blocking the airway in his throat.

But he felt the wall shift as he pushed his weight into it and further investigation proved that he could push it to the side. It was a stone panel, hiding this hell pit from the world beyond. He put everything he had into pushing it to the side, even as his bruised hands slipped on the blood that he hadn't realized was still seeping out, and reopened closing wounds from the friction. He pushed his full weight against it until he had just enough room the slip through the crack, tumbling as he tore past the stone.

A lower surface was hidden in the dark room he had burst into, which he used to keep himself up. But the familiar size, the texture- it was another coffin. A violent shiver ran up his body, but he pressed on, moving his body forward despite the terrifying blindness. A gentle moonlight slipped through thin slits in front of him, too weak to light anything but just strong enough to tell him where to go.

Roy ran his hands over the stone door, searching for a handle to pull or anything, but it was completely bare. He tried pushing against it, but heard a metallic mechanism clang in objection.

His mind buzzed with panic, threatening to disorient his thoughts, but he quickly pulled back on the reins, reminding himself that he had gotten through worse just minutes ago.

One more transmutation- that was all he needed, and he would be free.
He called on the fading memories of Edward explaining the simple circle, knowing it would work on stone just as it did on wood. Roy tested his finger with his thumb to ensure that he still had enough blood through the self-inflicted wound to work with before positioning himself against the door.

He could do it. He knew how— it was simple.

Roy took a deep breath, repeating the words in his head until he forced himself to believe them, just as he forced his hand to move with as much confidence as it once did.

The constant self-doubt and second-guessing whispered in the back of his mind as his bleeding finger moved across the stone, but he hushed it the best it could, demanding for the hundredth time to shut up. But it wasn't until he pressed his hand against the completed circle and blue sparks filled the room that it finally followed his orders.

The stone fell away at his will, crumbling to the ground and allowing the moonlight to stream through, greeting Roy with what had to have been the most breathtaking sight he had ever seen. He stumbled out of what he discovered to be a small mausoleum at the top of a hill surrounded by gravestones and a neatly mowed lawn. Trees rustled in the distance and the night air was fresh and warm.

Roy fell to his knees and his fingers gently curled around the blades of grass beneath him, as he was too weary and speechless to do much else. Not only did part of him think he would never see the outside world again after waking up in a coffin, but he still had not been outside for longer than a few minutes since before his original imprisonment. He hadn't felt grass or soft dirt in what felt like so long, he had almost forgotten what it was like.

But even now, he lacked the time to enjoy it. The astonishment that had struck him upon breaking out was swiftly tossed to the side when he was reminded that Hughes and possibly the rest of the team were in grave danger.

Roy forced himself to stand once again and turned to scan his surroundings, collect his bearings, and brace himself for the journey ahead.

Blood pumped loudly in his ears as he ran down the street, breathing heavily and keeping his eyes set on his objective. It took Roy a few minutes to remember the right way to go in order to get to Hawkeye's apartment, but once he did, he stopped for nothing, even when his legs began to ache and his lungs begged for respite.

He wished that they had gone to Maes' home instead, since it was a much shorter walk from the cemetery, and he even considered going there and asking Gracia to give him a ride. However, he squashed the thought a moment after it appeared, knowing that wouldn't work. Explaining to her the situation, since she probably thought he was still dead, would take far too much time. Plus, by the time he considered it, he couldn't risk turning around.

Roy all but burst into the apartment building's lobby, which was thankfully devoid of witnesses—not that he would have cared in that moment anyway. He took two steps at a time until he reached Hawkeye's floor, almost slipping as he turned down her hall. It only occurred to him that it might have been locked when his eyes fell on the correct door, but was prepared to break it down if he had to.

Seconds away from his objective, the fears gave themselves a voice, asking him if he was too late. He didn't even know how much time had passed since Envy returned. An entire day could have
passed for all he knew. Maybe he was about to walk in on the abandoned corpses of his friends who had been long dead.

As fear readjusted its grip around his heart, Roy slowed his pace only marginally to reach for the apartment's doorknob and pushed it open. His body froze in the doorway, terrified of seeing limp bodies or splattered blood, but the main room looked the same as he had last seen it, except obviously deserted.

Silenced by the tension in the air, he went in further, thoughtlessly leaving the door ajar behind him. He glanced in the kitchen, but it was just as empty. Until then, it hadn't even occurred to him that Envy led the others out as he did to him, to a place where he couldn't save them. Or maybe he had personally taken care of their bodies, careful to leave no trace.

Roy's stomach lurch ed at the thought, but he pursed his lip, mind spinning, and his legs carried him down the hall. At this point, maybe he was only stalling, but he couldn't accept anything until he had seen it all.

He peeked in the bathroom, the study—nothing. He was beginning to lose hope, until his ears caught a soft shuffle coming from the bedroom. Roy slowed himself, trying to keep his movement as quiet as possible despite his very abrupt and loud entrance, and desperately wishing he still had his gloves on him.

But all thoughts of self defense went out the window the moment he stepped inside the bedroom to see Maes lying sprawled out on the ground, expression scrunched, and a hand tightly gripping his shirt that had already been heavily stained by blood.

Roy felt himself go numb as he took a quivering step forward, only to collapse besides his friend. He was too horrified to speak by the paleness of Maes' skin, or how he didn't react to his presence, but it only took a moment longer for hysteria to slap him across the face.

"Maes! What—what happened? Oh my god—" he was painfully aware that he was speaking primarily to himself at this point. He could guess what had happened here. Roy leaned over the man, taking in the tension that was evident in his face, and the shallow, intent breaths of his chest, then collected his friend's shirt to press down into the wound, gently guiding his tense fist to the side.

"It's alright, Maes. It's alright, I'm here, you'll be alright."

"R-Roy," he choked, the hand that was previously pressed on his own wound reached to weakly grab at Roy's sleeve, smearing the fabric with dark blood. "-m glad you're a-alright." Somehow, he still had the strength to open his eyes, though thin and fighting to close, and smile up at him. The warm smile, the relief that shined through the pain—it was too much. Something in his chest cracked and shattered to pieces, allowing whatever it was holding to fall into a miserable pile.

Roy struggled to swallow the lump in his throat as he shuffled closer and slid his free arm under his friend to support him. "Damn it," he muttered weakly, ignoring the crack in his voice and the blood that he could feel seep through his fingers. "Worry about yourself, dumbass." He was so lost, so confused, so scared, that all he could think to do was revert back to something familiar and safe, such as the banter that he had missed so much as if it could magically fix everything.

Maes' smile twitched, as if he lacked the strength to keep it there but wanted for it to stay. But as a beat passed, he did allow it to drop and replaced it with a seriousness in his flickering eyes.

"L-listen, Roy," he began, each vowel proving to be arduous. "He just left. You can still... c-catch him if you go now."
"Wha- no way, Maes. I'm not going to leave you here!" he fired back desperately, putting more pressure down on the wound despite how his friend flinched. He wasn't getting enough blood flow to his brain to suggest such a thing.

"You have to," he growled through the pain as his fingers tightened around Roy's wrist. "I- I think he's going after Ed."

His gut twisted into nauseating knots. "But you'll die."

"...You need to help Ed." The dismissal of his own life only served to heighten his already raging concerns.

"I- I can't just leave you here," he gasped, lacking anything to say besides repeat the one coherent thought that made its way through the chaos that was his mind. Maes must have understood that he needed a moment- just one damn second- to think through the situation and weigh the value of two invaluable people.

But it was in that second- as Roy silently looked down on Maes, who had allowed himself to show the pain of being shot, laying his head back with his eyes shut tightly- that help arrived.

Arms suddenly wrapped around Roy, shoving him away from Maes and onto the floor, his head coming alarmingly close to the bed frame. His arms were forced behind his back before he could consider fighting back, and he heard the distinguished sound of a gun clicking behind his head and felt the cold muzzle press into the back of his head.

Familiar voices broke out behind his view. When he thought it was only him and Maes, four more suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

"He's been shot," someone- Breda- said urgently, followed by a pained groan from Maes as pressure was surely put on his wound once more.

A whispered curse in a feminine voice. "Fuery, call an ambulance- now," Hawkeye ordered, followed by the younger soldier's stuttered reply before rushed footfalls trailed away from the room.

"What should we do with him?" Havoc asked, his voice cold and vehement as the gun's muzzle was pushed harder into the back of Roy's skull.

"Wait- wait, Havoc- Hawkeye, it's me," he insisted, trying to turn to meet their eyes, but wasn't allowed any wiggle room from his position on the floor.

"Nice try," Hacov hissed behind him. "You're not getting out of this one, bastard."

"What have you done with Mustang?" Hawkeye demanded, her voice laced with a subtle venom that sent a shiver down his spine and made him glad that she was on his side- usually, anyway.

"You don't understand!" He fought to keep himself from sounding too desperate or wiggling under the weight. "Envy had already left! I just escaped-"

"Careful," he heard Falman warn from the back of the room. "He's probably a master of deception."

"We'll get answers out of you one way or another," Hawkeye said with an unnerving calmness in her voice. "Make sure he can't get away."
"Maybe we can just break his legs," Havoc suggested.

"Edward said he has incredible healing abilities. I doubt that would work," Falman supplied back.

"How incredible? I wonder if a bullet to the head would even kill him."

Roy would have understood and maybe even partaken in the conversation, had be not been the target. In regard to the real Envy, he easily related to their rage and desire for revenge, but not as things were.

"Wait- just- stop a moment- I can explain-" he stuttered, brain fried from the sudden attack by his own team, thinking he was Envy.

"The only thing you should be explaining is what you did with Mustang!"

"I'm telling you that I am Mustang!"

"And you expect us to really believe that?"

"I-"

"Stop." The overlapping argumentative voices all hushed at the sound of Maes' weak, broken voice speaking up in his defense. Roy squirmed to see, but was still not permitted enough freedom to move. And with a gun to his head, he wasn't eager to test it. "I-it's him."

No one said anything for several long seconds, the tension thick enough to cut with a knife. Then wordlessly, military boots stepped in Roy's limited range of sight, followed by Hawkeye crouching down to his eye level. She stared at him, eyes searching for something but otherwise unreadable. He could only look back, hoping to show her whatever she was looking for. His heart was pounding and he was sure Havoc could feel his racing pulse from where he held his arms back.

Then, she nodded. "Release him," she said, her voice now softer and gentle in comparison to how it was only second ago. As commanded, Roy's arms were released and the weight was lifted off, allowing him to rise to his knees. He glanced back at Maes, he was grimacing as Breda was pressing down on the gun wound, looking back at the scene with an unspoken urgency in his eyes. They needed to hurry.

But they had called an ambulance and there was little they could do for Maes now that they were not already doing. And he certainly couldn't help. Roy only had one mission now, and that was to find Ed.

"Oh- god- Boss, I'm sorry, I thought you were Envy," he heard Havoc say, but his voice was muffled and distant as his thoughts roared. His heart was still racing and his shoulder blades were sore, but none of it mattered any more. The moment Maes vouched for him and Hawkeye recognized him, anything before became irrelevant.

"It's fine," he said dismissively as he used the bed to pull himself to his feet, still admittedly shaken, but he'd be damned if he let it slow him down. The others were watching him carefully, expressions mixed with uncertainty and guilt and other things that he didn't care to study. "Just-take care of Maes. I need to find Ed before Envy does."

Hawkeye of course only took half a second to process the situation. "I'll drive you to the hospital."

Roy nodded and immediately weaved through the others to exit the room. But on his way out, he
Edward's memories of the past hour or so were a discombobulated daze as he shifted between conciseness, unconsciousness, and something in between. He felt a dull ache in the back of his head that would occasionally spike the more he tried to think, and his surroundings spun out of control constantly.

He remembered waking up in a small metallic room, feeling bumps in the road- he was in an ambulance- looking up at unfamiliar faces as they spoke to him. He heard himself give them answers to questions he couldn't remember, they flashed a bright light in his eyes, and a few clattering tools and road bumps later, he found himself laying in a hospital bed.

Ed was panicking the entire time, but perhaps it never made its way to his exterior, because no one seemed eager to help. But even as he knew something was wrong and that he couldn't afford to be there, his body must have refused to listen as well. He woke again to a nurse prodding at an IV that had suddenly appeared in his arm.

"Hey, what- what happened?" he mumbled, hopefully coherently, as he tried to wave her away, mind still filled with a distracting buzz.

"Oh, do you not remember?" the young woman asked, masking the slight start that his sudden awakening must have given her. "You got hit in the head and got a concussion. But don't worry, you'll be right as rain soon enough," she smiled, far too chipper for- well, whatever hour it was. The dark windows suggested it was late.

She didn't need to go over any the specifics, as if she knew any. Envy had returned, and Mustang was in danger. He didn't have time for this, Edward decided as he warily rubbed his face, struggling to organize his thoughts. "How long am I stuck here?"

"We plan to only keep you overnight for observation, seeing as there's not much we can do for you now. However, we'll need to wait for a parent or legal guardian to come in and sign some papers before we can discharge you."

"Legal guardian?" he heard himself mumble under his breath. Shit, that meant Mustang, didn't it? But if Envy got to him, then it would be pretty unlikely for him to magically show up here to sign him out. Besides, what would that mean if Mustang was still thought to be dead? But more importantly, there was no one standing between the older alchemist and Envy once he was knocked out. Shit.

"Listen, I can't stay here. I'm a State Alchemist and I'm in the middle of-" he paused as he reached for his pockets, only to realize that his pockets were gone, and his watch along with them. They had forced him into one of those damn hospital gown things. "What did you do with my stuff?"

"Your belongings are in our safe keeping until you get dis-"

"My legal guardian is a little per-occupied at the moment, and I need to go save his life! Now who do I need to talk to in order to get out of here?"

Despite the urgency he tried to throw into his voice, the nurse did not seem to pick up on it. She watched him dubiously for a moment, pursing her lip in thought. "Please be sure not to strain yourself. You must be tired from the concussion."
Edward couldn't bring himself to come up with an actual response and settled for burying his head in his hands with an irate groan. She must have thought he was crazy and making up stories. If this was how Mustang ever felt, then... damn, it sucked.

"Not getting anywhere like this. Get a doctor over here,"

She smiled thinly as if he was the exasperating one here. "I'll let the doctor know that you wish to speak with him."

"Good," he snapped, and was inwardly grateful that he managed to sound dismissive enough to convince her into leaving the room.

If this took longer than a few minutes, then there was no way Edward was just going to sit here and wait for the hospital to get their shit together and realize what was on the line here. And especially if they continued to treat him like he was insane, then he sure as hell wasn't going to waste time dealing with it.

Thinking back on it, he should have seen it coming. Why didn't he just listen to Black Hayate!? He supposed that there was always something more pressing to distract him when the dog started barking. He knew that it had to have meant something, but when Mustang fell into a flashback, suddenly that was all he could think about. As for the second time, even Black Hayate himself was surprised to see Hawkeye behind the door.

He should have known. There were so many red flags, but he didn't pick up on any of them in time to stop Envy. Or maybe he was just too afraid to...

Hell, what did it matter? He had royally messed up, and was paying the price. But he still had a chance to make it right - hopefully.

God, how much time had even passed since then?

And what the hell was taking that doctor so long?

Edward folded his arms, impatiently tapping his fingers against his automail. But even as he itched to get outside and start tearing up the city until he confirmed that Mustang was alright, part of him was selfishly glad he was currently lying down. He could easily pinpoint exactly where he was hit thanks to the aching in his skull, and part of him doubted he would be able to stand up straight if he tried to get up.

Damn it.

Damn Envy.

His blood simmered at the very thought of that monster and boiled knowing that Ed was stuck in a hospital while he was running around doing who-knew-what.

Finally, the sounds of footsteps clicking down the hall, which stopped right outside of his door. With Ed's attention already drawn, the door opened and an older man in a white coat stepped in, holding a clipboard and slim eyes immediately falling on the blond, who has shifted to sit up straighter.

"About time," Edward huffed under his breath at the sight of the doctor.

"I hear you wanted to talk to me," the man smiled as he stepped over to the end of the bed. There was something almost unnerving about how happy he seemed, but Ed paid it no mind.
"That's right," he began, gearing himself up to begin his rant about how he had very important things to do, none in which included sitting in a bed.

"Well, I actually wanted to talk to you too." There was a quality in his voice and how he purred in a way that was unbefitting of his appearance, and the grin that stretched unnaturally on his face that put a pause to the words that were on the tip of Edward's tongue. He could only gape dumbly at the man for a moment as voices screamed and alarms blared in his head, speechless by the fading hope that it wasn't what he was thinking. "I still have to pay you back for last time."

The old doctor's body began to spark red, highlighting the sickening grin and flashing a frightening eagerness in his eyes. His hair darkened and grew, his body slimmed, his clothes shifted into dark rags, and within seconds, the Envy that Ed had grown to despise appeared before him, at the end of his bed.

"Long time no see, Pipsqueak."
Chapter 25

Roy had a river of thoughts cascading through his mind as he sprinted into the hospital's lobby with Hawkeye hot on his heels. Primarily, it was the well-being of Edward, but concerns of Maes were relentless.

Hawkeye had offered to drive him to the hospital in order to get to Ed as quickly as possible; for a split second, he wondered if bringing Maes along would be the best option, but the idea was quickly shot down by the colder reality of the situation. Moving him would put too much strain on the wound, and with an ambulance on its way, remaining behind with the others would ensure that he got professional help faster than what Roy could offer.

He absolutely loathed the idea of leaving his best friend behind as he bled out on the floor, but he had the support of the rest of Roy's team, when Edward was alone with Envy quite possibly on his way over. Had they not appeared to save him from choosing between the two, Roy wasn't sure what he would have done, and had no desire to consider it further.

Roy should just have counted himself lucky. He didn't know exactly how much time had passed between Maes getting shot and Roy's arrival, but it had to have been only a few precious minutes. His brain was wired too tightly during the car ride to consider bringing the thought up to Hawkeye, but she probably wouldn't have been able to add much anyway. She had explained to him that she had to leave Maes there in order to gather the others, despite everyone's greater judgment, so Roy assumed she had been gone for a few hours at most.

But on the other hand, it made him wonder if it was even worth going to Hawkeye's apartment when they were so close behind. Did him finding Maes minutes before they did help him in the long run, or did he just put more risk on Edward's life? How much time would he have saved by just going straight to the hospital? But then again, he would have been going on his feet with no backup had that been the case.

The first lieutenant must have been facing her own damning thoughts as well during the car ride, because she eventually asked what had happened to him, where he was taken, was he okay, and so on. Roy wouldn't have thought much of the questions and would have waved them off in favor of piecing together his own mental puzzles, if not for the slightest hint of fear in her voice that only he could have caught. Of course she was worried; she and Maes must have been terrified once they began to suspect that he had been replaced by Envy, a thought that occurred to him only for a moment before it was shunned away, too repulsed by the possibility to give it must thought.

For her, he forced himself to slow down and assure her that he was okay. Roy just wished that he could have said it with more confidence.

He at least understood enough to know that he was distracted. Blissfully distracted, and kept from thinking about the horror that struck him when he woke up in that tight, compressing coffin, too close to the walls to move or even breath. No light, no space, no freedom whatsoever. There, Roy lacked even the freedom to think as his own mind had shut down, too terrified to fully understand what had happened to him. He didn't realize it at the moment, but part of him must have been convinced that he would have died if he slowed down to think about the predicament, as if acknowledging it as real would diminish his chances of getting out. It was a miracle or maybe just an amazing stroke of luck that he was able to slow down enough to consider Ed's words, and even dream of escape.

Hawkeye had asked if he was really alright three times before he heard her. In response, he could
only send her an unconvincing smile and said that he needed to focus on getting to Ed, ignoring the
fact that he was just sitting uselessly in the passenger's seat.

His heart was beating a million miles an hour when they arrived at the hospital, but he was relieved
to have an excuse to no longer think on it.

She pulled up alongside the building in a way that might have been less than legal, and they both
climbed out and charged up to the front doors.

After throwing some demands at a tired receptionist and Hawkeye there to prove that they- or at
least she- was military, he had gotten Edward's room number and was tearing down the halls
within the first minute. The halls were dimly lit and mostly deserted for the ungodly hour of the
night that it was. They passed a nurse or two on their way, who thankfully didn't do more than cast
them concerned glances, not that they would have stopped if asked anyway.

As the two rounded a corner, Roy tugged on the new pair of gloves that Hawkeye had provided,
gritting his teeth together as he ignored the various aches and pains that spiked through his nerves.
Little did they seem to understand that he did not care what was wrong with his own body as long
as Ed was in danger.

Behind him, he heard the first lieutenant arm herself with a handgun just as he faced the correct
door and burst inside.

Inside, his worst fears became reality.

Envy was there, perching on the foot of the bed, looking down at Edward like a bloodthirsty
vulture who was eagerly waiting for his prey to accept its fate. Ed on the other hand, had pressed
himself up against the headrest, his arms up and threatening to do something, but there was some
unease in his eyes that made Roy doubt he would be able to defend himself in that state.

Roy froze in the doorway as the two sets of eyes fell on him, failing to quite register Hawkeye
aiming her gun up at Envy besides him. He was far too preoccupied trying to control the
conglomeration of emotions that plowed into him.

"What the- what are you doing here?" Envy growled, straightening up from his perch to face Roy.
"How the hell did you get out of there?!"

Envy- that scum thought he could get away with locking him up again, shooting Maes in the chest,
and then go after Ed to do god knows what. Rage, a fiery protectiveness, the powerful desire for
revenge all stormed inside of his mind, too fiercely, too chaotically for him to digest. In that
moment, there was only one thing that he understood.

"Get away from him." His voice came out as a cold demand as he rose his less-injured hand up at
Envy. However, he did not look quite as concerned with Roy's unsaid threat as he should have
been. Instead, he seemed to be hugely inconvenienced by how outnumbered he was, more vexed
than anything. Silence settled after Roy's words bounced off of the whitewashed walls as Envy's
thin, reptilian eyes shifted from him to Hawkeye, all but forgetting about Ed.

Meanwhile, Edward was staring back at them with a mix of intense relief and disbelief with a hint
of distance fogging his gaze that must had come from being concussed, as Roy was earlier
informed.

Then finally, Envy sighed loudly as he made a dramatic effort to rise to his feet, then hopped off of
the bed and to the center of the room, Hawkeye's gun trailing him all the while. "I gotta say," he
began with a low growl in his voice. "I underestimated how much of a thorn in my side you'd come
to be. I don't know how you got here, but you're going to regret ever leaving your place in that
coffin. You're a dead man, Mustang."

Edward visibly blanched at the statement and Roy could sense Hawkeye shift uncertainly, both
undoubtedly hungry for more information. Roy, however, couldn't bring himself to care at the
moment. His fingers tensed, itching to snap and create an inferno on Envy's unsuspecting face, but
his location and Edward being so close to him held him back. He supposed he didn't put much
thought into what he was going to do with Envy, besides physically harm him a lot, but it didn't
really matter as long as Ed was safe.

Envy, however, would not wait to see what happened. With a quick glance around him, he
backpedaled and swiftly elbowed the window, shattering the glass with a sharp clatter. Grumbling
to himself, he leaped through the opening, seemingly oblivious to the shards that remained around
the frame.

As soon as he was out of sight, Edward let out a deep breath that he must have been holding and
seemed to have relaxed as he lowered his arms to his sides, clearly exhausted, but his eyes were
still wide with a residual fear. "God- Mustang, what the hell is happening? W-what happened to
you? He said something about a coffin? And-

"I'll explain everything later," Roy promised as he hurried across the room and peered out of the
window, unsure if he could really stick to his word when just thinking about retelling the
conditions he woke to was enough to return a tightness to his chest. "I'm going after him."

"Wha- no damn way are you going without me," the kid insisted as he began to slide out of the bed
and hobble to his feet, unbalanced. One step and he teetered off to the side, stopped only by the
wall that was conveniently in his way.

"Don't let him follow," Roy passively said to Hawkeye, who had moved herself over to the blond
before he could finish speaking. He wasn't watching her attempts to usher the unruly alchemist
back to the bed as he heaved his boot up to the broken window, knocking aside any glass shards
that precariously remained. Without waiting for her to finish, he climbed to the other side,
adjusting back to the dim moonlight with ease. Thankfully, Edward had a window that was on the
first floor and looked out to the main road rather than the hospital's courtyard.

In the distance, he caught a glance of Envy crossing the road and disappearing inside the city's
maze of buildings. Thankfully, they were still in the business side of town, where very few people
remained at this time of night. Hopefully, it would remain that way until he could shut Envy up
once and for all.

Hawkeye would catch up, but Roy didn't have the time to wait for her. Breaking into another
painful sprint, he chased Envy across the street, thankful to the adrenaline that muted the lingering
pain in his ribs.

The street was blissfully devoid of life as he hurried across the blacktop to the other side. If this
had to happen, Roy was glad it was happening too late for any spectators to be present. He would
need to be careful, Roy decided when he turned around the corner of a building.

However, that thought didn't last long once he noticed a figure waiting for him around the corner,
far too late to react before he was unceremoniously kicked in the stomach. He managed to step
back before the blow could become worse, but was winded all the same and forced to lean against
the brick wall of the building for support, uselessly pressing an arm against the new bruise.
His body wanted to crumble to the ground from the blow, but he forced himself to stay on his feet, albeit unsteadily. He looked up to see Envy sneering down at him, looking completely at ease despite how irked he seemed when he left the hospital.

"You humans are so easy to predict," he mocked as Roy struggled to recover the air that was knocked out of his lungs. "You'd be much more likable if you'd just stay like that, instead of breaking out of the nice little room I set up for you."

Roy's stomach churned just at the thought of that endlessly dark room. He didn't have a response—didn't even consider coming up with one, as he was far too focused on crushing the destructive memories and recovering his composure.

"But don't worry, I'm not going to bring you back there this time," Envy went on, taking a few steps closer as Roy took just as many back. "In fact, I've decided that you're no longer worth the effort. It would have been fun, though."

The air around Envy suddenly became far more intimidating as a wicket smile pulled at his sharp features. "As I said, you were only a potential sacrifice. The others will understand once I tell them how much of a waste of time you've been... But just imagine what a little more time in that coffin could have done to you! It's a shame I wasn't able to be there when you first woke up, but I was too busy dealing with your dear friend."

Roy froze and his mind went blank. "It would have been hysterical to listen in on your reactions, especially once you learned that he was dead because of you. If you think you lost your mind before, then this would have been on a whole new level! Being unable to see and move!? I wonder how long it would have taken you to break completely— I wonder how far I could have pushed you." One step closer after another, but Roy had stopped reciprocating the movements, still trapped in a motionless daze, staring holes into the diminishing distance between himself and Envy, whose words were muffled by the chaotic static that roared in his head. "How much would you have screamed and begged until you finally gave up? How long would it take you to not even recognize yourself?"

The gap between them had closed completely and Roy felt the shadow cast by the dim moonlight and distant street lamps fall on him. His arms quaked with a building rage, ready to pull up and snap at a moment's notice. He was a beat away from doing so as Envy's presence grew stronger, but a hand grabbed his chin and forced his head up. His eyes widened, body shivered from repulsion and his hand rose with his gaze. But before he could snap, he met his own eyes staring back at him, dark and confident, whispering with nostalgia of what he had been missing.

"Can you even tell the difference—" he saw himself ask, tilting his head questionably, his black bangs falling around his eyes. "—between you and me?"

Roy was left speechless by the sight of himself, forcing his fractured mind to sort through what he knew to be true when he had become so used to doubting everything.

But it wasn't supposed to be like that. He knew what Envy was doing. It wouldn't work. It wouldn't work!

"Then let me ask you this," Envy asked in Roy's voice, tilting his head back as he looked down with a familiar vanity. "Who do you prefer? I only see a pathetic, broken shell of a person who's unable to trust his own friends, or even use what he claims to be his alchemy. Then there's me:
confident, powerful- far closer to you than what you could ever hope to be again. Wouldn't you rather have someone actually competent take your place?"

Roy wasn't sure what kind of expression he had in place, but he eventually found the strength to shake his head, if only just marginally, partly just in hopes of shaking Envy's hand off of him.

"Just look at yourself! You're a disgrace," he continued, followed by an arrogantly superior laugh. Roy's own voice- his own laugh cycled through his ears, ringing with familiarity, but also striking him by how different it was.

He had always been proud and sure of himself, but the voice that filled his surroundings came from someone who looked down on others like insects. It was supercilious and condescending to the point of making him feel ill at the very sound of it. It idly reminded of the days during the war, when those around him started to believe what they were being told- that the enemy was inferior in every way. That mindset made him feel sick every time he saw it in practice, but deep in the recesses of his heart, he was terrified of conforming to it. He never did- he never got close, but the arrogant laugh that rung in his head was as if it had come straight out of his nightmares. He couldn't let someone like that take his place.

Roy knew he wasn't good for much, especially these days, but he as at least better than that. He could at least say with certainty that he was better than Envy. Envy, who put Edward in the hospital, with Maes right behind him.

His body moved on its own as his bruised fingers rose to curl around Envy's wrist, latching as tightly as he could manage without putting any thought into it, driven purely by rage. His eyes hardened as he felt a newly revived spike of fear for those who he cared for- those who had already suffered for stepping into Envy's path, and those who potentially still could.

"You bastard," he breathed, vision fading into a furious red and voice dripping with venom. "You disgusting piece of shit." He forcibly pried Envy's grip away and steadily rose to his feet, mind spinning but far too focused to allow his balance to waver. The smug vanity had been wiped from Envy's stolen face, replaced by something that sickeningly resembled curiosity. "I know what you're trying to do, and it won't work. You clearly do underestimate me, if you think you can win by copying me. But I swear to you, Envy: I will not be satisfied until I see only pain and regret on your face."

Envy only stared back for a moment, seemingly startled by Roy's sudden vehemence. Then after a beat, he whistled, tone low and impressed, just before another sick smile slid onto his comportment. "Now we're starting to get somewhere. Who would have thought that you'd still have a few surprises left in you?"

Roy narrowed his eyes, unsure of what game Envy was playing, but certain that he was tired of it. He released his wrist and straightened his back as his fingers tensed in preparation to snap, hesitating only due to the uncertainty that he was now force to face.

His flame alchemy had only failed him thus far, so why would he be lucky enough for it to work now? He had recently succeeded in some simpler transmutations, so that had to count for something. And when so much hung in the balance, he couldn't afford to screw it up. He demanded the accuracy and destructive power that he knew he was capable of, and would accept nothing less.

He had to focus, and put everything he had into it. He knew how flame alchemy worked as well as he knew the back of his own hand. He knew every in and out, and was the world's only flame alchemist for a reason, damn it! Whatever mental barrier had been blocking him from what was rightfully his would be blown apart as if his life depended on it.
The doubt that glinted so evidently in Envy's eyes - Roy would burn it out of existence.

Envy's smug grin returned just as he opened his mouth to speak, but Roy had no intention of letting him. He took a deep breath, focused in on the gasses in the air that would morph to his will, and snapped his fingers.

Flames roared, heat consumed the air, the dark alley with lit up with an array of red and orange as he watched himself catch on fire. Harsh, gaspish screams shattered the pristine silence of night as Envy reared back, hands clutching at his face, where the flames were most intense.

He managed to put the worst of it out after a few seconds, scorching his sleeves and snapping his enraged gaze up to Roy, burns quickly healing themselves. Roy was far from satisfied, however. Envy was still portrayed as the flame alchemist, which just wouldn't do.

The last transmutation was at close range and comparably not very large, so Roy ensured to remain focused as he rose his hand to snap once again, but this time with much more force, manipulating the oxygen between him and Envy to create a larger effect, reveling in the joyous leap his heart took when it actually worked. The flames greedily ate up what he provided for them, snapping through the air until exploding upon making contact with Envy, engulfing his body completely. The flash of light was brilliant, stifled only by the writhing silhouette inside. Again, he screamed uncontrollably, paralyzed by what had to be the most brutal form of pain imaginable.

As the fire began to die, the light it created was replaced by a red alchemic lightning that danced off of Envy's burned body, healing him just as immediately as before. He had reverted back to the more slender form that Roy was most familiar with.

An incensed howl sounded from the monster, as if he was far too infuriated to know how to proceed, besides to glare bloody daggers at Roy as the terrible battle cry tore through his throat. "I'll kill you for that one, Mustang! I'll make sure to make it as painful as possible, you worthless human scum! I-"

Again, Envy erupted into a burst of fire, cutting off his threats and replacing them with earsplitting screams that were tainted by pure, loathsome fury. The alchemic regenerative lightning snapped across his burning body, but it glowed brighter this time, sparking more violently as Envy's body again began to shift and transform. Through a power that Roy had thought to be impossible, his size began to grow, skin changed colors and texture, becoming rugged and scaly. Roy found himself backing away as the flames finally went out but the sparks continued to fly, Envy growing in size until he towered over Roy like the monster he was.

And was he hideous.

Roy backed up again, keeping his eyes locked on the monstrosity that formed before him. If his life wasn't at risk, he would have been wracking his mind to figure out how Envy had such unreal powers. How was it possible to compress that much mass into such a small body? He hadn't thought about it when Envy was just swapping between different people, but he seemed to have ignored the laws of alchemy completely. There was no other way to possibly explain what he was capable of.

But even without being able to quite understand it, this at least explained why he weighed so much.

"Sir!"

Roy spared a moment to glance back, where Hawkeye stood with her gun in hand, and eyes shifting between him and the beast that stood a few meters back, clearly doing her best to compress her
many questions, just as he was.

"Stay back, Hawkeye; I have this taken care of."

"I'm not going anywhere, sir."

He only gave himself a fraction of a second to study her, already knowing what he would find. There was no changing her mind in times like these. As unnerving as it was to have her so near someone who was hellbent on destroying all that he cared about, Roy assured himself by deciding that he would just have to break Envy down before he could do anything about it.

Without offering a response, he turned back to the monster, somewhat reassured with Hawkeye by his side. He doubted a gun would be as effective as his deadly flames, but he was glad to have her there all the same. For a moment, it almost made him forget about how much of an utter mess he had been the past few weeks. The sensation allowed him to return to better days, if only just for a minute.

And with it, came the confidence required to put Envy in his place. Roy lightly rubbed his index finger and thumb together, eyeing the tiny sparks that it created; his alchemy had not abandoned him just yet. With it as well as Hawkeye besides him, Roy was sure he would come out of this on top for the first time since he started to feel hope deplete in that underground cell.

Envy loomed above them growling viciously, bared teeth shining in the dark street as a hundred agonized faces writhed inside his body. Undaunted, Roy rose his hand into the air, and snapped.
Chapter 26

The familiar tingle of alchemic energy rippled down his hand as Roy snapped his fingers, activating the circle that was sewn into his glove, warming the back of his hand with its power. The flame he directed outward eagerly jumped through the air, combusting around Envy's monstrous body, filling the street with his agonizing screams, and blowing a powerful heatwave back on himself and Hawkeye, who remained ever by his side with her gun drawn and ready.

The flames danced across Envy's rough skin, eventually dying but leaving badly charred burns and exposed muscle in their wake. The pain was clearly unparalleled, as he was only still standing thanks to having a grand total of eight limbs. His screams morphed into heavy gasps, laced with quaking insults and death threats. But in light of everything that Envy had done- despite what Roy knew he was capable of- he was unafraid.

"How long will it take you to stay dead?" Roy asked coldly as he waited and watched the monster writhe.

A low, manic growl sounded from deep within Envy's throat as he slowly rose to his full height, his many limbs shaking as red sparks flickered across his countless wounds as his skin eagerly regenerated itself.

"Damn you!" he howled as he lunged forward for Roy, earth quaking under his enormous weight as each step left cracks in the ground. Before he could get far however, another snap pierced the air and Envy was consumed the flames once again, his words bleeding into an incomprehensible shriek. Roy took a step back with Hawkeye following suit, only to get a better view of his handiwork.

He didn't want to admit that he was enjoying his first real taste of sweet, deserved revenge, but there was no denying the thrilling jolt that flared excitement into his chest at the sight of Envy's pain. Part of him- a part far too small and timid to notice- didn't approve of the pure, elated glee that it gave him, but he mostly didn't care to think about it.

No one would say that he wasn't doing the world a favor.

"What's wrong, Envy?" he asked callously once the screaming simmered, speaking in a tone that he had been targeted with far too many times. "Weren't you just calling yourself powerful and competent? What happened to that?"

Envy had fallen to his elbows to keep himself upright, shoulders heaving with every heavy breath as the fires were put out and the burnt skin repaired, but doing little to ease his suffering. He looked down on Roy with an unspoken fury in his mismatching eyes. "Don't- don't think so highly of yourself just because you can now make some sparks," he hissed as he again slowly corrected his stance. His cruel gaze jumped from Roy to Hawkeye just as some of the trapped pain was wiped away and replaced with something more calculated. "Well... if I can't get to you, then I'll just have to go around."

Perplexed by his words, Roy could only manage to jump out of the way as Envy reached an arm forward, which grew off of itself and extended much further than any natural range. Hawkeye too moved out of the way but in the other direction. She, however, retaliated the strike with far more ferocity than what Roy had expected. Before she had so much as righted herself from the dodge, she had taken a flawless aim and unloaded three bullets into Envy's face, disrupting his attack and forcing him to withdraw. His elongated arm return to its normal length as he reeled back, face
dripping with blood from the bullets that had lodged themselves in his eyes.

Roy took a moment longer to reclaim his balance than Hawkeye, who still had her gun aimed for the monster, eyes shining with a fierce intensity. Meanwhile, Roy had been almost relaxed besides the excited thrill that having Envy at his mercy created; he didn't quite understand why she struck back with such vehemence when he had everything so under control.

That was, until he turned to see what Envy was truly aiming for.

On the other side of the street, leaning precariously against the side of a building, was Edward.

Roy's heart leaped into his throat at the sight of the kid, dressed in hospital clothes and expression hardened by how taxing the simple trip here must have been. For a moment, all thoughts of Envy had disappeared, seemingly freezing time as he stared at the blond, who at least had the decency to wither ever so slightly. But unfortunately, that damn pride that could one day get him killed was still relentlessly present in his golden eyes.

"You idiot!" Roy barked, causing Ed to jump. "What are you doing here!? Didn't I tell you to stay put!?!"

Edward opened his mouth to make some half-assed excuse, but was largely distracted by the giant green monster that stood a little further back, slowly recovering from being shot in the eyes. It took him a moment to recollect himself and plaster on some of his typical brashness, as forced as it was. "Did you really expect me to stay back and twiddle my thumbs as you fought for your life?" he growled, trying and failing to mask how reliant he was on the wall besides him.

"Did you think you would actually be able to help in the condition you're in?" he fired back, waving his less injured arm in the kid's direction for emphasis.

The harsh truth that rung in his sarcastic question caused a flinch to rip through Ed's defiant exterior, if only for a moment. "You know, this really isn't the best time to remember what a bastard you are!"

Roy heard himself groan exasperatedly. "Ed, I don't have time to-

"Sir!"

The urgency in Hawkeye's voice put a halt to the argument as Roy spun around to see a large open hand rushing towards him, again stretched by Envy's gross ability to distort his own flesh. His body moved on its own, tapping into the years of training that had perfected his reflexes- a skill that had been dulled over the past few weeks, but apparently not forgotten. Standing his ground, Roy snapped his fingers, creating an angry torrent of flames to tear into the limb, violently melting the skin and diminishing a good portion of it to ash as Envy's reach got only inches away.

Envy screamed again, his voice unable to quite capture the mix of rage and agony. Even as the part of Roy's mind that was starved for revenge relished in it, it was also grating on his ears, and he wondered if he could simply burn out Envy's vocal cords. But sadly- he realized the moment the idea occurred- they too would just regenerate within seconds.

But Roy didn't care how long it would take. He would not rest until Envy had experienced the wrath of hell itself, even if he was truly incapable of dying.

"Stay back, Ed," he ordered without turning back to face the kid, unwilling to let his guard drop yet again. "I'll finish this myself."
As he watched Envy's hand grow back from the bone, he could practically feel Edward's unyielding glare hit the back of his head and hear the cogs turning, coming up with all of the ways he could ignore the simple command. He wanted to feel annoyed at the kid, but in spite of all that was happening in the moment, he couldn't help but be glad that at least that was reminiscent of the time before Envy had first appeared.

Envy's gaze fell back on Roy as he heard his condemning words, and something dark flashed across his inhumane face. Before anyone could move, his eyes narrowed into a glower and he turned around, his long tail colliding into the side of a empty restaurant, destroying the wall and throwing stray bricks and dust into the air. Roy shielded himself from any stray debris with his arms, and looked up a moment later to see Envy shifting back into his more humanoid form and fleeing into the labyrinth of tall city structures.

Roy cursed roughly under his breath and took a step to pursue, but thoughts of Edward lingering behind him made him halt.

"You need to go back to the hospital, Ed," he stated as he turned to glance back at the unsteady blond, trying to ignore now his nerves itched to follow Envy before he could escape yet again.

He would have immediate turned back to chase his target, had he not heard Edward reply with a resounding "no" in a tone quiet enough for him to think that the kid had hoped he wouldn't hear.

"What?" he snapped back, silently daring Edward to say it again.

"Envy had already managed to drag you back to that hellhole twice now! You can't honestly expect me to sit back as he tries to do it again! And- and I haven't forgotten about what you said earlier; something about a coffin..."

Roy felt himself flinch violently as the recent memories plowed back into him as he stubbornly refused to comment.

"I can at least do something if he tries anything."

"You can't do anything in this state, Ed. I don't want you getting in my way," he insisted, sparing a moment to glance down the street where Envy fled, growing increasingly worried as the seconds ticked by.

"Listen to him, Edward," Hawkeye- thank god she was there to back him up- added sternly, looking equally concerned about Envy. "It's dangerous here, and you shouldn't strain yourself."

Ed muttered something about what a nurse had said earlier, but did not look dissuaded in the slightest.

Roy refrained from cursing under his breath, painfully aware that he did not have time for this. He found his feet moving towards where Envy disappeared as the voices in his head demanded that he track the shape shifter down before it was too late. He groaned warily, torn between his priorities.

"Don't you dare follow," he barked as he pointed an assertive finger at the blond, following by casting Hawkeye a tacit glance.

He knew he was putting her into a difficult situation by moving on ahead. She would want to follow, but also did not want leave Edward by himself. As much as he didn't want to completely disregard that, the sooner he found Envy, the sooner neither of them would have to worry about it any longer.

Without another word, Roy turned and ran after Envy, carefully stepping over shattered bricks as
he turned the corner and charged down the small path as hastily as his body would allow. The end opened to a plaza surrounded by buildings and multiple paths, all splitting off in different directions. With the moonlight and a circle of street lights to keep the area somewhat lit. Roy’s sprint slowed as he scanned the many options with a deep frown in place, eyes narrowed in search of movement.

A place like this would give Envy the upper hand- or at least it would lead him to believe that.

Roy boldly stepped out into the middle of the plaza, sensing a very similar air to the night that all of this started, when he was first goaded out under the implication of capturing Scar.

"Come out and face me, you coward!" he growled, constantly changing his view to keep the monster from sneaking up on him. "Let's finish this once and for all! Come on, I'm right where you want me!"

He could feel eyes on him, following his every movement, like a predator watching from the shadows. Roy was more than happy to allow Envy to feel like he could turn the tables for a moment, if it meant drawing attention away from Hawkeye and Ed.

If he had to play the bait yet again, then so be it.

He heard laughter echo through the plaza, bouncing across the surrounding buildings as if he was in a canyon, but couldn't pinpoint where it was coming from. "You find yourself with a little bit of power, and suddenly think you've won. Don't think that I'll make it that easy for you, Mustang!"

As Roy turned in each direction, peering into the many dark pathways that surrounded him, he paused as he saw movement, which soon proved to be Hawkeye rushing to catch up. He almost wanted to sigh in relief as she stopped at the edge of the plaza with her handgun held tightly in her palm. He nearly wanted to ask what she did with Ed, but was half afraid to hear the answer, and also knew that it wasn't exactly the time for that.

But seconds later, he saw more movement coming from that particular alley. Low and behold, a certain short blond that should have been miles away from here came rushing in, stopping just before falling into step with the lieutenant. He heard her say something, quiet and sharp, expressing her disapproval of him following, which at least suggested that she didn't invite him to come along. Roy didn't really expect her to take the time to escort him back to the hospital, and Ed was too stubborn to ever follow orders, so really, this was the only outcome that could have realistically happened. Even if he didn't like it. Maybe he would have been safer with the two of them with him, even if it meant all three went into the lion's den together.

But before the kid could try to defend himself, something that looked like a serpent slipped out of the darkness from behind and sneaked up on him, curling around his ankle before he could step away, and wrapping around his arms before he could fight back. Edward hollered in alarm at the green tentacle as Riza abruptly turned to face him aiming her gun for the appendage, but hesitated to shoot as it pulled Ed between her and its source.

"Wha- what the hell?!" Edward bellowed as he was lifted off the ground, entangled in it's grasp."Ah- watch out!" Being used as a blunt weapon, he was flung towards Hawkeye, knocking her back and into the nearest building, and she fell to her knees after her head made contact with the brick wall.

Edward cursed and squirmed under the thing's grasp, but it soon snaked up to his neck, wrapping around tightly while Roy took aim, but was also hesitant to fire with Ed right there. Just as expected, Envy walked out of the shadows, showing that his arm had morphed into the long green
snake that threatened to crush Ed's windpipe.

"Mustang," Edward choked, fighting against the binds, but to no avail. His efforts did very little, besides igniting a fierce protectiveness that burned savagely and silently inside Roy's chest.

There was no comprehending the rage that overtook his vision as Envy tightened his grip until Ed gasped and coughed for air, using him as a hostage and grinning smugly, foolishly believing himself to be safe.

Hawkeye began to correct herself, grimacing through the pain, but made no attempt to attack Envy. She glanced at Roy, but he failed to notice, far too distracted by staring daggers at Envy as if looks alone had the power to break every bone in his body.

"Since you're so insistent on getting in my way-" Envy sneered as he walked closer, still holding Ed up like some kind of sacrifice. "-then maybe I'll just have to take it out on the pipsqueak here. He's an important sacrifice, but a few broken bones might do him some good, and teach you not to-" Envy's threat was cut off as a snap pierced through the air and deadly flame zipped through the air and exploded around his body. The arm that had constricted around Ed weakened, then faded into ash, dropping the kid to the ground as he gasped for oxygen. Hawkeye hurried to his side with a hand on his back as she kept her sharp eyes targeted on Envy in case he tried to aim for the young alchemist again.

Roy, however, did not plan on giving him the opportunity.

The flames had mostly been put out, leaving Envy panting on his hands and knees, searching for the oxygen that had already been burnt in his lungs. His regeneration powers have weakened, healing the large burns but leaving patters that were reminiscent of alchemic marks.

"Don't you dare lay a hand on my subordinate," Roy demanded, tone cold and calculating, laced with a heavy threat burning with the uncontrollable hatred and loathing that simply looking at Envy had exposed. And Envy, despite all of his stupidity, finally managed to understand how dire his situation was and appear rightfully frightened. Seeing as he held the cards once again, Roy turned marginally to look at Ed, who appeared to be unscathed, besides being a little shaken. "Don't be so reckless."

Edward mutely stared back at him, calming his breathing after a moment. But as he opened his mouth to respond, his eyes darted past the flame alchemist, widened, and his arms moved before Roy could process what the kid was looking at. He began to spin around just as Ed clapped and dropped his palms to the ground. A bright alchemic flash blinded Roy for a split second as it passed him, and he turned to see Envy reaching forward with another demented limb, elongated claws aimed for his head. But he was frozen in place, expression claimed by pain as an alchemic bolt had extended out of the ground, and pierced through his hand before it could make contact with Roy.

Everything, from how close the strike had come to reaching him, to the fact that Envy had again failed, processed slowly as no one moved or spoke for a very long moment, interrupted only by Envy's pained hissed as he pulled his hand back, sliding the gouged limb away from the stone spear.

At the very least, Envy seemed to understand where he stood, judging by the glints of uncertainty in his dark, soulless eyes. For a moment, Roy could only look down on him, silently daring him to excuse his actions or make more threats or do anything besides beg for mercy.

Roy had not realized just how stubborn the monster was. Something again flickered across Envy's
expression for a beat, replacing his obvious fear with forced anger, as if he was reading Roy's silence to mean that he wasn't willing to utterly decimate him.

He growled behind clenched teeth, muscles tensing to strike once more, as it was all he could hope to do. "You damn human! Don't you know who-" His voice again morphed into uncontrollable screams once Roy decided that he was done listening to Envy waste his breath.

He snapped again and again and *again*, until his fingers felt numb and his energy was steadily sapped by each transmutation. Smoke and dust bellowed around each burst of flames and each snap recoiled with a wave of heat that blew back at his bangs fluttered through his clothes.

The stone that Ed had risen from the ground was destroyed in the destruction, and the two blonds shielded themselves from the stray embers. Again and again, flames spiraled in one spot, scorching the ground as Envy's ragged voice cried out, incomprehensible and inhumane, like the dying animal that he was. Roy couldn't keep his mind from traveling back in time to all of the moments that Envy had taunted him, threatened him, tormented him in the dark until he had stripped away all hope of escape and convinced him that he was losing his mind. And then there was the final straw: waking up in a coffin, unable to move more than a few inches at most in any direction, being yanked down to the lowest depths he had ever experienced all over again in mere minutes.

Roy put everything he had into each strike, fires burning brightest with each reaction, giving Envy no time to regenerate what had been burned away. He continued until his fingers were too tired to continue, until his mind was consumed by an angry static, and until the energy required to go on simply was not there.

Envy's screams stopped abruptly with his back arched forward, barely able to keep himself up with his elbows. His skin was charred, hair was a fried mess, eyes empty and expression pulled taut with unimaginable suffering. He did not move when the flames finally died, and at last, an empty silence had taken hold of the clearing, tainted only by Roy's heavy, tired breaths.

Then just as his arm did earlier, Envy's body began to break away into ash, dissipating into the air. His skin weakened and fell around his bones, until they too crumbled to the ground in a dusty heap. But before Roy could revel in it or digest what had happened, movement shifted from within the ash, and a small green creature crawled out, faintly resembling the beast that Envy had transformed into earlier.

Understanding came easily to Roy as he took a few steps forward, glaring down at the insect, who was too distraught and distracted to make an attempt to flee. He pressed the sole of his boot down on it, grimly satisfied by how it squired and screeched in a vain attempt to free itself from the pressure, yet part of him was still furious that Envy was still *alive* after all that.

"All this time, you've been calling *me* pathetic and weak," he mused coldly, idly testing how hard he could easily press down, "and yet this is your true self. It's almost ironic, isn't it?"

"W-wait, stop!" Envy's small, shrill voice pleaded as he squirmed.

"After everything you've done- after the *hell* you've put me through, you think begging will save you now!?!" Roy growled mercilessly, wanting so badly to crush him into the dirt, and being held back by very little.

"I- I don't want to die," he cried, which was hardly a response. But there was nothing Envy could say to change his mind, Roy supposed. But god, was it pathetic. He almost wanted to laugh, but rage and the thirst for revenge still burned too brightly.
"And I didn't want to wake up in a coffin; so that's just too damn bad!" he hissed as he added to the pressure, wondering if it would be better to simply smother him, or start one last fire. But it was an easy decision; he knew which was more painful, after all.

"No, please!" Envy begged, tears dripping from his large eyes. It was almost surprising that such a worthless piece of scum could cling so tightly to life. Well, it had its chance.

"Sir." Hawkeye's voice, calm and stern, ripped through the storm that raged in his head. Roy straightened up and turned back to her, not bothering to wipe the frigid hatred from his expression as he wondered what could possibly be worth interrupting him now in the moment of truth. Behind her, Edward was leaning back against the brick wall of the nearest building, clearly fighting to stay upright with a hand gently massaging his neck where Envy nearly strangled him. "That's enough. Let me take care of the rest."

Roy started as if she had physically slapped him, halting his ability to fully process her words. "... What?"

"I don't like what this is doing to you, sir. This is not the right path to recovery."

"What... what are you talking about, Hawkeye?" he asked slowly, eyeing over the conviction in her eyes with a narrowed glower. "This thing deserves it. Why would you try to stop me?"

"I have no intention of letting it live. But I cannot let your actions be driven by cold-blooded hatred any longer. I won't let you kill it."

"Come on, Mustang," Edward added from behind. He placed a hand on the wall as if he wanted to push himself off of it and stand without the extra support, but thought better of it after a moment. "You've already won. Envy won't be able to hurt anyone again. That's all you've needed to do."

For several long, motionless seconds, Roy could only stare back at the two of them and wonder why he felt cornered, and why they were trying to stop him from doing what had to be done.

He reached down and removed his foot just to pick Envy up in his gloved hand, and stared at it for a prolonged second. Even then, Envy squirmed under his heavy glare, much to his muted satisfaction. His other hand twitched by his side, itching to burn the petty little thing out of its misery.

"Sir," Hawkeye stressed, taking a step closer, tensing slightly with her gun still in her hand, aimed for the ground. "There are other ways to take care of it."

Other ways... Roy looked down at Envy, completely tuning out the annoying pleas and cries as he caught onto a train of thought and followed it.

"You're right, Hawkeye," he breathed as the idea came to light. "A simple death would be far too easy, anyway."

She paused, clearly surprised by how easily he agreed. Her shoulders slackened somewhat, but the vigilance remained ever present. "What... are you thinking?" she asked slowly.

Roy pondered the question for a moment as he looked at Envy wiggle in his hand. He would need to watch out for all of those teeth... Roy adjusted his grip in case Envy though to fight back, similarly to how one would hold a snake just below the jaw- which was difficult in this case, since its entire body was a mouth. "We'll need to find someplace to keep it in the time being. Maybe we can find a jar or something around here," he mused quietly, having simmered significantly after Hawkeye forced him to stop and think. And she was right to do so. After all, he wanted to draw out
Envy's suffering a bit longer than a few measly minutes. That probably was not what Hawkeye had in mind, but after he had been tortured for weeks on end, Roy thought it was perfectly fair.

But Hawkeye did have one point that he agreed with: he did not need to kill Envy himself.

"Mustang, are you sure... that you know what you're doing?"

As the kid spoke, Roy zeroed in on Ed, being struck with the reality that he was currently suffering the effects of a concussion, being choked by Envy, and by walking around when he should have been doing anything but.

"We don't have much time to spare," he said, ignoring the question altogether. "Come on, let's get you back to the hospital. We can deal with this thing later," he muttered as an afterthought as he cast one last withering glare down at Envy, who was still grossly begging to be spared.

Hawkeye still looked torn, and perhaps unconvinced that Roy didn't have some ulterior motive, but she remained silent, settling for quietly studying him instead. Meanwhile, Edward did a much worse job at concealing his worry, but appeared unsure what to say, probably thanks to how scrambled his mind must have been at the moment.

"But first things first," Roy continued with a wry smile before either of them could object. "Let's find a jar."
Chapter 27

"This isn't over! You haven't won!" Envy screeched, his voice muffled by a layer of glass. "There are others; I bet they're watching right now, getting ready to put an end to your miserable lives at any moment! Hey- are you listening to me?! Hey!"

They managed to find an old, mostly empty jar near the debris of the restaurant that had been gouged during the fight, which looked to have once held expired mayonnaise. They would need to deal with the complications that came with destroying the corner of a building at some point, but Roy was sure Hawkeye would somehow take care of that. Either way, the jar certainly wouldn't be missed, and made a very fitting home for Envy.

Hawkeye also managed to find an old rag to wrap around the glass to hide the ugly lizard as they made their way back to the hospital. It may raise some questions, but not nearly as many as having Envy on display. Thankfully, the risk was low regardless, due to how late it was- or rather, how early.

Roy let the lieutenant carry the little vermin for the time being, partially because he knew it would make her feel more at ease, and because he couldn't promise he would be able to hold himself back from frying it the moment Envy opened that distorted mouth.

Besides, the noisy thing would only serve as another distraction for the time being. As much as Roy still hungered to see it suffer, though not as fiercely as before, he had other priorities to concern himself with. He couldn't afford to let his attention be pulled by away by something that was simply less pressing that the survival and well-being of his best friend. And on a lesser important note, Maes' status would directly influence what Roy would eventually do to Envy.

But because life is never that simple, even that was not all he had to worry about.

After successfully concealing Envy, the small group had walked for only a few minutes, long enough to get across the street with the hospital in view, until Edward began to stagger. He had been unsteady all night, but with Roy's mind no longer wrapped purely on his own rage, he was finally able to key in on it.

Roy was by his side within the second that Ed began to tilt off to the side. He put a sturdy hand on his left arm, keeping him upright and halting the groups' movement. Hawkeye turned with the jar secure in his grasp, watching silently.

Ed wavered for a moment longer, body shifting as he struggled to understand which way was up. His face was streaked with disorientation, eyes distant and confused. His automail hand abruptly rose until it clumsily found Roy's arm and clutched around the fabric to better stabilize himself. He remained there for the next few seconds as no one said a word, besides some muted mumbling from inside Envy's glass prison.

"Sorry," Ed breathed absently once he seemed to right himself again, grip loosening but hesitant to completely detach from the older alchemist. Roy weakened his own grip but did not move his arm for the kid's sake, but he took it as a sign to keep going. Ed released his hand from Roy's sleeve and took a step forward as rashly as always, and almost immediately began to stumble as if his legs were fighting to hold up his own weight.

Roy sighed and kept from rolling his eyes simply due to the exhaustion that was returning with a vengeance. Before Edward could topple to the ground, Roy slid in besides him, keeping him up
from under his metal shoulder with an arm behind his back, allowing the kid to hold onto him in return. The sudden movement on Roy's part seemed to bemuse Ed more than his own failing balance, giving him little time to react the way he might have usually. Before he could process it, Roy began moving forward, pulling him with him. Edward stumbled but was given no choice but to walk alongside as the possibility of falling have been reduced to none.

And just like that, the group was moving again, steadily making their way over to the hospital as the earliest signs of sunlight began to drift from over the horizon, painting the bottom of the sky with a touch of pink.

The pre-dawn silence stretched on for a few beats more before it was interrupted by a subconscious groan from Edward. A sideways glance told Roy that he seemed a little more clear-minded now, but still made no attempt to walk on his own.

"Did I ever mention that you're an idiot?" Roy asked after a moment without any real blame or malice reaching his weary voice, throat still sore from his earlier yelling.

"Yeah," Edward mumbled after a beat, just long enough to consider and turn down a snappish retort. He then returned a hint of energy back into his voice, albeit forced. "But it's a good thing that I am, since I saved your ass."

Roy had a million possible responses to that, but he bit his tongue, deciding to let Ed take some credit. But even so…

"Regardless, it was dangerous to come here. You don't always have to be the one to save the day, you know."

"I wasn't trying to save the day, I was trying to save you."

"Ed," he sighed.

"I know, I know," the blond breathed, waving a hand dismissively. "But with that logic, you shouldn't have run off either. It's not like you had a great track record when it came to dealing with Envy..."

Roy scoffed under his breath, but didn't have quite a response to that one. It's not like the kid was wrong... "Whatever the case, you need to be more careful."

"That's rich, coming from-"

"I'm serious," he cut in, glancing at Ed in the corner of his eye, who, by some miracle, decided not to continue with that thought.

Edward exhaled slowly and turned his eyes back down to the road ahead. "... Yeah, I know... But at least in this case, I don't regret it."

Roy shook his head, but felt a warm smile form against his consent as he thoughtlessly patted the kid's shoulder. He was supposed to be mad at him, damn it. "Yeah, I figured you wouldn't."

Edward did not respond, but his smile was vocal enough to where no more words needed to be shared. Roy figured that was more than enough, and continued to focus on moving forward as they neared the hospital.

Edward sighed vocally once they reached the building and Roy noticed with no lack of bewilderment that he was leaning towards the broken window that lead into his old room.
"We're going through the front, Ed," he informed and guided the blond away.

"What? But it's right there!"

"Doesn't matter. They'll no doubt want to put you into a new room after chastising you for running away, and going through the lobby is the fastest way to ensure all of that happens."

"But- but that's just a waste of time."

"Come on," he huffed, bringing a swift end to the discussion and finding mild satisfaction from the overly annoyed groan that came in response.

"I wouldn't be so smug, if I were you," Envy chimed in as Hawkeye followed the two from behind. "It's only a matter of time before you get what's coming!"

It took only one glance at Hawkeye to know that she was holding herself back from shaking the jar for the time being. She had far more self control than Roy would have, but she at least was not careful to keep the thing steady as she walked.

Ignoring his mumbled words, they proceeded to the main entrance in a rather slow pace for both alchemist's sakes, though neither were too keen to admit it.

Roy squinted as they stepped into the lobby, far too distracted and exhausted to consider the possibility that he was still technically in hiding. Besides, the area was relatively clear of people, though there may have been one or two extras walking by than before, seeing as dawn was quickly approaching. He didn't quite care to notice them, and was much more distracted with thoughts of the state of his friend.

However, before he could continue on, Edward became frigid besides him and froze to the spot. A question glance in the kid's direction allowed his eye to catch what Ed was looking at.

Over by the hospital's receptionist was the familiarly hulking armor of Alphonse Elric. Despite having his back turned to them, it was clear to see that he exasperated.

"I know it's not visiting hours, but he's my brother! I need to know that he's okay," Al exclaimed to the frazzled receptionist, who probably looked so worried because the patient in question had disappeared with a shattered window in his wake.

"I'm sorry sir, but we'll let you know when you can see him."

"But."

"Al."

The suit of armor spun around with more speed than his weight should have allowed, seemingly stuck in place the moment his red soulfire eyes landed on the older Elric.

"Brother!" he then yelled abruptly, causing the blond to jump slightly as Roy supported him. "What have you been *doing*? Getting admitted into hospitals in the middle of the night and- and what are you even doing out here? Did you break out again? Is that why they wouldn't let me see you? Oh, and of course you dragged Colonel Mustang into it too. I swear, Ed-" Edward was unfazed by Al's lecture, most likely due to all of the activity within the past few hours. He only looked up when his brother paused mid-rant to stare at Roy, suddenly muted.

"C-C-Colonel Mustang! I- I can't believe it, it's been so long," he stuttered, too shocked to fully
process it. "Brother has been keeping me updated, but- wow it's so good to see you again. You... you look to be doing well," he added with an obvious hint of relief in his tone as he noticed this. But in his defense, Roy doubted the brothers had been able to talk much recently, given all that's happened. It was unlikely that Edward had been able to give him a very positive update last time it came up either. But even so, it looked as if the kid wanted nothing more than to pull him into a bone-shattering hug, and maybe would have, if Roy wasn't so clearly injured.

"Thank you, Alphonse. It's good to see you too," Roy replied, smiling through his exhaustion. But as Alphonse continued to talk, switching between directing his attention between him, Ed, and Hawkeye, it occurred to Roy that meeting anyone for the first time since his capture had never been as easy as it was with Al. That probably all had to do with his recent battle with Envy, and the fact that the deceptive little bug was exactly where he wanted him: trapped and out of sight.

"Wait a second," Alphonse broke off suddenly, interrupting himself. "What were all of you doing? Are any of you hurt? Brother, you look like you're about to pass out! It looks like both of you should be lying down," he stated firmly as Roy pretended not to notice Al's eyes pausing on the healing burns that marred his skin or the bruises and cuts that covered everywhere else.

"You're completely right, Alphonse," Hawkeye said pointedly, giving both alchemists a very clear look. "They both need some rest."

"Yeah, Ed," Roy added, casually deflecting more attention onto the blond, who returned his attempts with a halfhearted glare.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, I get it," the kid groaned. "As long as no one else decides to charge into any more stupid fights... I was getting tired anyway."

"Would you mind helping Edward get to his new room, Alphonse?" Hawkeye asked politely as Roy caught the hint and released him, careful to keep him from collapsing the moment his legs took on his full weight.

"Of course! Come on, Brother."

Edward mumbled something incomprehensible under his breath as he staggered over to the suit of armor, and leaned against him as Al directed his attention over to the receptionist to inquire about the new room number.

But before they were guided away, the very tired Edward glanced back to Roy. "Hey Mustang," he started quietly. "Thanks for uh... you know, not dying, and uh... yeah."

Roy could not keep himself from scoffing at the attempt. "You're welcome."

Somehow satisfied with that exchange, Ed just nodded absently before allowing himself to be escorted down the corridor, disappearing before Roy thought to add you too. Instead, he just sighed and figured he'd come up with some idiotically clever way to say the same thing later.

"Well, sir, you need to get some rest as well. We still can't risk getting you admitted here, so for the time being, we should-"

"Wait," Roy heard himself say, and took a moment longer to process why into something that sounded intelligent enough to explain. "I need to see Maes."

Hawkeye's lips twitched in a subconscious impulsion to frown. "It's unlikely that he will be in any state to take visitors for a while longer."
"I don't care," he insisted, fighting back the urge to yawn. "I'm not leaving until I see that he's going to be alright with my own eyes."

Maes' hospital room was dimly lit with minimal light sneaking through the half-open blinds and washing out over the bed. Roy paused in the doorway as he looked over his friend, how pale he was, how tired he seemed even as he slept, how the dull white walls sucked the color out of the world around them.

He had gotten out of surgery not very long ago, from what the nurse told Hawkeye. He had originally lost a lot of blood, but he had since stabilized thanks to modern science. Hawkeye graciously left out the medical hows and whys when relaying this information. He didn't care, as long as the man survived.

He slowly willed himself to enter the room, absentmindedly allowing the door to hang ajar behind him as he pulled over a chair alongside the bed, eyes locked on his friend's motionless form. Roy heard hinges creak behind him and glanced back only because he sensed the lieutenant's steady gaze fall on him. With a hand pulling the door closed and the other wrapped around the obscured jar, she was watching him with eyes that seemed to say a million things. But what mattered most was that she was leaving him alone with Maes until he woke up. She would go check up on Edward, he knew without need to ask, and was incredibly grateful for it.

The door closed, leaving Roy and Maes in the numbingly quiet room as dawn steadily crept in through the window. The alchemist shifted his weight on the chair until he was as comfortable as he could get, leaning back with his arms folded, surely looking far too relaxed for how he truly felt.

For several long minutes, he could only stare as if he could will the man back into a state of consciousness with his pleading gaze alone. One downside of being willing to sit and wait for him, was that he likely had a long time with only his thoughts for company. And given Roy's history, he was not above admitting that that might not have been a good thing.

It could have been worse, he forced himself to reason. While Roy liked to think that he had recovered in many ways since his imprisonment, some things still unnerved him to no end. But at least the sun was slowly making its way up, sparing him of being in an enclosed space in the dark, and at least the steady hum of machines and the sounds of rolling carts and light foot traffic kept him from thinking about a silence that was so unbearable, he once thought his head would burst.

But as he went through the mental list, Roy couldn't help but have some doubts. After all, what kind of soldier couldn't stand silence and was afraid of the dark? All the more reason why he questioned if he would ever get his job back. He knew Hawkeye and Maes had been discussing the matter, but he wasn't sure if they actually came to a decision yet.

Of course, out of all the things that currently chewed at his mind, that was not one of them. None of it would matter if Maes didn't wake up.

Relax, he sharply chastised himself the moment the thought manifested. He's stable- the nurses said so. He's going to wake up!

Only scarcely aware that his gaze has fallen to stare into space, Roy looked back up at Maes, somberly studying his empty expression and the hospital clothes that simply did not belong on him. They implied brokenness and subtly asked for pity for whoever wore them. But Maes was one of the strongest people he knew; he didn't deserve to wear those flimsy robes. He didn't deserve to be here.
But he was, because Envy shot him. And Envy shot him, because Roy was too weak and disabled by his stupid flashbacks to fight back. But not anymore, he reminded himself coldly. He made up for it by roasting Envy with everything he had, but despite that, Maes was still sitting prone in a hospital.

Roy had lost track of how long he had been sitting there. As time passed, he fell into the recesses of his brain, mind spinning through thoughts that were forgotten moments later. He had almost drifted into sleep- or maybe he did, and failed to realize it even when he jolted back into reality at the sound of someone clearing their throat.

Maes was suddenly looking back at him, head tilted oh so slightly in his direction, olive eyes narrowed and tired. A hint of a smile pulled at his lips.

"Maes!" Roy gasped as he floundered to sit up straight, leaning forward in the chair slightly as if he had to make sure he wasn't hallucinating.

"Hey," he replied, his voice groggy and rough, like all he did was take an extra long nap. Roy almost wanted to yell at him for how casual it was, how at-ease he seemed as he smiled weakly up at him.

"You're awake," he heard himself whisper, confirming it to himself rather than telling Maes what was plainly obvious. He quickly glanced out the window again as daylight flooded in with ease, idly wondering how much time had passed yet again.

"And you're- "Maes paused, tilting his head away for a moment in thought. ":you."

Roy could only stare in a mute confusion for a moment longer, mind tumbling over the simple statement. He almost physically reeled back when he realized that the last time Maes had seen him, it was actually Envy, just before he was shot. Roy blanched as the statement sunk in, but it at least insinuated that Maes could tell the difference.

"Yeah," he drawled after a moment, realizing that a response would probably be appreciated.

Maes smile faded as the weariness took over, but there was still a content quality in his eyes, battling with the pain for dominance. "Roy," he breathed after a quiet moment. "What happened?"

"You- you don't remember? Envy tricked us again and-"

"No, not that," he interrupted with a small wave of the hand, without bothering to bring it out from below the covers. "What happened to you?"

Roy paused with his mouth gaping open, mind suddenly buzzing with a numb static as dark memories fought to resurface. Maes said nothing to rush him, only watched with a tired curiosity and a hint of urgency and concern that would have been stronger, had he not just woken from surgery. Roy wanted to shrug off the question, deflect it in some way, do anything to just not think about it, but before he could form the words, a realization struck him to the core as he held eye contact with his friend.

Maes chose to put himself at risk. He chose to stay at the apartment even as he suspected that Envy was there. He did this so Hawkeye could gather the team and attack him all at once. And they wanted to do that, because they wanted to save Roy.

This was all on his shoulders. As much as the memories clawed at his mind and sanity, Maes deserved to know what his sacrifice was worth. He needed to know what had happened.
Roy clamped his mouth shut with a sigh, dropping his gaze to look at his own hands, still mangled and bruised under the white, dirtied ignition fabric.

"I had another flashback," he started reluctantly. "I wasn't able to fight back when Envy came in. He- he did something to Ed, so I chased him, but it was a trap." Roy shook his head at his own foolishness. How obvious it all seemed in hindsight. His stomach churned violently as his mind went to what happened next, but he forced himself to disconnect from it, and let his mouth form the words with as little thought as possible. "And then I… I woke up in a coffin."

He could practically feel the air harden and drop a few degrees around Maes. His eyes widened in shock, but he made no move to interrupt.

"It was pitch black and I could hardly move. I thought I would die in there… But I got out. I escaped, and it was all thanks to Ed," he said, allowing a grim smile to tug at the corners of his mouth. "He tried to help me use alchemy again; it didn't work then, but it did when it really mattered. But the coffin was in a room like the one I was originally trapped in." He took a deep breath to clear his mind of the fears that wanted to bubble back as if he was standing back in that room. "I escaped there too and made it out to the cemetery."

Maes just shook his head, expression bewildered with amazement.

"And then I just went to Hawkeye's apartment," he finished with a small shrug, painfully aware of how simple he made it sound. Just hearing the easy version, one might not realize how horrifying the experience was, or how he found himself there almost every time he closed his eyes. But somehow, he knew that Maes keyed in on that. He knew without a doubt that the lieutenant colonel knew he was missing some details, and he would not be surprised if he was asked again after some time passed.

"And Ed?" Maes asked after a sobering moment. The last thing Maes said after falling unconscious to blood loss was to tell Roy to go after the kid, after all.

"He's fine," Roy answered with a small smile as yet another wave of relief from this fact washed over him. "We got to the hospital just in time, and chased Envy out to the street. Hawkeye and I faced him, and- well, it's safe to say that I can use flame alchemy again."

Maes chuckled at that and dropped his head back onto the pillow, facing up at the ceiling with his eyes closed. "So it's over, then?"

"Not quite. We defeated Envy, but he's still alive… He's the size of a rat now, sitting in a jar that Hawkeye is safeguarding." At that, Maes cracked his eyes open to give the alchemist a very curious glance, but perhaps lacked the energy to question it for the time being.

"Then what are you going to do with him?"

Thoughts of Envy's fate darkened Roy's gaze as he glanced away at the floor again, with the desire for revenge still burning in his chest. "Hawkeye stopped me from killing him earlier… If I can't end his life, then I want him to suffer as I did."

"… What do you mean?" Maes asked quietly as he willed some of the weariness away to be replaced by focus.

Roy thought for a beat, then rose his head to return the man's gaze, eyes burning with a vengeful determination. "I want to bury him, Maes. I want to dig a hole in the middle of nowhere, and leave him there for as long as I was. I want him to experience firsthand the hell he put me through."
Maes did not respond right away, and left his expression unreadable, but serious and deep in thought. Roy expected him to fight him on this, just as he expected Hawkeye to.

"If you're going to try to change my mind, don't bother. I'm sure Hawkeye will do that for you once she finds out. But- but this isn't out of cold blood. Envy deserves it."

"Roy," Maes started, taking a moment to organize his thoughts. "I'm not sure you're in any position to claim to act for the sake of justice."

"Maes-"

"However-" he went on sharply before Roy could start, with something coldly meticulous in his eyes. "-maybe I am."

"... What?"

"You're not the only one he has hurt, Roy. It killed me to see what he had done to you. You have no idea how happy I was when you stated showing improvement," he smiled for a moment. "But it doesn't change the suffering that you and everyone you know has suffered. And he's not going to get away with it. If Hawkeye doesn't let you give that bastard what he deserves, then I don't see how she can stop me from doing it instead. And besides, I'm willing to bet that part of her wants this too."

Roy could only blink and stare dumbly at his friend for several beats, unsure how to respond to the surprisingly cooperative response. But it made sense- he wasn't sure why he didn't think about it. Maes was forced to put up with Roy's delusions for weeks. If anyone understood the effects of the torture he had endured, it was Maes.

If their roles were reversed, if Roy had to watch his best friend suffer to simply live, he would desperately want the guilty party to pay for it too. And besides, Envy shot him for god's sake! Maes was never vindictive- not even close. Roy wasn't either, generally, but everyone had a limit.

Stunned by both the realization that he had somehow missed this detail and the reminder that Maes was amazing, Roy had no words for what felt like a very long moment. As if he was nothing more than an open book, his friend just grinned weakly at him from the hospital bed.

"Well," he said to break the silence, clearing his throat again. "I'm just glad you're alright." And for whatever reason, the hospital patient, the man who was shot hours ago, who woke up in a whitewashed bed, probably in pain, thought it would be a good idea to push himself into a sitting position.

Roy, as wounded as he too was, got up faster, urged him down with a hand on his shoulder before he could get very far. "What do you think you're doing?" he scolded, ignoring his own aches and pains in favor of limiting his friend's. But in spite of his attempts, Maes still forced himself up, at least to the point where he could easily wrap his arms around Roy's torso, who unknowingly made it easier for him by moving closer to the bed. "Wha- Maes, lay down!"

"Relax," he said, voice still rough and shadowed by the pain he was undoubtedly spurring.

"Maes!" he barked, too stunned to be angry, but still unwilling to return the hug simply because he did not approve of the movement.

His friend let out an exaggerated sigh into Roy's shirt, but did not loosen his grip. "You're incredible, Roy."
"I- what?" his mind blanked, replacing the worry with confusion, which was likely the devious man's plan to stop him from fighting the hug.

"You managed to save both myself and Ed, and you fought off Envy all in one night. Given what you've already been through so far- it's amazing. Roy, you've been dealt some shitty cards these past few weeks, and yet you still beat the odds. I can't believe everything has turned out as well as it did; and it's all because of you."

"... I- I didn't- "

Maes sighed lightheartedly. "Oh, just shut up, Roy. Just return the damn hug."

Roy couldn't catch himself before an amused scoff broke past his lips, and he finally relented to wrapping his arms around Maes' shoulders, only then noticing how he was shaking slightly from the strain of moving. But even knowing that much, Roy didn't have the heart to stop him just yet. As he tightened his grip around his friend, the man who had been fighting along side him since his rescue, Roy realized that a weight that had been holding him down was no longer there.

Maes was alive, Ed was safe, and Envy- that piece of shit- was unable to hurt anyone again. And whatever weight remained, he shared with all of those who supported him.

"Thanks," he heard himself mutter. In response, Maes only chuckled warmly, yet another reminder that everything would be okay.

Riza quietly removed her hand from the door handle and took a step back. She had been torn between staying out of it and barging into Maes' hospital room when Roy was explaining his plans for Envy's fate, but considering how the conversation went, she was glad that she remained on the other side of the door. All things considered, this outcome was for the best.

She re-positioned her grip around the jar in her arms and turned down the corridor.

"Oh well isn't that sweet," Envy's venomous voice chimed in from inside, telling her little of how much he had heard. "Don't think everything is magically alright just because you think you've won. He'll never be the same. He- agh!"

A quick shake of the jar quickly shut him up as he bounced off of the glass, and Riza couldn't help the satisfied smile from slipping onto her expression.
A cool breeze swept through the area, complementing the warmth from the sunshine that was occasionally blocked by gently passing clouds. Birds chirped carelessly in the distance, oblivious to the world below them. The cemetery was mostly empty and perfectly peaceful, besides the low hum of traffic beyond the black iron gates that encircled the neatly mowed lawn.

Roy began his trek up the hill that was lined with gravestones as grass brushed against every step, tossed carelessly through the wind along with his dark bangs.

He hadn't gone to the grave site since breaking out of Envy's trap almost a month ago. For the longest time, he didn't want to do so much as remember its existence. He wanted to forget about what had happened there in hopes of moving on. And it worked in a way, but he eventually had to give in and acknowledge it once again, in spite of how his spine tingled and skin chilled at the very thought. It got better in time; not healed completely, but better. Given how lost and broken he once felt, that was more than enough.

The dark gray pointed roof of a familiar mausoleum caught Roy's eye as he continued his march, slowing his movements but not interrupting them. That was one place he certainly had no desire to return to. Maes, however, did check it out after things had calmed down. From what he heard, the investigations officer kept an eye on it for a while, looking out for any signs of movement and finding surprisingly little. Maes eventually clamped a very sturdy lock on the metal door and returned from time to time to see that it had not once been tampered with. From what they could tell, Envy was the only one to ever use the old tomb as an entrance to that labyrinth of underground tunnels. They considered bringing the suspicious crypt into light or investigate it personally, but as things were, it was decided that they were better off not bringing more attention to themselves; at least for the time being.

Roy and the rest of the team had gathered together multiple times since then, whether he was physically up for it or not, to further discuss what could be taken from what they already knew. Unfortunately, they did not uncover much besides speculations. He clearly remembered there being others- one more, at least- and Edward attested to that as well. But if the evidence was to be trusted, then it appeared as if Envy liked to run off and do his own thing, killing time with pet projects as their main goal progressed elsewhere.

Maybe that was why no one ever came after them to avenge Envy's defeat. Maybe Envy just wasn't worth the effort as the others focused on whatever their main objective was; something about the Promised Day. Envy was clearly involved, seeing as Roy was apparently a potential sacrifice, but the key word 'potential' made him wonder how much he was worth to them. It had to be just as Envy had said: he was proving to be much more trouble than he was worth.

After the hell Roy had been through to prove that, he wasn't about to complain. The less attention he drew the better. But even so, he rarely went a day without wondering if it was truly over, or if there was more just around the corner.

But at least for now, Roy allowed himself to just enjoy the sensation of not needing to look over his shoulder every five seconds. Even if it was false peace, it was better than nothing. Besides, both he and Maes needed the rest, as well as Edward.
But that wasn't to say it was possible to not think about the events that occurred on a daily basis, especially when so many mysteries remained.

Maes was true on his word and dealt with Envy. Roy still recalled the relief he felt when he discovered that his friend shared a similar opinion, but didn't quite realize at the time that he intended to keep the bugs' fate a secret from him. Roy tried to guess, tried to get as much information out as possible, but more times than not, Maes would just smile knowingly and say he'd tell him eventually. Said it was for his own good that Roy wasn't tied to it. Hawkeye wholeheartedly agreed, but Roy suspected that she had a part to play in the surreptitious decision in the first place.

With a mildly unsatisfied sigh, Roy scanned the rows of gravestones as he passed by, counting them down from the instructions he was given, until he spied his own name engraved into a stone slab. He stopped in front of it and looked down at the plainly sentimental blurb that was inscribed under his date of death, quietly scoffing at it's simplicity.

*Loved by many*

He couldn't help but doubt that many were moved to tears by the emotional epitaph, maybe excluding his small inner circle.

But nonetheless, his eyes were trapped on the gravestone, finding it nearly impossible to look away. Roy knelt down in front of it, eyeing the engraving as he wondered how many others stood over this grave with the firm belief that he was lying six feet beneath it.

Unlike a few of the surrounding graves, his was lacking any signs of flowers or anything of the like. They probably stopped coming in completely once his team learned that he wasn't quite as dead as the stone made them believe. The only thing that made his grave stand out among the others was a strange bump in the ground where some of the grass had been uprooted and pushed aside- it almost looked like the product of an alchemic reaction.

In fact, it was. It had to be.

The shallow dome was no wider than his hand and didn't look terribly sturdy either. Roy flexed his perpetually sore fingers for a moment as he considered it, then dug into the dirt, easily breaking through to whatever the alchemic shield was hiding.

As soon as he spotted something inside, he broke the dirt down completely, revealing that it had covered a patch of fading grass, and a note.

A folded piece of paper, dirtied and stained by the grass it sat on and the elements it had endured even while shielded looked up at him, addressed to *Uncle Roy* in what looked to be blue crayon. It didn't take him two seconds to know that it was written by Elicia's hand, but remained staring at the withered note out of pure shock. Finding this left on his grave, obviously for him, felt similar to discovering a lost relic- that just so happened to have his name on it.

He gingerly picked up the paper, half afraid that it would crumble in his grasp as he fumbled it to open, gently pulling apart the corners that stuck to one another.

Inside was half a page containing small doodles, such as a rain cloud and simple frowning faces, while the other half was covered in the young girl's handwriting, all in the same shade of blue.

*Dear Uncle Roy*

*Daddy said that you passed away and were not coming back because a bad man did a bad thing. I*
don't really get it, but I didn't want to ask because he looked sad, and I don't want to make him sadder. But Mommy said that if I want something, I should write it down and make a wish. I wish that you will come back so Mommy and Daddy won't be sad anymore. Please please please come back, Uncle Roy. I miss you and I know that all of your friends do too.

Love Elicia

Now that he was looking, he could easily differentiate the handwriting. The paragraph was all Elicia's, but under it was a row of signatures, all still in blue. For some, he recognized the handwriting before he could make out the names.

Maes and Gracia, Riza, Jean, Heymans, Vato, Kain, and Alphonse.

Surrounding the names were a random arrangement of hearts, some full, some cracked, some crying from cartoonish eyes. But the sight of it- the entire letter- it made Roy's own heart throb painfully in his chest. He had been focusing on recovering this past month and chose not to make any visits until his survival went public in a few days. But damn it, he should have gone to see Maes' family. His friend asked him to, more than once, but he never pressed when Roy shrugged it off and said he'd do it later.

And better yet, that little girl made the point to find the members of his team and ask them to sign her note, perhaps hoping that the more people who wished for it, the greater the chances that he would miraculously return.

It was almost funny in hindsight- grimly funny. Chances were, not one of them thought it possible, besides Elicia herself. And yet she had predicted it correctly.

He really needed to visit them.

Roy read through the note again and again, down to the last name.

And curiously enough, he noticed that Edward's name was missing. Even Alphonse signed it, with his large yet somehow elegant handwriting. The older Elric must have given her no time to find him during the funeral, seeing as that must have been the only time she could have gotten all of those signatures. The kid probably dashed right after the event to wallow in his usual brand of self-induced guilt.

Roy shook his head at this and folded the note carefully in his hands and held it for a moment longer, eyes gazing over the childish handwriting idly.

It was so innocently heartfelt and obviously hurt.

If only he had seen this sooner, he wouldn't have been so dense.

But to be fair, the past month had not been filled by him lounging on his couch day after day. Albeit only when Hawkeye and Hughes allowed it, Roy had been working on recovering his strength, brushing up on his alchemy, taking all the steps that were necessary before approaching the military. And for what it was worth, it worked out fairly well.

When Hughes arranged a meeting with Fuhrer King Bradley himself, he had boldly stated the truth; that Roy had been capture by a hostile individual while presumed to be dead. It was safe to say that they only said part of the truth, however. They left out that this person was a powerful monster or that he was working with a larger group for some grand scheme- they played ignorant, partially because they still were. They had no idea who could be trusted and the incredibly unbelievable events that occurred were much better kept secret.
When Roy was brought in to prove his survival, Bradley was elated. Strangely so, in fact. He was surprisingly pleased with how they presented themselves and even more happy when they insisted that the events had been taken care of, and were a matter of the past that they had no interest in revisiting.

There were plenty more details to be discussed before Roy could fully come out of hiding; there was a proper way to do everything, after all. But all in all, things were looking quite promising. But as they left that meeting, both Roy and Maes felt unnerved in a way neither quite knew how to communicate. But whatever was bothering them, it was an issue for another day.

A quiet shuffle lightly brushed his ears, just noticeable enough for Roy to glance behind him, half expecting it to be nothing more than the wind rustling the trees. But standing a few meters away was Edward, pausing mid-step once he was spotted. His gaudish coat and golden bangs were caught by the wind, but he was otherwise perfectly still, watching Roy with an expression that betrayed nothing besides a mild curiosity.

He felt himself smile thinly as he pushed himself to his feet. He had been keeping the others waiting long enough, he supposed as he brushed any dirt or stray blades of grass off of himself.

"Come on, we don't got all day," Edward called after a beat. "The others are waiting."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm coming."

Roy cast one last thoughtful glance at his own gravestone, mutely hoping that he would never see his own name in a cemetery. Then with a soundless exhale, he turned and began taking steps down the grassy hill.

He wasn't entirely sure what his expression was when he approached Edward, but he could guess that it wasn't entirely stoic, considering how the kid tilted his head and gave him a strange look.

"You alright?" he asked after a moment, stuffing his mismatched hands into his pockets.

"Hm?" Roy blinked out of whatever vacant thoughtful trance he was toeing. "Oh yeah, I'm fine. Just thinking... Actually, Fullmetal- do you recognize this?" He pulled out the old letter from his pocket and held out the front cover to the blond, who stared down at it blankly for a moment, eyes slowly reading over the words Uncle Roy.

Then after a beat, his eyes widened as realization hit. "Oh yeah, I remember that. I-" Edward cut himself off and looked past Roy to the grave, connecting the dots quickly in his mind. "I forgot about it," he mumbled under his breath, eyes caught on the note for several seconds. He opened his mouth again, but decided against whatever he was going to say.

"Figures you were the one to protect it," he mused quietly, gently brushing some dirt off of the old paper with his thumb.

"Yeah, well..." Ed trailed off and drifted his gaze to the ground with an indifferent shrug.

"And you never decided to read it?"

"Wasn't mine to read."

Roy couldn't help but softly chuckle without thought as he felt the smile pull at his lips. As opening atheistic as Edward was, he had quite a lot of respect for the dead. Then again, anyone who had experienced as much loss as he did at such a young age would. Whenever he saw that note by Roy's gravestone, he probably figured that the supposedly dead colonel would never get to
read it. And yet, he had no interest in opening it for himself. "You're a good kid, Ed."

The blond scoffed abruptly, almost awkwardly. "Is this really the time to be getting all sentimental?"

"Maybe not, but…" Perhaps Ed was right, but he couldn't help it. Finding the old note and being reminded of how far he had come didn't give him much of a choice. "But I'm glad you came today."

"You're not even supposed to know what today is," Edward corrected, finally bringing his eyes back to look at Roy pointedly.

Of course, that's what they said, but it was nearly impossible for him not to have a pretty good guess as to what the occasion was, and why he felt the impulsion to come to the cemetery on today of all days.

"Right," Roy heard himself breath, but his gaze had been drawn back down to the note in his hand one again

"… Mustang?"

He heard the kid's voice, but it sounded distant and obscured as he flipped the letter open again and grazed over the words. They were written down months ago and had sat alone and unread for just as long, but he heard the words just as clearly as if someone was there reading it to him.

"Why didn't you sign it?"

"What?"

Roy didn't realize what he had said until Ed's confused reaction hit his ears, bringing him a little further out of his thoughts. He exhaled slowly as he scrambled his thoughts into something orderly enough to explain.

"Elicia had every member of my staff sign her letter, as well as her parents and even Alphonse. So why didn't you?" He didn't mean to call Ed out for not partaking in the girl's activity and hoped that the calm, nonchalant tone of his voice would make that clear. He was honestly only curious.

But as he asked the simple question, something akin to regret flashed across Ed's visage for a moment, almost too quickly for him to catch. "I uh… I saw her going up to everyone a bit after the funeral. I didn't know that that's what she was doing, but… After seeing how upset she was, I couldn't bring myself to face her- or anyone. I still felt too guilty."

Roy finally lowered the note in favor for studying Edward's comportment for a quiet second, the only sounds being the faint rustling of trees and the distant city traffic.

"But you don't felt guilty anymore, right?"

"Umm…"

"Right?"

Edward didn't respond for a beat as his eyes jumped up to Mustang for a moment. They landed on the thin scar on his neck, then quickly leaped away. Of course, this was nothing new. He caught people glancing at it from time to time, and had long since gotten over the shame he felt. It was just a reminder now.
"Let's- let's just say that I feel as guilty as you do."

"That's a complicated answer," Roy huffed as he felt himself frown- not at Edward, but because he knew exactly what the kid was saying, and it was almost strange to hear him acknowledge it.

"Exactly."

"Well, we are quite alike," he shrugged, deciding to go along with it. They both had a tendency to take on the blame, even while it was unneeded- even though they would both be hard-pressed to admit it aloud. Roy just shook his head, silently deciding that he would question Ed again about it later, and would continue to until he was sure the kid had moved on.

"For better or for worse," Edward replied with a knowing smirk pulling at his lips, returning his usual brand of confidence to his tone.

Again, Roy could only chuckle buoyantly. "Right."

Edward glanced behind them, further down the hill, beyond the black iron gate, and down to the street where a car waited alongside the curb. "I think we've been procrastinating long enough. They're still waiting, you know."

"You're probably right. Let's go."

The drive wasn't a particularly talkative one. Riza drove in relative silence, keeping her careful eyes on the road and speaking up mostly to answer questions or make offhanded comments about the rare irrelevant comment. The passenger's seat beside her was offered to Roy, which he took without much thought, primarily keeping his attention on the passing scenery as the buildings flashed by and eventually faded into the fields and trees of Central City's outskirts.

Maes and Edward took up the back of the car, equally as solemn as the others. Ed was one matter, but when Maes was quiet, it was usually a bad sign. But such a thing wasn't a concern this time. Roy could feel the air in the car; there was no stress, no tension or trepidation, nothing to make him feel the slightest trace of unease. Even the fact that no one ever bothered to mention where they were going or what they were doing failed to set him off. No one ever needed to explain it.

The road turned into something more of a dirt path not long after they had officially left the city, driving through the empty spaces of nature between Central and the next nearest town. The sun had reached its peak by the time Hawkeye turned off the path and pulled up under the shade of the large shady trees that covered the area.

"Alright, here we are," Maes breathed as he climbed out of the back seat with the others following suit.

Roy scanned the arrangement of trees that surrounded them and took a deep breath of the clean air, all while wondering how long the others expected him to play ignorant.

The sound of the car's trunk opening convinced him to turn around just as Hughes pulled out a shovel with Ed and Hawkeye standing by.

"Hmm I wonder what that could possibly be for," he lightly mused out loud, earning himself a deadpan glance from Ed, an amused scoff from Maes, and absolutely nothing from Hawkeye.

"You can stop playing dumb, Roy," his friend replied with a thin smile as he passed the shovel to Hawkeye and picked up another for himself. He then closed the trunk and started walking further..."
into the threes. Edward watched them for a second, gave Roy another look, and began to follow.

Of course they went along with his idea, Roy thought as he began walking as well. Part of him figured that Hawkeye and maybe Hughes too were not eager to go along with Roy's plan of burying Envy somewhere on the outside of town where no one would find him. But what else was there to do to a shape shifting immortal monster who would no doubt be hell-bent on getting revenge the moment he got an ounce of freedom?

They walked for several minutes, once again in a relatively peaceful silence. Edward looked slightly uneasy however, and was likely just nervous to see what was waiting for him. Roy caught Hawkeye glancing at him from time to time, studying his comportment, but made no comment on the matter.

Then without any warning, both Hughes and Hawkeye stopped at the same time and eyed a single spot in the ground. Roy could find no difference in where they looked compared to the rest of the earthy forest floor, but there had to be one based on how confident they looked.

"Roy," Maes began with a breath as he dropped the sharp end of the shovel into the ground and rested his arms on the pole. "I assume you know what's happening here."

Roy, suddenly unsure about how to feel at the moment, just nodded.

"There's something you need to understand," Hawkeye spoke up beside him, her voice focused and calm. "We dealt with Envy, but not out of cold blood or revenge. We wanted you to be as disconnected from it as possible. I still clearly remember that look you had when you cornered Envy; you wanted revenge so badly that you would have done anything to get it. It was mindless and cruel and not something that the future leader of this country should ever express. We took control of this because we couldn't let you get that satisfaction. It would have changed you for the worst."

Roy, despite how badly he wanted to avert his gaze, kept his eyes sternly on Hawkeye and Hughes as Edward stood besides him. They were right, as they always were. He acted mindlessly, silently agreed that the time that had passed since then had truly done him good. He nodded to her words, easily able to hear the truth they rung with. He would have fallen straight back into that hellish pit that Envy had pulled him into had he not listened to her back then.

"I understand," he said with a faint smile. "I am very fortunate to have all of you here to stop me from being an idiot."

He heard Ed laugh besides him. "It's a full time job."

Roy smile widened slightly at the harmlessly light remark, but it soon faded when his eyes fell on the spot of ground that Maes had dug his shovel into. He knew why they were there and what was happening without needing to be told, but he had no idea what to expect. Far too many questions wanted to voice themselves, but he found it easier to just block them out and go with it.

"In that case," Hawkeye breathed as she too looked down at the ground, tensing her fingers around her own shovel. None of them knew what to expect, but they needed to see for themselves. If Envy was still down there, still demanding retribution, or if he had died long ago. Or perhaps, if someone had rescued him without leaving a trace. But regardless, they all had to see it with their own eyes, and deal with the answer, whatever it may be.

"Let's get this over with," Hughes huffed as he raised his shovel, then pushed it back into the ground, uprooting lose dirt and tossing it aside. He grimaced ever so slightly at the action, but
continued the motion nonetheless, ignoring the pain that remained from his all-too-recent surgery. Hawkeye did the same without comment, adding to the pile of dirt behind them.

Roy and Edward watched quietly, exchanging an equally uncertain glance with each other as they watched the two. The blond really did not need to come to this, but Roy was thankful to not be standing there by himself. Besides, Ed was just as involved in this as he was, even though he wasn't the target audience of this little display.

In fact, it was very appropriate that the four of them where here. No one else was more involved in this fiasco than Maes, Hawkeye, and Edward. They had endured just as much as he had in very different ways, and he couldn't ask for a better group of people to support him. As Roy continued to watch the hole in the ground grow wider and deeper, he slid his stiff hand into his pocket and felt the old withered note against his fingertips, hiding the names of all those who had supported him. And even now, when not all of them were present, he could feel them backing him up, a silent reminder that everything would indeed be alright, even as he was looking down at the face of uncertainty and even as so many questions remained.

He truly could not ask for more.

A light cling came from the hole and both Maes and Hawkeye stopped in their digging and withdrew their shovels. Maes knelt down and brushed through the dirt for a moment longer, revealing the cork lid of the familiar jar. He carefully slid the glass canister out of the ground and held it up in his arms with the inside obscured by the dirtied rag that was still tied around it. No obnoxious screaming came from inside, but even so, the four still held their breath as Maes untied the knot that kept the fabric in place.

The rag fell away and Roy saw Maes' eyes widen before he could see why. From where he stood on the other side of the hole, he copied his friend's expression without thought, seeing absolutely nothing inside the jar.

His heart beat into overdrive and he took a step forward, mindful of the hole that separated them, mouth opening to say something- express his confusion somehow but his tongue froze as he watched Maes turn the jar at an angle, allowing Roy to see a grey dust slide into the corner. Ash was all that remained.

But Maes wasn't there when he had finally destroyed Envy's body, burning it to a similar dust and exposing him as the small green worm that he truly was. He had no idea what to make of it, while the other three knew just enough to assume. It was understandable why he looked confused, while the others all had a solemn expression of acceptance.

"What… does this mean?" Maes muttered, turning the jar around to get a better view of the inside.

"He's gone," Roy answered simply, allowing his shoulders to slacken as the tension rolled out with ease. "He's finally gone."

Maes looked up at him for a moment, then at the others, realizing that he was missing a detail, then dropped his eyes back down to the jar. The silence stretched on between them, none quite knowing what to say.

"Is that really it…?" he asked slowly and softly, as if speaking to no one but the air around them. But nonetheless, Roy heard himself answer.

"Honestly, probably not," he said, recalling their discussions about there being others and a grander
plan behind it all. "But at least for now, I think so."

Roy rested his gaze on the empty jar for a moment longer as his thoughts strayed, but the sensation of eyes on him caught his attention rather quickly. Hawkeye was watching him carefully, searching for a reaction, waiting to see if he would smirk victoriously or anything of the like. But he just sent her a reassuring nod, tacitly telling her that she had nothing to worry about. Despite how eager he was for blood earlier, it had all vanished and was replaced by peace of mind. It had taken a while, but he knew not to take so much satisfaction in a destructive victory, and would not allow himself to go back to that state of mind again.

More eyes on him. In fact, he noticed that all three of them were watching him now, all with varying degrees of curiosity and concern, looking for a reaction. But he felt no desire to give one. So many questions were left unanswered, but he found no need to worry.

"I'm fine," he said in response to their silent questions, and was for once able to truly mean it.

He noticed Edward smile beside him, Hawkeye nodded back, and Maes grinned. "Good," his friend said for them all, lowering the jar to his side as it no longer mattered.

"Now then," Roy said, cleared his throat, and smiled as he looked at his trusted companions who had all planned a part in teaching him how to live once again. "Let's go home."

Chapter End Notes

That's it! Big thanks to everyone who stuck around this long! I hope you all enjoyed the story. :)

... Except... that's actually not it. Ranowa posted a little sequel thing for Postmortem and it is wonderful and I highly suggest you check it out! https://archiveofourown.org/works/17138567

Aaannnddd, I have a Christmas present waiting for you guys, in the form of another brief, never before seen sequel thing! Until then~

Works inspired by this Ride to the End of the World Laps the Country by Ranowa

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