The Earth Is Online

by AkemiAsh

Summary

(Inspired by https://www.novelupdates.com/series/the-earth-is-online/ , The Earth is Online by Mo Chen Huan)

Six months ago, tens of thousands of black phantom towers appeared all over the world, floating above cities, deserts, seas, and forests. Chemists, physicists, religious fanatics... all of them could neither explain, or understand.

Six months later, people got used to the towers, it wasn't news anymore.

That was... until Ed saw an insect crash right into the tower, instead of going through it. The next day, a child-like voice filled the air, issuing an announcement to all humans.

“Ding dong! November 15th, 2018. The earth is online.”

The black tower’s three iron-clad rules:

1. Everything is explained by the black tower.
2. 6 o’clock to 18 o’clock is the game time.
3. All players, please strive to attack the tower."

Now, Ed needed to find Al and survive vicious games meant to destroy the weak and strengthen the strong. If only he could make it there before everything started to fall apart.
And maybe, along the way, he'll meet someone who understood his mind and his heart better than he did himself.

Notes

Guys, so I've been having a very hard time lately. Like... my therapist advised me to keep away from sharp object and give my mother all my razors... so yeah. I started this sorta just for me, because a lot of the translation is filled with Chinese culture that I mostly understand but it always gives me pause. Besides, there isn't enough RoyEd out there, and I just felt like these two characters would fit Tang Mo and Fu Wenduo pretty well :)  

I will be updating regularly, every Sunday and Wednesday because I already have a lot of chapters written, but I need the time to not be pressured to write the next one and the next one because my anxiety is already very freakin' bad. 

Anyways, I hope you guys enjoy it, and keep with me as I go through and change most of the entire novel. (Seriously, Roy and Ed meet and find out about each other much, much sooner than in the actual novel. Because I want it that way.)
Chapter 1 – The Black Towers

It was around nine in the morning when the library’s doors opened, allowing the seven or eight people waiting outside into the building. All of them were older than 40.

It was less crowded due to the fact that today was a Monday, meaning most of the kids who usually came to the library from the high school only a parking lot over were all in class now, and unable to hang out in the reading areas.

For Ed, that was a relief.
Hanging out in the basement with the archives and science texts was always better when he was alone. No one talking to him, or trying to flirt with him while he tried to do his work.

Well…. not exactly. There was one annoyance that Ed couldn’t seem to get rid of.

“Hey, Ed, can you go see what Mr. Religious is doing? He just went around the corner where the cameras can’t watch him.” Alice smiled brightly as she came to find Ed, likely because she had a bit of trepidation when it came to Mr. Religious. The man was a religious fanatic, and most of the time, his mutterings and random spasms gave off the impression of insanity.

Ed was the only employee who had actually managed to approach the man in the year he’d been coming to the library.

With a weary sigh and a nod of his head, Ed walked over towards the mentioned corner.

The West City Library was located in the center of the city, and had a total of three floors. The basement was usually Ed’s domain, filled with History, Science, Occult and Religion, and Psychology texts, as well as most of the city’s archives. Ed made his way to the southeast corner of the basement floor. He passed by more than 30 bookshelves before finding Mr. Religious.

In November, West City carried a deep winter chill, and the winds howled outside the floor-to-ceiling windows that shook under the force. The only saving grace for the library was that the sunlight shining through was warm and comforting, especially since the heating system hadn’t even kicked in yet, since they’d all arrived at around 8 that morning.

Mr. Religious sat cross-legged on the floor by one of the large windows, five or six books scattered around him haphazardly. Despite the erratic display though, the man’s attention wasn’t on any of the books. Instead, he had his hands buried in his own hair as he hunched over his lap, making the whole picture just that much worse.

Ed pursed his lips to keep from sneering, and closed his eyes for a second before walking over and picking up one of the books. “Mr. Allen, our library has tables and chairs. Feel free to use them if you want to read the books.”

“Read book… Read books… What book am I reading?”

Ed frowned as he looked down at the book he’d just picked up. Instantly, his interest was peaked. “The Law of Equivalent Exchange?” Why would Mr. Religious want to pick up a book on alchemical basic laws? Weren’t most religious people against these types of sciences?

Mr. Religious suddenly raised his head and looked up at Ed with bloodshot eyes, voice thin as he asked, “Do you know the law of equivalent exchange?”

Ed didn’t know why, but he felt a cold shudder trail down his back. The back of his neck prickled with a sense of wrongness, of something odd taking place. It almost felt like being watched, but not as intense. He tried to shake it off as he asked, “Do you?”

“I know! Of course I know!” Mr. Religious whispered harshly as he pushed himself up. “To obtain, something of equal value must be lost. There is no creation without destruction! No joy without pain, no happiness without fear! The rule of the Truth!”

It wasn’t the first time Ed was hearing those words, but for some reason, he couldn’t bring himself to dismiss them this time. Mainly because it was the first time the man was using laws that Ed actually believed in to spout his nonsense. Was that why Mr. Religious picked that book? Because he knew it was one of Ed’s favorites? The library was a public place, and Ed had borne witness to
many strange things while working there, but they couldn’t chase an old man out just because he was a fanatic with mental health stress. He hadn’t hurt anybody yet, and Ed was sure he wouldn’t in the first place.

With narrowed eyes, Ed decided to ask the one question that would get rid of the old man. For the day, at least. “What is ‘The Truth’?”

Mr. Religious’s expression suddenly froze, his face going blank.

Ed cracked a small grin, tilting his head a bit to the left before deciding to shake the feeling off and get back to work. He picked up the rest of the books and turned to walk away.

He’d asked Mr. Religious this question many times since the other man had started coming to the library around a year ago. All day long, the man would find a seat that he divined ‘lucky’ and babble. It was only when one of the staff members came over and asked him a question about what the Truth was that he’d shut up and leave the library for the day. This was the first time ‘The Truth’ was being paired with alchemy, though.

As Ed took a step forward to make his way back to the tables, he was caught by surprise when a deep and mysterious voice seemed to echo behind him. “That is ‘The Truth’.”

Ed hesitated, but in the end, he turned to look at what Mr. Religious was pointing at.

The man was standing by a large window, pointing out at the giant Black Tower hovering over the city. With a crooked little smile, Mr. Religious turned his head to look at Ed and said, “The Truth is coming.”

The shiver that passed through Ed’s body nearly had the books in his arms tumbling back to the floor.

For some reason, those words had been colder than the winter winds blowing outside.

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The bus that Ed took to get home from work every day passed right through the city center. He sat in the back of the bus at a window seat, earbuds in his ears as he listened to a Serial podcast. The man’s voice wasn’t too loud, so despite the earbuds, he could still hear the conversation of the two high school girls sitting across from him.

“Look! The Black Tower! Take a picture!”

“You’re still taking photos of that thing? What’s so interesting about it, anyways? It’s been so long since it appeared that no one even cares about it anymore.”

“I’ll post it on my Instagram. The caption: A Day Trip to the Black Tower.”

“No one’s going to like it. Hey, look over there! That man sitting by the window is freakin’ hot! I bet if you take a picture of him instead, you’ll get more likes and followers. You should call it: Handsome Bus Encounter! Come on, you have to take a picture!”

As the podcast switched to an advertisement, Ed raised his right hand to block his face and turned farther towards the window, not caring about the two girls anymore.

As his eyes lifted, he caught sight of what they’d been staring at before they noticed him. The Black Tower suspended over West City.
The Black Tower stood in the air among the city’s tall buildings, an intimidating quadrangular pyramid, similar to the pyramids found in Egypt. The only difference really was that it was black, not gold. The base spanned the entire center of West City, almost covering the city itself. The bright and full moonlight passed right through the Black Tower, and shone on the ground without even noticing the large obstacle’s existence.

Six months ago, the tower had suddenly appeared in the center of the city. Ed had nearly been late for work, so he’d left that morning in a rush, not even bothering to watch the morning news. Once he was on the streets, though, it was hard to ignore. All of Amestris was abuzz.

The buses weren’t anywhere to be seen, and the taxis wouldn’t stop. Even his attempts to get an Uber were met with not a single driver available in the city.

Everyone seemed to be driving to the city center in a frenzy.

Ed wasn’t stupid or slow, but he had just woken up, and he couldn’t exactly figure out what was going on. Then he looked up and saw the huge Black Tower.

All of his dazed sleepiness was gone in an instant.

He never believed in such a thing, but for a moment, he actually thought that it was the end of the world.

What the hell was that thing, and how the fuck did it get there?

He hadn’t seen it when he’d left work last night, so how could it just suddenly appear out of the blue?

At first, Ed thought it was something the country had constructed. People on the internet often boasted about the country’s infrastructure and technological advancements. Amestris was famous for its sciences. They could build an overpass overnight, making many foreigners envious. He didn’t realize until he finally managed to hail a taxi and arrived at the city center, looking up at the tower with the rest of the crowd, that the motherfucking tower was actually completely suspended in mid-air!

Completely suspended! At least 100 meters off the ground!

How the fuck would humans be able to build a goddamned castle in the sky overnight?

A big LED screen in the city center broadcasted the news channel, and everyone was quiet, listening intently for an explanation. Too bad they wouldn’t be getting one.

“At 8 o’clock this morning, approximately 1,021 strange towers appeared over all major cities and seas in Amestris. It was also reported that, at the same time, these very same Black Towers appeared on a large scale all around the world. Please do not panic. Amestris has set up relevant departments to investigate this Black Tower incident. We’ve also invited Professor Colten, of the Physics Department of Amestris University, to explain the issues related to this Black Tower incident. We are now connected with Professor Colten…”

It! Was! The! End! Of! The! World!

Instantly, Ed pulled out his phone to call his little brother.

“Al, tell me you see what I’m seeing.”
“I see it, Brother. This morning, the military came to the university to set up a lab here. They’re asking for volunteers to help with the research, and my professor offered me the first spot!”

For some reason, the moment Alphonse said those words, Ed’s stomach bottomed out. He’d find out much later that all of his instincts had been right. He should have said ‘no’. He should have made Al come home.

But he hadn’t.

Al wasn’t 8 years old and dependant on Ed anymore. He wasn’t 10, stuck in a hospital and relying on Ed to pay the bills, either. And he wasn’t 16 and getting accepted into a university program much earlier than normal kids. They were too alike, Ed and Al. Two little geniuses with no one else to rely on but each other.

Now, it was six months later, and the Black Towers had become more like tourist attractions than unbelievable alien-made monuments.

In the first few months, people wearing white research uniforms came to the bottom of the Black Tower in West City every day. They brought large instruments, checked for unknown things, and calculated various superfluous factors. Now, they only came once every three days, and the stores near the Black Tower had resumed their normal business hours.

Yet, it had been almost two months since he’d received any message from Alphonse.

[Al: Brother, I won’t be able to contact you for a few months. I’m entering an isolated research study with Professor Marco. Take care, okay? I’ll call you as soon as I can!]

And with that, it was like Al was gone.

Ed supported his chin on a hand, looking calmly out at the Black Tower. When the bus turned a corner, the Black Tower was left behind, no longer visible.

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That evening, Ed made some ramen and ate at his computer while he logged onto Skype. Instantly, the chat box popped up.

[Flame: I’m sorry, I’ve been busier than usual these days and might not have time to play with you.]

Ed frowned at the chat window. The message Ed had sent last week only got a reply today. It seemed that Flame really was very busy.

[Fullmetal: Don’t worry about it. We can play a round whenever you’re free.]

After sending the message, Ed quickly pulled open the Bridge game software, but this time, Flame’s reply was swift.

[Flame: Come play one now. I have a little bit of time.]

[Fullmetal: Good! (Smiley Face)]

Ed couldn’t help grinning as he invited Flame into the game room and queued up a fresh round.

Ed had been playing Bridge for a little over five years. When he’d been a freshman in college, he’d had a roommate who’d been obsessed with Bridge, stating that it was a delicate strategy game that
tested your IQ. However, less than a month later, the roommate had moved onto another game, while Ed had quietly continued playing Bridge for the next five years.

In the middle of the game, Ed discovered a chance to take the contract. A grin flashed on his face for only a moment, and he hadn’t played the card yet, when he saw that Flame had pulled out a king of clubs. Ed’s mind went blank. Flame’s card had just killed Ed’s chances of making a contract.

Had Flame made a mistake?

Bridge was a 2 verses 2 game. Ed had met Flame on the internet around a year ago, and the two of them had played as a team ever since. For some reason, the two seemed to have a tacit understanding, an instinctive grasp of each other’s strategic minds. It sometimes didn’t help that Flame was better at it than Ed was, though, and that would often lead to bickering and name-calling.

Still, Flame had been busy for the past six months, and hadn’t played at all for two of them. It wasn’t impossible that the man had gotten rusty.

Ed looked over both sides of the table carefully, making sure he wasn’t the one making mistakes, when he suddenly realized. “Does he want a grand slam?”

His lips curved up into a small smirk as he played his card, more reassured now that he’d picked up on the strategy.

Half an hour later, the game ended in a victory and Ed opened the chat.

[Fullmetal: Good game. Like I thought, you’re still just as good as before.]

[Flame: Good game.]

[Fullmetal: (Smiley Face)]

Flame didn’t reply for a long time, and Ed was beginning to suspect that the other man was busy, so he refrained from sending another message. Instead, Ed opened up another game of Bridge. When he came back, he saw that Flame had finally replied.

[Flame: I remember you once said that there is a Black Tower next to where you work?]

[Fullmetal: Yes, around 200 meters away. Why? What’s wrong?]

[Flame: Recently, it seems like there may be some concerns.]

Ed read that message and suddenly remembered the young religious man at the library. Mr. Religious had pointed at the Black Tower and said, ‘The Truth is coming’.

Flame and Mr. Religious…

Uneasily, Ed shook his head with a strained laugh before typing out a reply.

[Fullmetal: Do you belong to the ‘The Black Tower is Dangerous’ faction? Anyways, I work in that area, so it’s not like I can avoid it.]

Flame didn’t continue the topic. He spoke for a few more minutes before saying that he’d have to go. A little reluctantly, the two of them said their goodbyes and logged off.
The next day at work, Mr. Religious didn’t show up. The director of the library, Ms. West, was a bit surprised, and asked Ed, “Mr. Religious didn’t show up today? I think he’s here more often than I am. What happened?”

Ed tried to shrug casually. “Maybe he was busy with his family.”

Director West waved her hand. “Eh, it’s actually better that he didn’t come. Otherwise, we would have to keep an eye on him. Alice! Alice, I need you to do something for me. Can you find some time to sort out the History shelves in the basement tonight?”

Sorting books was a librarian’s daily task, and it wasn’t as easy as most people believed it was. Alice had made plans to go on a blind date that night, and Ed knew the second she turned her big, brown, watery eyes on him that she wouldn’t be the one doing the sorting tonight.

Ed grimaced, but in the end, he gave in. “You go, I can do it by myself.”

Alice’s helpless puppy-eyes turned into a big grin in a second. “Thank you, Edward! Next time, I’ll help you out when you need someone to work your shift!”

Ed only nodded, waving the girl away with his own helpless smile.

He worked until 10 that night, and just managed to grab the last bus going back to his neighborhood.

There were only a few people on the bus. Apart from the driver, it was only Ed and a middle-aged man who seemed to be sleeping soundly near the front.

With his phone dead, Ed had no choice but to stare out the window, completely and utterly bored.

Many shopping malls in the city center were closed at this time. November nights were always so cold it kept most people confined to their homes, especially at night, so the streets were mostly empty. The moonlight came down bright and cold while Ed looked at the flashing neon signs around the city.

When the bus turned a corner, the huge Black Tower suddenly came into view.

After looking at it for a good six months, Ed wasn’t really interested in the tower anymore, just like most of the Amestrian population. Hell, just like most of the global population. Ed only stared at it calmly, almost more bored by the Black Tower than he’d been by the neon signs.

Suddenly, he saw a small bug, or maybe a bird. It was too far away to see clearly, but in the moonlight, the dark little thing shone as it flew off towards the Black Tower. Ed watched carelessly as the small thing flew true, heading straight for the large, transparent tower.

Then, it seemed to hit something… and fell to the ground.

Ed’s eyes widened, and he watched intently until the bus went around another corner and the Black Tower disappeared.

“…No way. Did I see that wrong? The Black Tower is an optical illusion. Nothing can touch it. It isn’t actually solid.”

That was the current mainstream view in society. Many people didn’t believe the Black Towers
were real, agreeing that they were only illusions caused by pollution, or something similar. They could be seen, but not touched. They weren’t solid.

Ed closed his eyes, carefully trying to replay the scene he saw just now.

Something touched it. Something actually touched the Black Tower…. Why? What did that mean?

The next morning, Ed woke up at 7:30.

He hurried to brush his teeth and get dressed so he could catch the 8 o’clock bus. He packed up his backpack quickly and dashed to the door, but the moment his hand touched the doorknob, a melodious music suddenly vibrated through the air around him. Loud and clear and…. close .

‘Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way…”

Ed was startled, and instantly turned around to look for the source of the sound, but there was nothing. The song ‘Jingle Bells’ just kept playing. There were no more lyrics, but everyone knew the song.

The more Ed tried to listen carefully, the more confused he was. He couldn’t find the source. It seemed to be coming from everywhere at once.

In the next heartbeat, Ed’s whole body froze.

He made a mad dash to his small balcony, knocking over his computer chair before throwing open the glass door to look out at the distant, giant Black Tower in the center of West City. Colorful lights kept flashing from the tower, and the melody of the song was constantly changing. Once it reached the last note, the lights died and disappeared, everything falling dark once again.

Ed inhaled sharply, but that’s all he had time to do.

A voice suddenly spoke into the dead silence, with the uniquely high-pitched, sharp, and loud tone of a small child.

“Ding Dong! November 15th, 2018. The Earth is online.”
Chapter 2 - The Black Tower Event

Chapter Notes

Chapter Edited and Betaed by the fabulous luvsanime02!!! and Nick Oak!

Chapter 2 – The Black Tower Event

That was the very moment every human in the world stopped and looked up at the closest Black Tower.

Suddenly, the Black Tower felt bigger than normal, more oppressive… sinister. No matter how far away anyone was from a tower, they could all clearly see a blue flashing dot of light appearing on every side. The blue dots flashed and began to form a string of characters, like an old computer that was crashing. Then, a row of blue words began to appear in the center of the Black Tower –

“Ding Dong! All players will have three days to eliminate each other. This includes, but is not limited to, games.”

Everywhere around the world, the child’s high voice was heard. At the same time. In several different languages. At various times of the day due to different time zones.

Ed stood on his balcony and stared sightlessly at the distant Black Tower. The cold winter wind blew at him, but the chill had nothing on the cold sweat dotting his forehead, dripping slowly down the side of his face. Despite having been watching it the entire time, Ed was startled when he realized the Black Tower had suddenly gone back to its calm, blank state. The blue words, and the child’s voice, both disappeared.

When Ed arrived at the entrance of the library, there were countless other people crowded near the Black Tower, blocking the roads and nearly making his work commute impossible.

Ed had to get off at least three stops before the library and walk the rest of the way there. He passed by the noisy crowd that blocked the entire city center. He could only watch along the fringes as he moved steadily towards the library.

It didn’t even take 10 minutes from Ed setting down his things for Director West to come out of her office and announce, “There’s going to be no work today. You guys can all go home and wait for further notice!”

Alice excitedly looked up and couldn’t help asking, “Director, is this related to the Black Tower? Did everyone hear the Black Tower speak this morning?! You must have heard it! What’s going on? Where did this thing come from? Is this really the end of the world?”

Director West immediately furrowed her brows and glared at the young girl. “What’s this ‘end of the world’ nonsense’? You’re not as naïve as you look, Alice. Don’t spread rumors.”

Alice was one of the youngest workers on the staff, born in 1996. Only about 3 years older than Ed himself. There was a hint of fear on her face, but in her shiny, round eyes, there was mostly surprise and curiosity… and excitement. Ed could understand why. After all, something was
happening. This was a change from the dull monotony of everyday life, a sudden shift in the paradigm. Ed couldn’t really blame her.

If Al had answered his calls that morning, maybe Ed would feel a bit of that excitement too, but as it stood, without having heard from his younger brother, Ed could only feel trepidation and a sense of urgency.

Three days… They had three days to do, what? What did ‘eliminate’ each other mean? And games?

What the hell was going on…?

When Director West turned to leave, Alice turned to Ed. “Edward, you heard it, right? The Black Tower spoke! What does it mean by ‘online’? And ‘eliminated’?”

Ed was quick to pick up his things and go home. A sense of urgency rose in his chest, and he suddenly felt annoyed at this girl for being so… exuberant. “I don’t know. I didn’t pay attention,” he answered, short and harsh.

That didn’t seem to even make her pause.

“Do you think this is the end of the world? I don’t think this is an apocalypse with zombies, though. The Black Tower told us to ‘eliminate’ other players. Do you think that’ll turn us into zombies? This must be a joke or something, right? A government conspiracy? No, wait, that can’t be right. I saw on the internet that all the Black Towers in the world spoke at the same time! Which country do you think would be able to do that? I don’t think the United States has the influence for that. Does Japan? China?”

Ed wasn’t in any mood for this discussion. He wasn’t sure why, but after he’d seen those blue words appear on the tower and heard that child-like voice speak, his heart had started to race.

A normal adult human’s heartbeat was between 60 to 100 beats per minute. Ed had already counted out his heartbeat while Alice had been talking.

His BPM was at 130.

Even stranger was the lack of discomfort in his body. There was no shortness of breath as his lungs struggled to oxygenate that much blood pumping through his system. There was no ache in his chest, or spike in his blood pressure. If anything, all he felt was annoyed.

Looking left and right, Ed watched his surroundings. On the left was the shelves of self-help books, and on the right were the autobiographies. Fiction was upstairs, history and science in the basement.

He watched as the sunlight shone through the tall, open windows, the dust particles floating in the air like snowflakes. Dandelions.

“Edward!” The loud female voice seemed to wake Ed up, Alice’s tone not even attempting to mask her agitation. “I called your name several times. What happened? What were you thinking about that you got so lost in thought?”

Ed swiped a hand across his face, noting that his palm was oddly sweaty. He flexed his other hand, the small, soft tinkle of metal reassuring him in a strange way. He cocked his head to the side to look at the girl. “…It doesn’t matter.”
His heart was beating even faster.

Alice seemed to take a moment to eye him speculatively, but she soon seemed to shake that off and picked up her bag. “I want to go see the Black Tower. Would you like to come with me? On the way here, I saw a huge crowd of people there. I want to go, but I don’t want to go alone.”

Ed was quick to shake his head and refuse. “I’m going home.”

He had to try to call Al again.

It had been months since he’d properly spoken to his brother, and if Ed were inclined to be honest, he’d admit that he was scared and worried. He’d promised Al that he trusted the younger man to take care of himself, and he did… It was just… this situation wasn’t normal. Everything seemed to be happening all at once, and Al was directly in the vicinity of one of those towers, working as a research assistant.

Al could take care of himself. Ed knew that. In his mind, he knew that. Al could take care of himself.

So why wasn’t his worry easing at all?

“Fine. Bye, Edward!”

Alice didn’t get a chance to go see the Black Tower. Ed saw a group of riot police escorting the crowd around the Black Tower away as he walked out of the library. They started to surround the tower with a wall of clear, white plastic. The barrier wall started from the library’s entrance and blocked the Black Tower completely, no one getting near unless they wanted to face the riot weapons and rubber bullets from the riot police armory.

Many people were still standing outside the plastic wall, using their phones or cameras to take pictures.

Ed took one of his own before grabbing a taxi and heading home.

Online, the Black Tower incident had become a world-wide headline.

Ed had tried calling Al another ten times, but there was no answer. It still rang, so he knew the phone was still in service, but Al never picked up. Ed didn’t know if he should be worried about that or relieved.

He laid in bed and read through various forums and chat rooms. Due to Al still being a student, and Ed knowing his log-in password by heart, he was able to log into the university’s forums to try and get some information, and he saw that many students had commented and taken photos of the Black Tower everywhere. Japan, China, England… Everyone who’s been doing a study abroad had started their own thread, and Ed followed them.

[It was in Korean! I almost didn’t understand the whole thing; I was scared to death! My school canceled classes, and there are many people rioting in the streets asking for answers.]

[Right now, it’s really freakin’ hard to get flights back to Amestris. The prices fucking soared with this Black Tower bullshit! I can’t get a ticket home! My roommate is some rich asshole, so he’s going to be going home this afternoon. It’s no fair. I’m starting to worry.]

[When the tower spoke, it was late at night here. There was also this Japanese nursery rhyme along with it. My friend took a video, here’s the link ----]
Ed didn’t hesitate, opening the video and watching the familiar Black Tower suspended over Shibuya’s city center, nearly over the large expanse of the Shibuya Crossing. It flashed with colorful lights and was particularly dazzling. The song wasn’t ‘Jingle Bells’, but had the cadence of a childish nursery rhyme. When the song finished, the same high and clear child’s voice spoke. This time, in Japanese.

[Ding Dong! November 15th, 2018. The Earth is online.]

What the hell was that?

Ed anxiously dropped his phone beside him on the bed and brought his arms up to cover his eyes.

The authorities still hadn’t disclosed any information about the Black Towers. Even researchers like Al were kept on a tight leash, and held to a non-disclosure agreement Ed was sure Al didn’t sign. However, there were too many of these towers around the world, and there was no way to hide them. People had already sent out more and more information online. On average, every 10,000 square kilometers of land would have a Black Tower suspended right at the center of it.

There were even countless Black Towers hovering over vast expanses of oceans and forests and deserts, and uninhabited lands.

Ed needed to calm down. He pushed himself up and started to pace. Irritation and annoyance seemed to flood his system like lava, his heart beating so quickly that Ed thought maybe it’d beat itself right out of his chest.

He had already made his 160th pass around the room before he suddenly stopped.

What was he doing?! This wasn’t like him!

Why was he suddenly so upset, so agitated?

With gritted teeth, Ed went to the bathroom and shoved his head under the sink faucet. He didn’t think as he turned on the water and let it pour directly over his head. Long, blond hair curtained him off from the rest of the world, and the cold water seemed to shock a bit of sense back into him.

He felt calmer. Stable once more.

Ed would be the first to admit that he had a temper, and many times it was on a hair trigger, but he wasn’t one to react to nothing.

He was logical, calm under pressure, stable and reliable, always able to keep a cool head. He had to be. After losing their mom at a young age, having a dad who simply walked out and never came back, living with the Rockbells until Ed turned 15 and got a full-ride scholarship to university, taking Al right along with him… The accident that took his arm and leg. The house burning… Al’s scars…

Everyone had always looked down on Ed, and he had never let that stop him. It didn’t matter. None of it mattered, because he had to take care of Al. Had to keep Al safe, and fed, and happy…

Ed looked down at his bare arms.

The automail shone brightly under the fluorescent bathroom lights, the design and complex mechanical systems and wires all meticulously maintained since Winry had made it for him. It was a work of prosthetic genius, and Ed had been her only test subject. Hell, he’d been the entire reason she’d began to study artificial limbs along with her PhD in biomechanics.
His arm… His leg… They were one-of-a-kind treasures of science, and Ed made sure to treat them like it. Even though these two were his 5th pair. He hadn’t grown much in the last 5 years, but they still needed to be measured and upgraded every year. The last time Winry had done that was almost six months ago, when Al had taken the research job involving the Black Tower.

Unable to shake off his mood or his thoughts, Ed braided back his wet hair and headed for the computer.

He needed to calm down.

To keep his mind busy.

This sudden sense of anxiety and irritation wasn’t under his control, and he couldn’t stand that.

Maybe it was his heartbeat. It was still beating too fast. Was it affecting his judgment? Just now, it seemed to reach a BPM of 150… Fuck, he should be dead by now, but he wasn’t even in pain.

Ed needed to focus on something else.

Pulling up the Bridge game software, he hoped that Flame would be online. He’d be able to challenge Ed, to keep him present in the game, focused and steady.

Only, Flame wasn’t there. There were actually very few people who seemed to want to play games at this time, probably due to the big Black Tower event, or whatever.

Ed waited 10 minutes before entering a room and quickly opening a hand. The game progressed, and Ed’s brain processed the information quickly. Gradually, his BPM dropped, but it wasn’t by much. He was still tachycardic.

He played from day to night, until Ed was finally too tired for another round and dragged himself to his bed to sleep.

Maybe tomorrow, Al would call him back.

--

In the morning, that undefinable sense of anxiety came back again.

Ed tried to call Al. Over and over and over, but he never got an answer. So, he called Winry.

“Ed! I’ve been trying to reach you for two days! What have you been doing?!”

Winry’s voice was shrill as she yelled, but Ed ignored that. He focused on her words. She’d been calling him? But he hadn’t gotten any of her calls. Not until he’d called her.

“I haven’t been doing much, Win. What about you and Granny Pinako?”

“We’re alright. Resembool is in an uproar right now, but there isn’t much we can do all the way out here. I’ve been worried about you and Al! I got a letter from him a month ago saying he wouldn’t be able to contact me electronically for the next few months. The trains are packed or not running at all, or I would have come to West City to knock you over the head for not picking up your phone!”

“Transportation is at a grid-lock, then? There, too?”

“Just about. Everyone is more worried about being with family, and it isn’t like many of us have
anywhere else to go. You and Al are the only two kids to leave Resembool in the last 6 years. Will you be able to come back?"

Ed frowned, leaning against the balcony railing as he looked up at the giant Black Tower. “I don’t know, Win. I was waiting for some kind of word from Al. He’s only a few towns away, but I haven’t heard from him either. If I manage to meet up with him, we’ll both come back for a bit, alright?”

“Psh, don’t bother. I’ll come to you! I know how much you hate being away from Al, Ed, but this is good for the two of you. You need to learn who you are away from each other. If he doesn’t call, just remember that Al’s stronger than you realize, okay? He can take care of himself.”

Hearing the words that he’d been repeating in his head echoed back at him by Winry didn’t help, but Ed had to admit defeat.

Al could take care of himself.

He wasn’t helpless. He wasn’t injured. He wasn’t weak.

“Thanks, Win. Did you hear the Black Tower’s announcement yesterday?”

“Yes, I did! That’s why I’ve been trying to call you! What do you think it meant by ‘eliminate’? And what was all that about games?”

“I don’t know, Win. I… The Black Tower near the library was acting strange the night before last. I could have sworn I saw something actually slam right into it. Like it was solid.”

“Yeah, that happened here, too! With Resembool being such a small-town village, there haven’t been many guards or police anywhere, so there have been a lot of people throwing things at an attempt to hit the Black Tower. Normally, no one would be able to reach it, but Mr. Colt took a sniper to the second floor of Delta’s Diner and shot at the thing. Everyone saw the bullet hit and bounce right off, not even a scratch left behind.”

Ed closed his eyes, trying hard to suppress the little smile of amusement that wanted to appear on his face at the mental image of Mr. Colt’s expression after his bullet had no effect. As a big, burly marine, Justin Colt didn’t think there was any problem in the world his gun couldn’t fix.

“So, what, are they just solid pieces of material hanging in mid-air now? What if they fall onto every city around the world? Most of humanity would be done for.” It was just a thought, but as soon as the words were out, Ed felt a spike in his ever-present anxiety.

“Stop being morbid! They haven’t fallen yet, so don’t go thinking that they will! By the way, how’s the automail? I hope you’ve been taking care of them, or I’m going to beat the shit out of you, Edward Elric!”

This time, Ed did smile. “I know, I know. I’m taking care of them. I keep a small tool-kit in my backpack at all times, just in case of an emergency.”

Winry huffed. “Just because you’re a genius with an eidetic memory doesn’t mean you know how to work with machines. Especially those delicate pieces of work attached to you. Remember that, and let me know if anything feels off. They’re not indestructible, Ed, even if they feel like it.”

Ed had heard that from her many, many times before, but he still nodded by route, listening intently.
She was right. He was a genius. He was smart and quick and capable…but he wasn’t a mechanic, and no amount of memorized material was going to help him if his arm or leg ended up broken.

“I understand, Win. I’ll take care of it. Do you have the new models done yet? The year-mark is in another six months.” Ed tried for a light, teasing tone, and just about managed it.

He could hear the pride and pure joy in Winry’s voice when she answered. “Of course it’s already done! Now I’m just doing some touch-ups and minor additions! You just wait, these will be the best ones yet!”

Ed wasn’t sure why, but he suddenly felt like asking for something he’d never asked for before. Usually, Ed liked to fight bare-handed. He and his brother had trained under a martial arts expert known as Izumi Curtis, and she’d been their sensei for many years. Even now, they would visit her home only to get beaten down by her every time.

Still, Ed had practice with many weapons. Izumi never wanted to leave anything to chance, and more disciplines meant a wider range of options when protecting yourself, and an orderly mind when going through daily life. Ed had never found a way to tell Alphonse that Ed was paying for his tuition fees by taking up illegal cage fighting on the weekends.

Maybe it was best if Alphonse never found out.

“Win, I don’t really know what’s going on with these towers, but I feel like something big is about to happen. I want you to put a blade on the automail for me. Something that I can spring and retract at will. I know you already have the design and things taken care of, but… I’d feel better if I always had a weapon on me.”

There was a moment of silence. Ed wasn’t sure if Winry was taking in his request, or questioning his sanity. After a while, she spoke. “I know what you mean. There’s this feeling in my gut that something bad is going to happen. It feels like… like when my parents left and never came home. I was trying over and over to call you, but you didn’t pick up, and Alphonse didn’t answer, and…”

There was a sob over the line, and Ed lowered his head. “Winry, it’s okay. Whatever happens, me and Al are like cockroaches. We’d survive the end of the world.” He said it lightly, a hint of teasing in his voice that seemed to clear the air a bit. He smiled when he heard Winry’s watery laugh.

“Okay, okay. I understand. I’ll make sure I put some cool things on both your new arm and your new leg. They should be done in about three months, so I’ll make my way over to West City to find you and Al after that. Isn’t he supposed to be back by then?”

“He is. The program was supposed to be for 6 months in Central, and most of the assistants did their 6 months and went home, but Dr. Marco wanted to keep Alphonse on for a few more months. ‘At most a couple more months’, he said. Don’t worry, though. If he doesn’t come back, I’ll go get him.”

“Of course you will.” She sighed for a stretched-out moment before speaking softly. “Take care, Ed. I’ll see you in three months.”

“Bye, Win. See you then.”

Hanging up was harder than he thought it should be, but at least the call had calmed Ed down some. With a long, drawn-out exhale, Ed moved back to his computer and decided to play some more games. He needed to keep his mind occupied, at least for the aforementioned three days.
After that, things were bound to calm back down.

Ed played until late into the night, round after round, one after another. When his brain’s processing speed began to slow and he began to have trouble keeping his straining, squinty eyes open, Ed finally stopped.

Sitting in the computer chair, Ed let his head thunk down onto his desk and closed his eyes.

Then, there was the sound of a message in his chat window.

[Flame: Have you been playing all day?]

Ed closed one eye to try and read it clearly, but ended up having to rub at his face before he replied.

[Fullmetal: Yeah, I was feeling a bit uneasy all day, and playing occupied my mind.]

[Flame: You must be tired after playing for so long. Get some rest, Fullmetal.]

[Fullmetal: I will. Promise.]

With that, Ed’s head dropped completely as he finally gave up on consciousness. He fell asleep so fast, he didn’t see Flame reply with one more message.

[Flame: Stay away from the Black Tower.]

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When Ed woke up the next morning, he had to stretch out his arms and rub at his neck. When he read Flame’s message, Ed quickly sent off his own reply, but Flame was already offline. Feeling a bit disappointed and slightly annoyed, Ed had to get up and attempt to crack his back. He hadn’t been keeping up with the exercises Izumi made them do every morning, but Ed would use today to get back into the habit. The feeling of uneasiness that dogged him would work as motivation enough.

His heartbeat was still erratic, so fast and powerful that it seemed to pound in his ears as Ed did his pushups, sit-ups, squats, and stretches.

After his mild workout, Ed moved back over to the computer, noting absently that his uneasiness and anxiety were mostly gone. It was just at a residual hum, like a long-plucked guitar string.

The Black Tower event was being discussed everywhere online.

The government still wasn’t giving out any specific explanations. Likely, they were just as clueless at the moment as everybody else, but that didn’t stop the rest of the online world from discussing relevant information on the Black Towers worldwide.

Many people had set up blogs in the last two days, detailing how to survive without electricity, or how to distill polluted water, how to hunt, and many other things. In Ed’s opinion, it was all useless, but by the increased number of threads, they gave some people comfort. It was like a Dummy’s Survival Guide in case of the apocalypse.

While a lot of people seemed to be panicking, there were others who seemed to be excited about everything going on. People who’d had no meaning in life suddenly started praying to the Black Tower like it was a god, hoping for salvation and redemption, or something. Ed didn’t linger on
those posts.

He did, however, pause on one particular thread.

[Forum: Don’t gather together.]

That was it, that was the title. After that, there was nothing. Comments were disabled, and no explanation was given. Yet, for some reason, that warning seemed to stick in Ed’s mind more than anything else he’d read.

Don’t gather together.

Why?

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In the afternoon, Director West made an announcement on the library staff’s group chat.

[Director Victoria West: Emergency notice! The day after tomorrow, the library will be requisitioned as a temporary research center. Please swing by to collect all personal belongings either today or tomorrow. I’ll say it again - the day after tomorrow, the library will be requisitioned…]

The group chat blew up.

Several veteran employees asked why the library was being requisitioned, and where (or even if) they could still work. There were a few younger employees joking.

[The world is ending. Who cares about our jobs?]

Ed looked up at the Black Tower in the distance again…

Don’t gather together…

Well, warning or not, this made up Ed’s mind for him. Swiftly, he moved to pick up his bag and headed for the library. With the way the chat group was blowing up, Ed was fairly sure no one else would be there this morning. They would all likely save their trips for the afternoon, or just pick everything up tomorrow if they cared to pick their things up at all.

He had to admit that Amestris was doing a fairly good job at keeping up social stability. Ed had seen many other threads online that showed multiple riots on the streets, and people running and screaming and hurting each other. With humanity, when panic and fear came first, chaos followed soon after, and Ed was sure that that would be the case everywhere if this went on for a few more days. Luckily, it wouldn’t. Today was the third day, and tomorrow, when nothing happened, people would begin to calm back down and reorganize themselves back into some semblance of society.

On the bus, it was clear that nobody gave much of a crap anymore.

The driver had an ashtray near his elbow, and he smoked heavily as he drove. Despite wrinkling his nose at the smell, Ed decided to remain silent.

A decision that was not echoed by the middle-aged lady that got on the bus at the next stop. Clutching her child to her chest, she sneered at the driver.

“How can you be smoking while driving? Isn’t that against policy?”
“Fuck you, lady, you’re lucky I’m driving at all. You wanna drive? I’ll get off right here and take my smoke away with me.”

“What are you saying?! It’s against the bus company rules! Do you think that people won’t say anything later just because weird things are happening right now?”

The driver and the woman kept arguing back and forth, but the two female students sitting near Ed rushed to try and intervene. It took a while, but the two noisy people were persuaded to calm down and the two girls walked back to their seats, plopping down heavily. One of them began to speak.

“Today is the third day, right?”

“Ah, yeah. Like you said, it really is the third day.”

The girls spoke while they played around with their phones. “What do you think the Black Tower meant when it said eliminating players wasn’t limited to games? It’s been three days, and nothing’s happened. What games? Was it talking about a rock, paper, scissors game?

“Hehe, do you want to try?”

“Sure! Rock!”

“Paper!”

“Scissors!”

“Ah, I lost. Then I guess I’m eliminated, right? How could you, Allison! You eliminated me!”

The two girls looked at each other, one wide-eyed and the other glaring, before they both cracked and burst into laughter.

It looked like a small group of people had already put the Black Tower incident behind them and went about their daily lives without much care.

When Ed got to the library, he saw a large group of nearly thousands of people holding signs and shouting out slogans as they confronted the armed riot police keeping the crowd away from the Black Tower. From the signs and slogans, Ed could tell that this group were all people who believed the Black Tower would bring about the end of the world, and it needed to be destroyed as soon as possible.

Ed detoured around the library to the employees-only back door. Just like he’d thought, he was the only one there. That was good for his nerves, at least.

As the shouts from the crowd outside nearly echoed through the library’s doors, Ed went to his employee locker and began to gather his things: his little research notebook, several loose sheets of paper containing some of his more scientific data, and a small keychain shaped like a suit of armor. The keychain had been from Al, and the only real reason Ed had come here at all. His research was all in his head, and likely, whoever found it wouldn’t know what to do with it, so it was useless. This keychain, though, this was important.

Closing his locker, Ed moved to leave the library altogether when a sudden noise stopped him in his tracks. It came from the southeast corner of the basement…

Ed stood still, listening intently for any other noise, but when none came, he narrowed his eyes. Moving to a security cabinet in the employee office, he grabbed a riot stick and moved silently towards the stairs.
He was at a disadvantage here. Though he had the higher ground, the other party knew his position. Ed had to be alert as he descended the stairs.

When he got to the basement, Ed knew the bookshelves would block his full view, so an ambush wasn’t totally impossible. But still, this was a library. If the thing in there was another employee, then…

He had to take the chance.

“Hello? Who’s there?”

The instant he spoke, Ed moved on quiet feet to a different location, making sure the thing or person in there with him wouldn’t be able to pinpoint his position.

There was no answer.

He could vaguely hear the sound of muttering around one of the bookshelves, though, along with the sound of someone pulling books off the shelf and pushing them back in. A sound Ed was very familiar with.

Ed moved like a cat, careful and silent, creeping over to the area where the noise was coming from, but keeping vigilant every time he passed another shelf of books. As soon as he rounded the one where the noise was coming from, he frowned.

“Mr. Allen?”

An ordinary young man with messy hair and shiny, wide eyes startled as he turned to look at Ed in a panic, a book clutched to his chest.

Ed relaxed his grip on the riot stick, but he didn’t let down his guard. “Mr. Religi – um, Mr. Allen, what are you doing here?”

Mr. Religious stiffened for only a moment before letting out a huffy, hollow laugh and placing the book in his arms back on the shelf.

Still no answer.

“How the hell did you get in here?”

“There’s a window along the east wall that wasn’t closed properly… I just came in from there…”

Ed knew that window. It was one of the long windows attached to the ground, and connected here to the basement. It was mainly used for a bit of light and ventilation, though. How would Mr. Religious have gotten in through that window? Did he break it?

Ed wasn’t in the mood for this. “Mr. Allen, you know that what you’re doing is called breaking and entering, right? Also add stealing on top of that.”

“I’m not stealing anything!” Mr. Religious denied hastily, his arms coming up in a show of surrender.

Ed looked the man up and down, twirling the riot stick once in his hand. He walked over to the bookshelf in front of Mr. Religious and studied the books carefully.

There was nothing missing from the way Ed had left everything three days ago. It looked like the ‘not stealing’ part was true, at least.
“Then why the hell did you break in here…?”

“Ding Dong! The game ‘Who Stole My Book?’ has been triggered. At 17:52 on November 17th, 2018, players Edward Elric and Zane Allen have safely entered the zone. The players have entered the sandbox, the game map is complete, data loading…”

In an instant, just like that, all the noises from the chanting crowd outside the library disappeared. It was suddenly so quiet that Ed could hear himself breathing… and he could hear it when that breath stuttered and paused.

In the empty library, a clear child’s voice pierced the silent air, singing an out-of-tune nursery rhyme.

“Oh, and by the window, glass shook.

Two players stepped into the house.

Don’t make a sound for three days and three nights.

The angel and demon abound.

Now, who stole my book?”
Chapter 3 – Little Mosaic

People who didn’t believe in the Black Towers just observed them, from the first day until the third. They believed that the towers were the result of their governments’ high-tech research, and wouldn’t do any harm to anyone. It was impossible for their governments to harm their people. Even if something really did happen, they had their leaders - their presidents, queens, emperors, chiefs… whatever. As long as the top leaders were still there, they didn’t have to do anything but wait and see. Even if the sky itself fell to the ground at their feet.

On the other hand, those who believed in the Black Towers felt a great amount of crippling fear on the third day.

“What are the games about? What’s ‘elimination’? We need a statement!”

“Statement! Explain!”

“We need to know what is going on!”

More and more people marched and rioted, blocking the city center of West City, and many other large cities around the world. There were even more people looting and rebelling, stealing and burning down everything around them. Despite the armed riot police warning everyone off, they used their numbers to their advantage and refused to leave. They would cling to the white, plastic barricade, and even break it if they could.

Amestris as a country was usually very stable, with a strong cohesiveness and optimal military control. Instead of a president, they had a Fuhrer - a strong military commander. Their army was second-to-none, despite their unusually small size. But that didn’t mean they controlled everything. Especially not with Amestris itself separated into five different regions: Central, North, South, East, and West.

In some poor and weak countries, especially those where their government deterrence was weak at best, the ‘Black Tower is a Danger’ group occupied their government's attention on the first day.

“The Black Tower is God, and it will lead us to salvation! The time of the Black Tower has come! My great and holy master, please save us!”

“Grant us strength!”

Thousands of people bowed in worship, yearning for a new and better century.

Ed didn’t really know about any of these things going on at the moment.

Currently, he held a black riot stick in his left hand, his right clenched into a hard fist, as sweat began covering his forehead. The clear, little kid-voice sang its creepy nursery rhyme, and once it was finished, the last notes echoed loud and ethereal in the empty library.

“Did you hear that?” Ed’s voice was barely audible through his gritted teeth.

Mr. Religious was lying on the ground in a fetal position, rocking back and forth, obviously scared and confused as he hid his face behind his hands. When he did look up, Ed could only see a pair of shaken, fearful eyes. Mr. Religious was so frightened, he couldn’t even speak. And wasn’t that…
odd.

The man slowly uncurled himself, staggering up onto his knees and shrinking back against the wall near the basement’s check-out desk, holding his head in trembling hands and repeating, “What… What was that thing? What— what was that thing?”

Ed couldn’t even begin to try to explain.

Hell, Ed didn’t even know.

There was a long stretch of silence in the library after the nursery rhyme had ended.

With the silence falling, so did Ed’s fear. He was gradually calming down.

Most people would be at a loss when coming face-to-face with danger. Panic and fear were natural animal reactions. Ed wasn’t most people.

Years of getting beaten down had given Ed an extremely stable and sensible sense of survival. The accident that had taken his arm and leg had nearly taken him out, but he’d surpassed it because of Al and Winry and Granny Pinako. The fire that nearly took away his brother was the next obstacle, and though he’d panicked at first, that didn’t last long. Ed had to take care of his brother. He donated parts of his own skin, and worked as an office assistant when he wasn’t in class. He visited his brother every night, sleeping in a cot in Al’s hospital room because they’d both lost nearly everything when the fire took their house.

Ed was much too used to fighting against his fears. This wouldn’t be what broke him. Whatever this was, it didn’t matter. He needed to get out of here and find Al. There was no time or room for anxiety and panic.

Despite his tachycardia and the anxiety he’d been experiencing for the past two days, Ed now found himself completely and utterly calm.

Ed still held the riot stick with his left hand, holding his right arm out before him to act as a shield if need be. The silicon skin sleeve was convincing to the naked eye, but as soon as someone touched it, they would know the skin was fake. It would work for now as he approached the window.

Outside the window, the world was a pure and uninterrupted white.

This was an east-facing window. Normally, Ed would be able to see the main street of West City, and several famous military buildings. Only… there was nothing. Just. White.

Swiftly and guardedly, he moved to look through the southeast and northwest windows in the basement room, before returning to the check-out desk.

“We aren’t in Amestris anymore.”

Mr. Religious huddled against the corner wall, looking up at Ed in horror.

What was wrong with this guy? Wasn’t he supposed to be a religious fanatic?

Shaking off the thought, Ed spoke calmly. “We’re surrounded by blank, white nothingness, but this really is the library. It’s like the entire library got moved into a big, white room. I’ve been working here for a few years, and take a look at that. My coworker’s water bottle is still on the desk, exactly like our library.”
Mr. Religious finally seemed to realize that he wasn’t alone after Ed’s explanation. He found the courage to stand up, and looked around, suddenly saying, “Ah, yes. This is the book I hid here last week!”

He moved to pull a book out from behind one of the towers in the computer section. Ed raised an eyebrow.

“I was afraid the book would be checked-out before I could read it, so I hid it behind the computers,” the other man explained.

Ed wanted to punch the man. It was people like him who made working at a library completely unbearable.

That wasn’t what mattered now, though. Ed was a librarian who worked here, and Mr. Religious was one of their regular visitors. If both of them could confirm that this was their original library, then it really was.

Reluctantly, Ed waved Mr. Religious over to the basement’s security cabinet and pulled out another riot stick. With everything being so unknown, a weapon for each of them would keep them as safe as possible, at this point. No matter Ed’s skills, he really wasn’t inclined to save someone he had nothing to do with, so it would be better if Mr. Religious could protect himself.

The two men had just arrived back at the check-out desk when the sound of footsteps was heard near one of the bookshelves in the basement.

Mr. Religious’s eyes widened in fright, while Ed froze, tensing with an instinctual intent to strike first and strike fast.

They’d looked around this floor already. There had been no one. So, who did those footsteps belong to?

Ed clutched the riot stick, falling into a careful fighting stance as he cautiously moved forward, Mr. Religious at his back. Ed didn’t trust the man at all, so he moved nearer to the wall and kept his back to it, looking around like a hawk - careful and waiting.

As they got closer, the sound became clearer. It was very irregular, but it kept to a certain beat, like someone skipping… A child, most likely, since the steps were lighter than a normal human adult.

It didn’t even take half a minute for a small shadow to appear from between two bookshelves. It was a little girl, with long, black hair tied into two pigtails. Despite it being late November, she was wearing a red dress, and a pair of shiny, red leather shoes.

The noise had been her… skipping.

“G-g-g- ghost! It’s a ghost!”

Mr. Religious shrank back behind Ed.

Ed gritted his teeth in both anger and helplessness.

It wasn’t…. He wasn’t really panicking or anything, but… what was with her face?

The little girl in the red dress looked around seven or eight years old. The skirt was short and delicate, her small shoes were bright, candy-apple red, and she carried a school bag on her back with a Minnie Mouse theme on it. Her outfit was extremely detailed, and she looked no different
than an average little girl.

It was just that her face was covered with a thick and intricate mosaic.

She had no eyebrows, no eyes, no nose, and no mouth visible.

Just an extremely detailed, colorful approximation of a face-like mosaic.

Ed had to still himself against the instinct to strike first and ask questions later.

“Hello, Big Brother, have you seen my book?”

Big Brother?

No matter how clear and sweet her voice was, Ed could only feel horror and confusion when he looked at her face.

When he didn’t answer, the girl tried again.

“Big Brother, have you seen my book?”

The little girl looked small and weak; it should be easy for Ed to subdue her. Still, this place was strange, and this girl was clearly not human. Ed wasn’t one to fight unless he was pushed to it, so the only thing he could do was play along for now.

Trying to force a gentle smile on his face, Ed licked his lips and opened his mouth. “Hi, little girl, what book are you looking for?”

“Big Brother, your smile is so creepy.”

A vein on Ed’s forehead throbbed, and his smile became more like a snarl. Before he could try again, the little girl spoke up.

“My book is gone. Big Brother, can you help me find it? Mother is very annoying. I hate reading, but she bought me so many books! The books are ugly, but Mother will be very angry if I lose any of them. Mother will kill me if the book is gone! Big Brother, can you help me find my book?”

Ed was quick to drop his false smile. Instead, his brain started to work overtime. “Who is your mother?”

“My mother is Mother. Big Brother, you’re very strange.”

Mr. Religious spoke up in a trembling voice from behind Ed. “If you can’t find the book, your–your mother will kill you?”

“Yes, Mother will be very angry. Mother is very scary when she is angry.”

Mr. Religious shook his head. “Surely, she wouldn’t kill you?”

The girl tilted her head, her right ponytail falling in front of her mosaic face. Ed wasn’t sure why, but he felt like, if it wasn’t for the mosaic, the girl would be laughing at them right now. She looked at Ed and Mr. Religious with a dark line over her eyes. “Oh, but if Big Brother doesn’t help me find the book, I will kill Big Brother.”

It was like getting dumped into a pool of cold water. Ed’s muscles tensed, preparing for a fight as he kept a close eye on the little girl.
A moment of thought later, he asked lightly, “Do you remember what book it was? I can find it for you.”

“Um…” The little girl shook her head slowly, her pigtails swaying back and forth. She seemed to be thinking hard, even if he couldn’t see it on her mosaic face. She made the ‘um’ sound for a long time, before finally giving up and crying out, “I can’t remember!”

Yeah, Ed had long guessed that that would be her answer.

Suddenly, the girl jumped, and hastily said, “Ah, I have to go to school! My teacher will also kill me if I’m late! I’ll be going now. Big Brother, you have to help me find my book!” She turned on her heel and ran back into the bookshelves.

The little girl disappeared, and this bizarre little game had officially started.

Suddenly, a noise from the check-out counter drew both Ed and Mr. Religious back behind the desk. The computer that belonged to Ed had suddenly lit up, and Ed was quick to move forward, the other man right at his heels.

On the blue computer background, black text started to appear. It was written almost like a diary entry.

Ed didn’t hesitate to read it out loud. “November 15th. Weather – clear. I lost my mother’s book. Mother is going to kill me.”

Mr. Religious suddenly exclaimed, “It changed! The words changed! November 16th. Weather – overcast. I passed by my mother, and she still doesn’t know the book is gone. Where is the book? Where is the book? Mother is really going to kill me!”

Again, the entry on the screen changed.

Ed began to read it out loud. “November 17th. Weather – overcast. Mother seems to have found out. Did she find out?” As the words changed, Ed continued to read. “November 18th. Weather – rain. Oh no, oh no, oh no… Mother really will kill me.”

Both Ed and Mr. Religious fell silent.

“…A- are we really going to die?” the man muttered anxiously to himself.

Ed turned to look at him.

Working in a library all day, every day got boring. Every day, Ed would help people, and then during breaks, he and his coworkers would occasionally talk about the crazy or weird things they’d seen that day. Mr. Religious had been one of those weird things.

He didn’t seem to have a job, or anywhere to go most of the time. He came into the library nearly every day and read books. Alice had said that Mr. Religious was dumped by his girlfriend, and as a result, his mental state began to deteriorate.

In the minds of most of the library staff members, Mr. Religious was nothing more than another interesting story to tell their friends. Funny, and maybe a little pitiful, but still a story. Ed honestly didn’t think any of them had actually seen Mr. Religious as an actual living, breathing human being.

Now… Ed was starting to see the man behind the stories.
Ed looked back at the man calmly. For some reason, the more Mr. Religious panicked and fretted, the more Ed’s own mood seemed to stabilize. He wasn’t necessarily afraid. Sure, he felt a small degree of anxiety and trepidation, as well as an interesting dose of resignation, but there was also curiosity. Excitement. That question was actually odder than anything else Mr. Religious had done so far. And so when Ed answered, he answered honestly. “I don’t know. Maybe we really will die.”

Mr. Religious made a wounded whine in the back of his throat in despair, but Ed was no longer paying attention. Ed hadn’t been afraid of death in a long time.

“Hang on, there are more words on the screen.” With that, he began to read again. “The mosaic girl is sensible and obedient…” Ed’s expression twisted as he continued. “There is only one drawback to the mosaic girl. She doesn’t like to read. Her mother hates little girls who don’t like to read, especially little girls who throw their books away and lie about them being stolen. However, her mother doesn’t know that the mosaic girl isn’t lying. She didn’t throw away the book. The demon stole it.”

Ed instantly frowned at the word ‘demon’.

“The demon hates books the most. Demons are illiterate. Why should they even want to read? Only because those pitiful winged creatures can read? The evil demon stole the book and was discovered by the angel. He didn’t burn the book, but secretly hid it in a library. But the library shelves all look exactly the same. After the angel left, the foolish demon couldn’t find it again, and let out an angry roar –

That damn book!”

Once Ed finished reading, the little-kid voice was back again.

“Ding Dong! The game ‘Who Stole My Book?’ has officially begun. During the game –

First, Violence is prohibited.

Second, Angels can get a clue about the book during the daytime.

Third, the demon can burn any one bookshelf at night.

Clever and kind angel, the mosaic girl will be killed by her angry mother in three days. Do you have the heart to watch such a lovely little girl die?”

Ed was speechless…

How the hell was she ‘lovely’?!
Chapter 4 – The Angel

Ed surveyed the library, but no one else was here and the quiet had once again bathed the place. There was no signs of the so-called angel or demon.

“Mr. Allen, can you help me turn off the computer? I want to see if I can take a book off the shelves.”

Mr. Righteous nodded, and then clicked at the mouse to shut down the computer.

Ed glanced intently at the back of Mr. Righteous’ right hand, then strode to the nearest bookshelf and pulled out a book, only to put it back again. “We can still remove books from the shelves. Just to make sure – Mr. Allen, did you hear that voice?”

The religious fanatic paused, before asking in confusion. “Do you mean the voice that told us to help the little girl find the book or she would die?”

Ed nodded, and moved to sit behind the check-out desk, the older man following his every step. “It seems that we belong to the angel camp.” Ed said, stretching out his left hand as he spoke. Mr. Righteous saw it and mimicked the move. Pulling up his right hand instead to show the image of a pair of angel wings decorating the back.

“Ah, I have that too.”

The moment the child-like voice had said the word, ‘angel’, Ed had felt the tingle of his left hand, only to discover the pattern on the back. The intention was obvious. Ed belonged to the angel camp. Most of the human population was right-handed, it was only Ed’s luck that losing his right hand had forced him into training to write with his left. It wasn’t pretty, but it got the work done. So on that hunch, he’d asked Mr. Righteous to turn off the computer in order to determine the other man’s team without arousing suspicion.

However, given that Mr. Righteous was also an angel, the problem became that much more serious.

Mr. Righteous, apparently following right along the same train of thought suddenly asked, “Wait. We’re both angels. Then… who is the demon?”

The library was exactly the same as the one Ed worked in, and out of a weird sort of instinct, he reached into one of the drawers by his desk and pulled out some of the candy Al sent over a few months ago. Usually, he’d only eat one a day to make it last, but seeing as this is maybe not even the real library, Ed’ll take two.

Drumming his left-hand fingers on the table softly, Ed allowed himself to get lost in his thoughts.

“The first possibility is that the demon isn’t like us. Demons aren’t human players. The weird voice should be related to the black tower and it’s not a stretch to assume that this is one of its ‘games’ that it mentioned three days ago. This gives us one clue at least, there are unknown creatures in the black tower, and like the black tower, the demon isn’t human, it is an opponent set up by the black tower itself.”

This seemed to make Mr. Righteous have epiphany. “So, the reason there isn’t anyone else in the
library is because the demon doesn’t exist?”

Ed bobbed his head from side to side, “Yes. Maybe. It might be the case, but there is also a better theory. The second possibility is that the demon is human.”

Mr. Righteous nervously gripped the riot stick, “Is he hiding?”

Ed paused, the word ‘he’ striking some kind of nerve. Unwilling to let it show, Ed smiles. “It’s a possibility.”

An unknown opponent was always far more dangerous than a known one.

With that thought, Ed and Mr. Righteous split up. Since Mr. Righteous was broader and taller than Ed, he’d look for the demon who might be hiding in the library. Ed would go up to the first and second floor to check out the rest of the building.

Originally, Mr. Righteous had been afraid of doing the searching all by himself, but Ed was quick to argue, “The voice said that violence is prohibited.” He wasn’t really sure why, but he believed the tower. The rules.

Mr. Righteous was still scared despite that, and reluctantly, he staggered further into the library, gripping the riot stick and moving slowly.

But it wasn’t long before Ed returned. With a twisted expression, he growled. “I can’t get up the stairs.”

Mr. Righteous startles and whips around. “Huh?”

“There are two ways to get up to the first floor. The first, is to take the staff elevator. The second is to go down the stairs. I tried to take the stairs but there was some kind of invisible wall at the threshold, stopping me. Then I tried the staff elevator and it wouldn’t start. There is no way back up.”

Mr. Righteous frowned, “That means we can only move about freely in the basement? Then the book we’re looking for must be on this floor.”

Ed frowned, head bowing a bit as he looked through the shelves of the basement floor.

The other man’s face suddenly scrunched up, with a trembling voice and rigid body, he asks, “How many bookshelves are there in this floor?”

“23.”

Mr. Righteous’ eyes widened. “What? Why are there so little?”

Ed jerked his shoulders in a shrug, thinking about it for a bit.

A few months ago, no one knew what Director West was smoking, but suddenly, she felt the need to modernize the library experience and transformed the basement floor into half a computer lab. The Amestris West City Library carried within it, multiple decades of history. The facility was old, probably one of the first buildings to come up after the military headquarters. After Director West renovated the basement, the original 100+ shelves were reduced to 23 large bookshelves all connected together.

Many patrons had complained that the shelves were inconvenient to circumvent, and Director West
already decided to change it all back to how it was, coming the new year. Unfortunately, Ed was pretty sure that she was never going to get the chance to rearrange anything in her life.

It was actually a boon that Ed and Mr. Righteous were stuck on the basement floor of the library. Ed was a library staff member who mostly worked on the basement floor, while Mr. Righteous liked to read books on history and religion, and these books were usually all confined to the basement. Both of them were the most familiar with the basement floor.

Despite that, the fewer shelves made it easier for the demon to burn the books. The probability of the book they were looking for getting burned greatly increased.

Both of them were stuck on that singular worry when familiar footsteps echoed among the bookshelves. Ed really didn’t know where the mosaic girl went when she left, or where she came from when she arrived, but it was all creepy as hell. The little girl was holding a small bowl of rice, a bib around her neck with a pig drawn on the front.

“Have you found my book?”

Mr. Righteous shook his head. “We haven’t even started looking yet.”

Instantly, the little girl was angered. “You haven’t started looking yet!? I finally managed to sneak out during luck time! The first day is almost over. Once the afternoon classes end, I’ll have to go home and it is all over if Mother finds out.”

Ed asked, “Do you have any clues? Do you remember anything about the contents of the book, or what it was about?”

The little girl shook her head, her ponytails swinging back and forth. “I can’t remember.”

Mr. Righteous hurriedly said, “Aren’t you going to give us any clues?”

The little girl stopped, her face twisting up before making a small sound in the back of her throat. “Ah, I just remembered something! I found this feather in my room this morning. It’s a demon’s feather! I knew that I wasn’t the one who lost the book, it was the damned demon who stole it! Demons are liars. I hate demons the most. That evil demon! If I get my hands on him, I’m going to cut off his wings, and feed them to him before I burn him alive!”

‘Liars’… ‘Burn’…

Ed’s mind caught on those words before the little girl ran up to him and placed the black feather in his hands, before turning and walking away.

“Ding Dong! The angel has received the ‘Demon’s Feather’ hint.”

Both Ed and Mr. Righteous frowned.

“…This is our hint?” Ed muttered.

The man beside him awkwardly stared as Ed rotated the feather in his hands, his face anxious. “What, is this feather special or something? Can it do anything?”

Ed didn’t answer. He held it with his right and felt the with his left, letting his skin take notice in a way his silicone hand wouldn’t. It seemed to be just a normal, ordinary feather without any magical or supernatural properties.
Right then, all of the light in the library suddenly disappeared.

Mr. Righteous screamed in fright.

The entire library was plunged into darkness, coughing Ed’s heart to stutter a beat. Standing next to the check-out desk, he reflexively moved to turn on the old lamp on the table. The faint yellow light illuminated a small radius around the desk, enclosing both Ed and Mr. Righteous.

Ed started out at the basement bookshelves, all of it shrouded in darkness.

Biting his tongue to keep himself from sinking into panic, Ed reached for another light. Despite the search though, it was apparent that only the lamp on the check-out desk would turn on.

Slowly, Ed moves down, sitting on the floor, back against the check-out desk. The other young man quickly moving to follow along.

Accidentally, he knocked into Ed’s left leg, and instantly froze.

Ed smirked thinly. He didn’t want to have this conversation in the dead dark with a person he isn’t sure he likes, during some unrelenting, messed up game. Still, he wasn’t surprised when the other man asked.

“M-Mr. Elric?”

“It’s a prosthetic. I lost my leg when I was younger. Lost my arm too.” Ed explained, succinctly and sharp. He didn’t want to explain. Hopefully his tone would convey that.

“P-prosthetic?”

Ed doesn’t answer.

That seems to be enough.

In the endless darkness, curiosity begins to be eroded by fear. The library had three floors and this basement was the only place with a dim shred of light. Even the windows were pitch black, nothing existing outside this space. It was as if there was a vicious beast stalking them in the night. If they stepped outside the circle of light, they would be eaten alive.

To Ed’s credit, he was staying remarkably calm for never having dealt with this type of ‘horror movie’ situation. Mr. Righteous on the other hand –

“Do you hear anything?” The frightened man was moving closer to Ed, nearly on top of him, and Ed wanted to snort but he kept that to himself. Things were already tense enough.

“No. I don’t hear anything.”

There was a loud gulp from beside him. “Why did it suddenly get so dark?”

Ed remembered the little nursery rhyme the child’s voice had sung when all of this began. “Don’t make a sound for three days and three nights, the angel and demon abound. The angels get a hint during the day, and the demon can burn one bookshelf a night. By the darkness right now, it seems that day and night in the game are different from our normal flow of time.”

The young religious man buried his head in his hands.

Ed wasn’t paying him much attention anymore. “It looks like it’s two hours.”
“What?”

“This game started at 17:52. It’s 19:68 now, so two hours is one day.”

Mr. Religious was shocked, “You’ve got a pretty good memory.”

The man only vaguely remembered the child’s song after the game began. It seemed like a time was mentioned, but he’d been too terrified to pay it any real attention at the time, let alone remember it. Yet Ed had managed, even in the panicked state they’d both been in.

Ed honestly didn’t feel like explaining to the man what an eidetic memory was, so he moved on.

“Let’s assume that there are two hours in one day. The rhyme said to not say a word for three days and nights. Likely, it means that the little girl will die three days later. So, let’s presume that nighttime is also two hours. At ‘night’, the demon will come out to burn one of the bookshelves.”

With that hypothesis, both Ed and the young man stared wide-eyed out into the 23 dark bookshelves for a long while.

Despite being told that the game forbid violence, the two of them still didn’t trust that statement fully. They were afraid to relax, so held tight to their nerves and their weapons as they stayed as quiet as possible. There was a bit of psychological comfort in not being completely alone in the dark.

Still, when an hour and a half passed and they didn’t see anything happening, Ed began to smirk.

Mr. Religious spoke up, “Is there really a demon?”

Ed’s eyes narrowed as he turned to stare at the young man. “There should be.”

“Then why hasn’t he burned a bookshelf yet?”

Ed leaned back against the check-out desk and said meaningfully, “I’d also like to know why he hasn’t burned a bookshelf yet.”

Mr. Religious wasn’t getting it. Ed clenched his right fist and watched the man with deep, intent eyes. “Mr. Allen, why do you think the demon hasn’t burned anything yet-”

_Boom!

The loud explosion nearly made Ed scream. The brief memory of headlights coming at his brother’s side of the car, of reaching for Al… of blood and fire. His arm was trapped…

No.

No, this wasn’t the past, this was now. He needed to stay in the now. He needed to keep his head on straight. This wasn’t the past.

Ed’s wide eyes moved quickly to the place where the explosion originated. He saw the flames swallowing up one of the bookshelves. Seeing such a huge flame in a library was horrible, as if it would ignite everything and there would be no saving them. Ed and Mr. Religious started from beginning to end, watching the flames burn only that one bookshelf before finally going out. They didn’t see a single person appear even as the flames died.

On the second day, the little girl appeared again, her Minnie Mouse school bag slung over her shoulders.
“You haven’t found my book yet? My mother went to visit mole uncle’s house today. I managed to hide from her and she didn’t discover that my book was stolen. I can’t hide it forever. She will find out. When will you find the book for me?”

Flashbacks painted Ed’s face pale white, but he rubbed his temple with his left hand, sighing heavily. First the huge ‘boom’ and now then the fire. Fuck. “Do you have another clue about the book today?”

The little girl was not amused. “I told you I don’t remember. If I don’t remember, then I don’t remember!”

“It’s the second day.” Ed reminded her, holding on to his patience by a thin string.

The little girl fell silent as his worlds, but Ed could feel that under that mosaic face, the little girl was glaring at him. She said, “You are an angel and have read so many books. You will certainly know the book I need. I’m not an angel. I hate reading books. How can I have a clue about the book? You should know!”

“Ding Dong! The angel has received the second clue: ‘Mosaic’s Contempt’.”

Ed closed his eyes and took a deep, steadying breath.
Chapter 5 – The Demon Part 1

The mosaic girl bounced away after leaving that strange hint.

Ed had to take several deep breaths to hold tight to his desire to kill that damned little girl.

It was not ‘daytime’, the demon had disappeared and it was now the angel’s turn to walk about freely. Now that they’d been in this strange mirror place for a few hours, both Ed and Mr. Religious weren’t so nervous about it. The two gripped their riot-sticks and paced to the burnt down bookshelf. Ed squatted down to examine the ashes.

There were 23 bookshelves on the basement floor of the library. The one that was burned was the ninth shelf from the check-out desk.

It had been the category one shelf, with most of the books being about domestic and foreign travel, geography, and some religion books. Now they were all burned to ashes, the wooden bookshelf a piece of black charcoal on the ground, while all of the books were small piles of black and grey dust. Ed couldn’t help reaching out to touch the black ash.

“It isn’t hot.”

Mr. Religious was confused. “It isn’t hot?”

Ed tilted his head to the left in thought. “According to the child’s voice, the shelf burned all night, so it is plausible that it isn’t hot. But if we go by our own time flow, it was only half an hour ago. Not to even mention how such a large bookcase with over 10,000 books could be burned so cleanly in only an hour… No amount of logic and physics can explain this.”

Mr. Religious looked at him like he was stupid. “This was burned by the demon. Of course it can’t be explained by science.”

This entire experience happening to them was beyond the scope of theoretical science, but Ed couldn’t help his scientific brain from scrambling for some kind of explanation. He wished Al was here. Some of Ed’s best theories happened when he could bounce ideas off his younger brother. The man had a mind as heightened as Ed’s own, and despite the paths their futures took, Ed would always be a scientist at heart.

Despite that, Ed figured that if enough weird shit kept happening, Ed would need to conform with the new rules here. It was proven science that if one couldn’t adapt, one would find itself dead before long.

Mr. Religious was obviously more concerned about finding their unknown book. He gulped loudly, “Didn’t the little girl say that the angel knew the book she lost? Edward, can you think of any books?” He paused a moment before adding, “I’ve read too many books. I’ve been reading in this library for a year, and I don’t even know all the books I’ve read by now.”

Ed wasn’t as anxious. “I’ve been responsible for the books coming into the third floor. More than likely, I know more books than you. Have likely read more of them too.”

The older man stared at him, a pinched look distorting his features. “Then what do we do? It’s already the second day.”
Ed didn’t bother answering as he made his way around the pile of black ash and broken, burnt down shelf. The man kept speaking behind him, loudly going over everything he remembered the little girl saying to them, only to come up short on any conclusive evidence. Frustrated, he cried out, “Edward! What do we do!”

“Don’t worry.” Ed intoned smoothly, squatting down in front of another part of the burnt-out bookshelf. The artificial sunshine shone on his long blond hair, making it look like pure golden silk as he smiled slightly, “The most important thing right now is: Why did the demon burn down this bookshelf?”

The older man suddenly froze.

There were 23 bookshelves in the basement room, and according to common sense the probability of the demon burning the book was 3/23. On the premise that the angel didn’t find the book before the third night that is.

Mr. Religious stopped to think before attempting to speak up. “The kid said that the demon couldn’t remember which bookshelf he hid her book in. Following that logic, he should be just burning them randomly, right?”

“Perhaps.”

The man ran both hands through his short black hair, stress marking all the angles of his body. “We have to hurry and find that book. If we can’t find it, we’ll be finished. The books I’ve recently read are on this bookshelf and…” The man’s face twisted. “The burned shelf as well. Edward, what about you?”

Ed pushed himself to his feet, his left leg almost protesting. He’d need to oil it later. “I’ve seen too many books. Every day, I’m the one here sorting all of them.

The older man looked crestfallen. His eyes kept darting from one bookshelf to the next, only to return to the burned-out husk of the one nearest them. All the while, he kept whispering the little girl’s words back to himself.

Ed wasn’t surprised and he wasn’t about to offer any comfort. In fact, if other people, normal people, were to encounter this situation as well, they would also, very likely, go out of their mind. And yet… Mr. Religious had failed to do the one thing every other normal person in his position would do.

He hadn’t turned on Ed.

Reaching out to grab a handful of ashes, Ed glanced up as the older man walking back and forth before suddenly sucking in a sharp gasp. “I recently had to organize one of the bookshelves. Around three days ago, the director asked me to get the History shelf in order.”

The other man’s footsteps stopped instantly as his head whipped around to look at Ed. “Three days ago? The timing is too perfect! Maybe it is there.”

The two people rushed over to the History shelf and paused, dumbfounded and intimidated.

“There are 12,000 books on the history shelf…” Ed stated, knowing the number itself was discouraging.

Instead of panicking, Mr. Religious suddenly seemed to calm. “What constitutes finding the book? If we just take it off the shelf, is that finding the book? Do you think that counts?”
The rules hadn’t mentioned it at all. The game had only stated that angels would be given a hint during the day and demons would burn the shelves at night. If they found the correct book for the mosaic girl, it would be counted as completing the task, but would success be as simple as taking the right book off the bookshelf?

Ed didn’t think so, but that didn’t really matter. He moved forward into the stacks as he said, “If we hurry, we can probably take out all the books within two hours.”

They got to work without anymore conversation.

Mr. Religious excitedly pulled books out while Ed went about the job at a more sedate pace. They split up, one on each side of the bookshelf to take as much advantage of the time as they could.

Like that, time passed quickly.

Ed had been taking out a book on the Roman Empire when night finally came. As he reached out for the next book, he found that he couldn’t remove it from the shelf. No matter how much he tugged, the thing wouldn’t even budge.

In the dark, Mr. Religious sounded horrified, “I can’t get the books out.”

“I can’t get it out either.” Ed muttered back.

Slowly, the two left the bookshelf and headed back to the help desk and the only source of light. Turning on the lamp again, they sat down to wait.

Despite the dim light, Ed and Mr. Religious stared intently at the History shelf. In the darkness, they couldn’t see clearly, but they knew that a bookshelf would burst into flames within two hours. Once those flames were blazing, they’d be able to see the entire library.

Like Al used to say, ‘a watched pot never boils’, and Ed felt that statement on a visceral level as the time passed by like a snail crawling on gravel.

The older man’s eyes were bloodshot, he looked worn down and burnt-out, like he hadn’t spelt in three days. His lips were chapped and snow-like dandruff fell from his head every time he raked his hands through his hair. The only thing that looked maintained on the man were his hands. Clean, nails trimmed and straight, it was such a contrast to the rest of the picture that Ed couldn’t help looking. Especially on the back of the man’s right hand.

A demon lies.

The second night came at 23:52, and the next day would come at 1:52. Unbidden, the clock in the library rang as the hour hit midnight.

“We’ve known each other for a year now.”

The older man whipped his head around like a frightened meerkat when the clock chimed the time, and Ed couldn’t help snorting.

After a long moment, the man finally relaxed. He seemed to be lost in thought as he looked down at the ground, at the clear area where illumination turned to darkness, and softly whispered, “It really has been a year, hasn’t it.”

Ed’s lip quirked; a sarcastic grin Al had hated. “You know your library car just expired today, right? Although, looking at the current situation, we aren’t likely to get the chance to renew it. Still,
“you should’ve finished reading all the occult and religion books on the basement floor by now, right?”

“I would’ve finished them in two days.”

“That’s a pity.”

Silence fell between them for a few heartbeats.

When the strange tension seemed to reach a breaking point, Mr. Religious spoke up again, “I know you guys often talk behind my back. You say I’m neurotic, that I’m crazy. But there are still many things in this world that can’t be explained by science or logic. You didn’t believe me before, you thought I was spouting off nonsense, but look at where we are right now. Look at everything that’s happened. Can you explain any of it with science?”

Ed grit his teeth before admitting, “I can’t.”

Mr. Religious nodded like he’d expected it. “Exactly. This is God’s work. The age of God has come, the Truth. Our prophet, our holy master, he hasn’t forsaken us just yet. The black towers that came to Earth, they are the true manifestations of God, of the Truth. It was once Jesus, once Buddha, and now it appears before us as the black tower. We have the opportunity to be one of the twelve apostles, to find true salvation, to finally grasp the Truth with our own hands.”

Ed’s smile was thin, mocking. “Then why are you so afraid of it?”

Wide-eyed, Mr. Religious had no reply.

They were talking about death, about a possible apocalypse.

Why would a religious man be afraid, if he thought that the black towers were a display from God? Some ultimate ‘Truth’? No, he shouldn’t be afraid. He should be willing, even eager for what was to come.

No one spoke after Ed’s subtle accusation. Fortunately, ‘night’ wouldn’t last much longer. In the last 10 minutes remaining of the night, there was a loud boom and one of the bookshelves was lit on fire, the ceiling reflecting the orange-red light.

Ed wanted to sigh.

The older man was quick to jump to his feet in panic. “That’s the History section! The History shelf!”

They didn’t get a chance to talk anymore as the little girl came running out from between a random stack of bookshelves. She was wearing a smooth black skirt, no school bag this time. Instead, in her hands was a small basket with what looked to be a variety of food items inside. She didn’t even spare the two burned bookshelves a glance as she walked past, running straight to Ed and Mr. Religious.

“Where’s my book?” She muttered angrily,

Instead of a reply, Ed countered with his own question, “No school today?”

Though the little girl’s expression was hidden under the thick mosaic, her cheerful voice gave her away. “Today is the first day of autumn. I like autumn the most, especially the first day. We go to a farm and there are small sheep and white rabbits.” She stretched her arms out, the basket swaying
precariously as she swallowed thickly. “The small sheep’s thighs are the best to eat, but the white rabbit’s eyes are like mini sugar balls. There are wallabies too, but their too hard to eat. Mother lights them, so I’ll bring one back for her.”

Mr. Religious paled and shivered with fear as he listened to the little girl.

Ed only glanced his way. “Mr. Allen, you seem to be ill. Are you alright?’

The man’s wide eyes snapped to him, incredulously he asked, “Aren’t you afraid? The demon knows what we’re doing during the day. He deliberately set the History self on fire. Luckily the book wasn’t on that shelf or we might’ve failed.”

It seemed his words had caught the little girl’s attention, because her entire demeanor suddenly changed, “My book!”

Ed tilted his head at her. “Do you remember anything about the book today?’

Surprisingly, there was no ‘mosaic’s contempt’ this time, but Ed was pretty sure by her body language that she was looking at him like he was an idiot.

His thoughts were confirmed when she spoke.

“Why is the angel as dumb as the demon? I know. You want my book for yourself, don’t you? The evil demon, he knew the book was expensive! That was a present from my mother for my birthday and he deliberately stole it! He knew that book was a gift from my mother and that my mother would be angry. Are you even helping me find my book?”

The little girl suddenly pulled out a huge matchstick from the small basket.

“You aren’t even looking for my book!”

“Ding Dong! The angel has received the third hint: ‘Is my friend not looking for the book? You are going to die!’.”

The little girl viciously threw the basket aside and held the match with both hands. It was bigger than her body, the red tip nearly as big as her head. When she took a step towards them, Mr. Religious took a step back.

Ed watched her, waiting for her to come closer before speaking in a careful tone, “I hate children. Especially mischievous children.”

As suddenly as she’d started, the girl’s footsteps stopped, as if she’d stepped on instant glue and couldn’t continue forward. She was quick to say, “I’m not mischievous! I’ve never done anything bad! I would never do anything bad. I’m an obedient and sensible little girl!”

Ed didn’t bother answering.

Mr. Religious eyed him nervously. “Edward?”

Why was he provoking her?

The little girl seemed to repeat her little mantra multiple times, “I never do any bad. I’m a good girl.” Ed rose an eyebrow, but paid it no mind as he walked right by her, until finally, the little girl raised her mosaic face and lifted the large match again. “You aren’t helping me find my book!”

Ed didn’t even turn to her as he reached the F sections of the nearest bookshelf. “Oh yes, you never
do anything bad. You just burn things and kill people.”

The little girl hurried move to hide the match behind her back. Comical really, since the red end was still sticking out above her head.

Ed shook out the book in his hand, ‘The Law of Equivalent Exchange’ seemed to hang in the air between them. “Isn’t this what you’re looking for?”
Chapter 6 - The Demon Part 2

“My book!”

The little girl ran towards Ed at an inhuman speed, small hands reaching out and grabbing ‘The Law of Equivalent Exchange’ and holding it tightly to her chest. She held the huge match in her left hand and the book in her right, and after determining that it was indeed the book she’d lost, she rushed to one of the reading desks and cracked the thing open.

“My mother will test me on this tomorrow. I need to read it quickly.”

In the large and spacious library, the only sound was of the little girl quietly flipping page after page.

Mr. Religious’ face grew pale, his lips drawn in a grimace as he stared at the mosaic girl sitting on one of the reading desks, book in front of her. He looked like he’d been dunked in cold water, the sweat pouring from him seemed to soak his hair in seconds, his shirt collar turning dark with it. He turned to favor Ed with a brittle, bitter smile. “So that was the book… When did you figure it out?”

Ed looked down at the man’s right hand, the riot-stick still held tightly in his fist. ON the back of that hand, the white angel wings gradually began to blacken, becoming demonic, bat-like wings instead.

Ed quirked an eyebrow sardonically. “From the moment I saw you.”

The man’s eyes narrowed in disbelief. “You’re lying.”

The little girl on the desk didn’t seem to be aware of their conversation at all, but the game had ended, so Ed and Mr. Religious moved to the reading area, taking a seat on the stuffed chairs arranged in a semi-circle.

Ed looked at the mosaic girl in the distance. In the whole damn library, she was probably the only one with the patience to read anything right now. Mr. Religious’ timid fear had disappeared though. He sat in front of Ed and started to speak, “I pulled you into this game.”

Now that was a surprise for Ed.

Without giving him time to reply, the older man kept going. “It was an accident. I snuck into the library before you even got here. I’ve spent a lot of time in this library, especially since I’m currently unemployed. I knew how to get in, and this library is very close to the black tower. After the message about the Earth being online, I chose to come here to observe the tower. On the third day, I heard it speak to me while I was reading one of the books.”

When the man raised his eyes, he stared at Ed with a serious and fanatical smile. He seemed to be seeing some great and powerful entity instead of Ed himself.

“It told me that the game was about to begin.” He turned to the window that usually faced the black tower and watched it obsessively. “I was chosen!”

Ed didn’t speak.
Everyone who worked in the place knew that Mr. Religious wasn’t crazy… just fanatical. And Ed could see every ounce of that in the man’s face as he lost himself in his thoughts. After a while, he finally seemed to calm down, but the slight flush in his cheeks betrayed him. “The game selected for me was a 1 verse 1 game. I couldn’t finish it alone. I was thinking about leaving the library and finding someone to start the game with, and then you came in. I knew you, and after a moment of thought, I deliberately made noise to bring you closer. Now… I think that was the worst decision I’ve ever made.”

Ed wasn’t going to humor him. “What is the penalty for failing the game? What is elimination?”

Mr. Religious shook his head, a disappointment clouding his features. “I don’t know, it never said. What it told you was the same thing it told me after the game started, I never got anything extra. Before that, all it told me was that I could chose the opponent, while the game itself would be up to you. It was fair. Before the game actually started, I didn’t know it was going to be a book-hunting game. Perhaps it was because you are a librarian.” He paused for a moment, earnest gaze turning to Ed. “How did you find me?”

This question Ed had no qualms indulging. “You aren’t a madman, nor are you a fool. Your reasoning for sneaking in here was threadbare at best, and every performance after meeting you here was fearful. Mr. Allen, you are a fanatically religious person. The man who said to me that the black tower was the truth… I don’t believe that after three days that person would be panicked or fearful when selected by the black tower for a game. He would have been enjoying it the entire time.”

Mr. Religious’s head lulled back, the riot-stick in his hand falling with a clatter to the floor. “So it was like that…”

Ed continued, “It was just a suspicion. I couldn’t really be sure if that was an act, or how you really felt.”

“Then how did you know it was me?”

“Because the game is fair.”

The older man’s face scrunched up in confusion.

Ed touched the angel wings on the back of his left hand. His automail cold beneath the silicone cover of his fingers. “I like playing games. A game I often play can be considered one of the fairest card games in the world. In bridge, skill can be stronger than luck. Meanwhile, in a game like stud, luck is far more important than skill. But these games are equivalent in that they are absolutely fair to both sides. After the game started, luck can also be a type of strength. Between luck and skill, there is no gap in their strength. The game itself is fair.”

It was obvious by his expression that Mr. Religious wasn’t quite understanding him. “What does any of that have to do with our game?”

Ed tilted his head. “Don’t you think this game was very unfair?”

“What?”

“There were only three rules in the game. First, violence is prohibited. This in itself had a profound meaning, but put that aside for now. Second, the angel gets a hint during the day. Third, the demon burns a single bookshelf at night. At face value, it seems like the angel has to find a book among hundreds of thousands of books. That makes the game very hard. Meanwhile, the demon has a 3/23
chance of winning the game.”

The older man started to nod like he understood. “So you mean that the game is unfair to the angel?”

“No.” Ed smiled as he clenched his right hand, the silent tick of his automail a strange sort of reassurance. “It isn’t fair to the demon.”

He’d shocked the older man.

Ed grinned. “For the angel, the game has a way of solving the problem. All he needs to do is use the clues to find the book. But the demon can only do one thing. Burn one bookshelf. He doesn’t get any hints to tell him where the book is. This makes the games the two people are playing into two entirely different entities. The angel is playing a puzzle game, while the demon is making a pure gamble. The angel can rely on luck and skill to win. The demon can only rely on luck.”

“But the probability of the angel finding the book is much lower than the demon’s.” The man argued.

“It can be said that after the game started, luck became a type of strength. The demon didn’t burn the book, so his luck was no different than the angel’s. There was also the ‘violence is prohibited’ rule of the game. This completely eliminated any possibility of the demon forcibly getting an edge. The demon’s only option was to find clues in other places.”

He finally got it. The only way the demon could get clues was to stick close to the angel.

After a long moment of silence, he gave a heavy sigh and helplessly began to laugh. “I should play more games. Edward, the bridge game you often play sounds like fun. Maybe I should play it after this.”

“If there is a chance, then we can play together.”

Mr. Religious only nodded and smiled.

Ed’s eyes narrowed, a sudden thought invading his mind. “If the person I was playing against was... perhaps I would have come out the loser in this game.”

“Who is he?”

Ed couldn’t keep the smile from his face. “A friend I often play bridge with. He’s got some serious skills. He’d be able to think of all these factors and lie to me perfectly. At least, he wouldn’t have made the mistakes you did.”

Instead of shame, Mr. Religious seemed interested. “What mistakes did I make? I thought I performed very well. When I saw you, I thought you’d see right through any lie I tried to tell, so I played scared. I took the opportunity to talk as little as possible, doing nothing but stick to your side.”

“But you still made mistakes. For example, when I said there was no one in the library but us, and that I didn’t know where the demon was, you said ‘is he hiding?’ If there were really two people on the angel team, a normal person would subconsciously assume that there are two people on the demon team as well. You didn’t. You said ‘he’ not ‘they’.”

The older man snorted, “I am suddenly very interested in this game of bridge.”
“I thought I could expose you on the first night, but I didn’t expect the bookshelf to actually burn down. I thought you had a partner at first, but that wasn’t realistic. The demon having two people while the angel only had one was unfair to the angel.”

Unless the black tower thought that two people added up to one Edward Elric, but Ed had to force a cough to keep himself from saying that, “I thought about it more on the second day. Who could have helped you set the fire? There were only two possible answer. The first was that as long as you thought about it, the bookshelf would burn. You didn’t need anyone to help you control it. The second possibility was that someone helped you said the fire, and there were only the two of us and the little girl. Apart from the black tower itself, she was the only one who could help you set the fires.”

Mr. Religious shrugged, “I didn’t even know she would help me.”

“It’s understandable. After all, the little girl hates reading. She would be willing to help you if you wanted to burn the books. The reason was plausible. Besides, I saw her hair when she came that second night. A bit of her pigtail was burnt. I figured it was singed when she was setting the fire.”

The older man rolled his eyes and threw himself back into his chair, his head tipped back against the backrest. “Well, I’m convinced of my loss.”

Ed wanted to explain further, but he only snorted as he shook his head. It was the first time he’d seen Mr. Religious so… loose.

There were many things that the man hadn’t noticed. Ed tricking him into burning the History section, being one, and the little girl’s three hints being another.

The three hints contained a lot of unnecessary nonsense, but they had actually exposed Mr. Religious early on with three important points.

First, the demon would lie. This was an indication for the angel, a warning almost: The demon will hide his identity and stay by your side.

Secondly, the angel knows the book. At first, the hint seemed useless because Ed knew too many books. Even in the pile he’d recently read there were at least a few hundred.

But mostly importantly, the third hint was that the demon also knew the book.

Granted, the scope was still very wide. Mr. Religious had been reading books in this library for a whole year. There were at least a thousand or so books that both he and Ed knew. However, the difficulty of the game couldn’t be so hard. If the game had no way to be won, then both players would lose and end up eliminated. Therefore, the answer had to be something that Ed and Mr. Religious could both think of instantly.

Ed’s first thought was ‘The Law of Equivalent Exchange’.

It was a book that Ed and Mr. Religious had talked about right before the black tower incident. If both of them were asked which book was the most memorable for them in terms of each other, it was that book.

The older man absolutely wasn’t stupid, the fact that he could think of acting fearful and his rather realistic performance had all been very good.

Ed suddenly thought that if this were Flame, all of Ed’s initiative would be taken away the moment they both entered the game together. Flame wouldn’t put himself in a position of weakness like Mr.
Religious did. The man’s actions were all to make Ed ignore him and minimize his mistakes. However, it also meant he’d lost the ability to reverse Ed’s ideas and mislead him. The older man played passively.

If it were Flame, what would he do?

At that very moment in time, in the military headquarters in East City, a tall and handsome man dressed in a striking blue military uniform strode confidently into the meeting room. He took a seat in a corner of the conference table, his eyes like that of an eagle’s as he took in the scientist who was speaking and gesturing to the text up on the big screen.

“Three days ago, the black tower was in a kind of phantom state. We call this the type A mirage. In the past six months, we’ve done a variety of experiments to test the relevant data of the black tower…”

Around the meeting room all the scientists discussed fiercely. In the end, the Fuhrer stood, “Today is the third day. What conclusion have you come to?”

The scientists fell silent.

Roy Mustang was the lowest ranked personnel here, and silently moved to look out the window. In the dark sky outside, there was a large black tower, as sharp as a knife, that hung above East City’s 21 million people.

It was currently 3:42 A.M. on November 18th, 2018. There was 4 hours and 18 minutes until the third day ended, and the elimination period began.

Back in the library, Mr. Religious was sweating nervously in his chair, the deep furrow to his brows and thinly pressed lips exposing his uneasiness. At the moment, no one knew what ‘elimination’ actually meant. Maybe they might just lose the game, maybe it meant something more.

It was only after a long period of silent thought that the sound of footsteps was heard from the depths of the bookshelf.

The little mosaic girl ran over to Ed with her book in her arms, the two pigtails swinging beautifully through the air behind her. It was difficult to ignore her joy, despite the inability to see it on her face, but what was even more surprising was when she handed the large match in her other hand to Ed.

“You’re an angel. Since you found my book for me, I’ll give this to you.”

Ed didn’t know if he wanted to laugh or glare, but he accepted the big match regardless. Against his better judgement, he couldn’t help cracking a sarcastic joke, “Are you the little girl who sells matches?”

In a flash, the thick mosaic on the little girl’s face parted slightly in a gap. Ed almost choked as the mosaic over the little girl’s eyes disappeared, revealing a pair of big, glassy, black eyes. Glazed over like that of a dead fish. Everything else was covered by the mosaic, only those eyes were exposed.

Ed held his breath, alert and wary by the sudden change.

The dead fish eyes glared at Ed, filled with scorn and contempt.
“Idiot, what are you? Naïve? Have you ever seen such a lovely little match girl?”

Ed couldn’t help it, he shivered.

She’s specifically lost the mosaic just to express her contempt and Ed felt it cold and clear.
Chapter 7 – Elimination

As if her only goal really was to express her ire, the mosaic on the little girl’s face returned to normal after she finished speaking. She handed the giant match to Ed, then ran into the depths of the bookshelves. Her long pigtails swayed as she jumped and skipped, her little figure vanishing into the shadows of the bookshelves.

“Ding Dong! The game ‘Who Stole My Book?’ has been completed.”

“Calculating game clear rewards…”

“Player Edward Elric had won the game and obtained the rewards ‘Giant Match’ and ‘Mosaic’s Contempt’.”

“Player Zane Allen has failed the game mission.”

The clear child’s voice echoed in the empty library, ringing in both Ed and Zane’s ears. Generally, games always had rewards. Even online card games gave some type of reward. Ed had already guessed that the big match was probably his.

But what was the ‘Mosaic’s Contempt’ and how was that a reward? Hadn’t it been a mission clue not long ago?

Ed frowned, his heart beating wildly in his chest. Compared to him though, Zane Allen was worse. The man had lost the game. Along with rewards, there were usually also punishments. Losing in an ordinary game might mean losing money, or points… but nobody knew what it meant to lose in a black tower game.

The black tower hadn’t talked about punishments, and there was a lot of fear in the unknown. Especially for Zane Allen as he slowly turned to look at Ed, a complicated expression on his face. “… Am I gonna die?”

Ed didn’t have an answer for the man. He bowed his head, unable to really come up with something comforting. “It… it shouldn’t be that bad.”

The words were halting, but it seemed to work. The man across from Ed gained a bit of confidence back, smiling. “I believe you. You’re so smart and your logic makes sense. God wouldn’t be so cruel. He will bring hope and rebirth, that is my god…”

He began to get lost in his own thoughts, muttering to himself as Ed watched, the match held stiffly in his right hand.

Not knowing what kind of punishment lay in waiting for the first game made Ed uneasy, like a calm before the storm. Like they were standing in the eye of a hurricane just waiting for destruction to hit. So far, the game had fair and solvable. There was a certain kindness in that, especially if the black tower really did have this kind of power. Still, it was unpredictable, and that was one of the core reasons for fear.

The only comfort Ed could offer himself was that if the punishment for failing the game really was death, wouldn’t half the people in this world die?
How could billions of people die?

It should be impossible. It was impossible…

Though the game was over, the library still hadn’t returned to normal. No matter how Ed or Zane tried, they couldn’t go upstairs, and at the same time, outside the third-floor windows there was still only a blank, white emptiness.

They hadn’t returned to West City.

Time passed and Ed and Zane were still trapped on the basement floor of the library. The clock on the wall had just passed 6 o’clock when Ed’s entire body suddenly seized. An unknown, unwanted panic tensing his entire being.

His heart started to beat erratically again.

It beat so fast it felt like it would fly right out of his chest. Ed stumbled, holding onto a bookshelf with the last of his strength, but his body was too unstable. He ended up slumping to the ground, only to have Zane hurry over in clear worry. “What happened?”

The too fast flow of blood caused Ed’s face to redden in seconds, every inch of his skin turning scarlet like a cooked crab. Zane took a step back in fright and complete horror. It took him only a moment to pluck up some of his courage and walk back to Ed’s side. “Are you okay? You’re… red, and your face is hot… do you have a fever?”

Ed’s heartbeat was way too fast, but at least his mind was still alert. Struggling to suck in a lungful of air, he stuttered out, “H-heart…”

Zane seemed to understand and immediately placed a hand on Ed’s chest. “Why is your heart going crazy? This is like 200 beats per minute… no, it’s 300!”

Ed couldn’t find the strength to speak, otherwise he would have corrected the man. His BPM was 394.

They couldn’t get out of the library, and they were the only two people trapped inside. With Ed’s sudden collapse, Zane had no way to call for help. He was useless. The only thing he could do was push all the books off the help desk and carefully lay Ed down on it. Without anything else to do, Zane ran to the bathroom, grabbing and wetting some of the cheap paper towel before bringing it back to Ed, placing it carefully over his forehead, hoping it would help.

Ed’s heartbeat now reached 532 beats per minute, and he knew that no normal human heart could reach that level without burning out. Nothing about this was normal, his heart was inconsistent with any medical knowledge and seemed to persist tenaciously.

Zane kept running back and forth from the bathroom, grabbing pieces of wet paper towel and placing it on every inch of exposed skin he could find on Ed.

Ed could feel that what he was doing wasn’t helping, but he was grateful that the other man was at least trying to help. He couldn’t speak, could only watch the man keep trying with bloodshot eyes.

It took nearly a full hour, Ed constantly counting his own heartbeats until he found that his heart rate was actually dropping.

Thinking that the cold towels were effective, Zane moved fast to place another piece of wet paper towel over Ed’s eyes.
Ed didn’t know how long it took before he managed to move again.

Slowly, he pulled the wet paper towels from his skin, hands trembling, body weak as he moved to get off the table.

Zane had just walked out of the bathroom to see Ed carefully moving from atop the desk, and instantly came running to help. “Edward, are you okay?”

Ed tried to speak up, but his throat was dry and raw. He had to swallow several times before he was able to force out a few words, a weak smile on his flushed face. “I think I’m doing better.”

“That’s good. You scared the shit out of me.” Zane said, slumping over with a sigh of relief.

Ed watched him seriously as they sat on the ground, their backs against the check-out desk. “Thank you.”

Zane shook his head, his smile strained. “It’s okay. I couldn’t just leave you there.”

The relationship between them was confusing at best. On one hand, it had been Zane who pulled Ed into an unknown game, dragging him into an uncertain danger. Because of that alone the two men should be distant and wary of one another.

But on the other hand, the game was over and it had been just like playing any ordinary game, and when Ed’s health took a nose dive, Zane didn’t just ignore it.

It might not have actually helped in the long run, but that didn’t mean Ed wasn’t grateful. Even if the man had uselessly placed wet paper towels on his silicone covered automail.

After all of the stress and near-death experiences, it didn’t feel completely right to regard Zane as his enemy.

“Why did your heartbeat suddenly go haywire? My father is a doctor and that wasn’t normal. For any normal person, once their heart rate reaches 250, the heart can’t sustain the strain, and can’t supply blood to the rest of the body. The person dies in minutes.”

Ed paused for a moment, but made the decision to be honest. “You haven’t experienced anything like this in the last few days?”

Zane shook his head. “No.”

Ed frowned and then sighed. “It started three days ago. When the black tower announced that the Earth was online. Every so often my heartbeat would spike like that, but it’s never been as fast as it was today. It usually reached around 300 BPM. Usually when it happened, I’d get irritable and annoyed. All of this might have nothing to do with the black tower, I’m not one of the people so adamant that the black tower is dangerous, but I’m also not someone who thinks that the tower is irrelevant. I can understand the irritability; I just can’t understand the heartbeat.”

“Are you sick?”

“It happened after the black tower event. I haven’t been to the hospital to check.”

Zane thought about it. “Then you should seriously go see a doctor. I’ve never heard of that type of illness. Hell, you’re lucky you aren’t dead after your heartbeat went over 300 beats per minute. You’re likely the only one in the world.” Zane joked with an ironic smile. “You might be kidnapped by the government and used as a science experiment. Maybe it’s better if you don’t go
to the hospital.”

Ed shivered a little at the thought. As a scientist himself, he knew better than most how much of a threat that actually was to the normal individual.

Click

In the silence that hung around the library like a dark miasma, the sound of the door opening was like a sudden shot of thunder.

Ed and Zane exchanged a quick, wide-eyed glance before the two threw themselves to their feet and made a quick dash up the stairs, taking them two at a time before speeding to the mahogany doors of the library’s main entrance.

A key turned in the lock and the door was pushed open. Long-forgotten sunshine shone through the crack of the opening door, hitting Ed and Zane full force in the face. The warmth was unbelievable, nothing like the artificial light of the game’s limited ‘daytime’.

Ed almost paused, have to blink back the sudden brightness, through the rush of warmth only seemed to soothe the rest of him.

“Edward? What are you doing here?” A bright feminine voice rang out. A familiar voice. “Did you come early to pick up your things?”

Ed’s eyes widened. “Alice?”

Ed remembered coming to the library yesterday to collect his things after Director West announced that the library would be requisitioned by the government as a research area. It took him a few seconds to organize all his buzzing thoughts before he spoke. “Are you here to pick up your things?”

Alice smiled bright. “Yes. My parents think this black tower thing is dangerous or something, so we’re planning on going back to our hometown to avoid the commotion. We should be leaving around 10 o’clock, so I came quick to collect something. Oh, what about you? Why did you come so early? Hey what are you – is that match? Oh, Mr. Religious… Um… why is he here?”

Alice looked at Zane, coughing nervously and shifting from foot to foot.

It took visible effort for Ed to calm himself, “I met him on my way here to pick up my stuff and we started chatting for a bit.”

“You had a conversation with the religious nut…” Alice muttered, seeing not to even care that Zane could full out hear every word. “Well, I’m just gonna go. I don’t really have the time to stay and chat.” Her smile was stiff as she took a step into the library.

Just as she took one step forward, her foot clearing the door’s threshold, all air was knocked out of Ed’s lungs, his mind stuttering to a halt.

“Alice!”

He’d yelled. Alice had never heard Ed yell like that before, and it was clear that it startled her when she jumped slightly, looking at him like he was crazy. “What?”

Ed opened his mouth, but nothing came out. His eyes were glued to Alice’s lower body, his face a mask of terror and disbelief.
When Alice looked down, it was clear she saw it too. She fell forward onto the ground, her hands quickly reaching for her feet.

“What the fuck! What is this!? My – My legs! My legs!”

The tears came like a waterfall.

She was a young girl, born in 1996, who just graduated from university. She reached out to her lower body with both her hands, but there was nothing there.

From Ed’s point of view, there was an invisible line at Alice’s thighs that seemed to rapidly rise up her body, taking away everything left behind. She was just… slowly disappearing. It was like something was erasing Alice from the world, feet first.

He wasn’t sure when the line had started, but Alice’s calves were already gone when he’d finally seen it, and she’d been totally ignorant. Standing there, mindlessly talking to Ed like everything was normal.

The line reached Alice’s hips and she was crying, snot dripping carelessly from her nose as her waist disappeared. She crawled forward, grabbing at Ed’s trousers with both her hands. “Help me! Ed, please! What’s going on? Ed, help me!”

Ed couldn’t… he had no idea what to do. Helplessly, he reached out his automail hand and Alice was quick to take it, however it didn’t take two seconds for the line to reach Alice’s arms and her hand disappeared from his.

The transparent line came to Alice’s neck.

Her head lay on the ground, wide, horror-filled eyes looking tearfully up at Ed. It was sad… it was terrifying.

“I don’t want to die.. I don’t want to die.. I – I haven’t been in love yet. I – I want to go back to watching cartoons, I ha-haven’t finished the novel I started yesterday. Mom… Dad… I – I don’t want to die. I don’t want to die. Please, Ed, help…”

Her mouth was gone.

Unable to turn away, Ed watched those wet eyes until everything was gone.

Within mere minutes, a whole living person was gone.

Ed’s mind was blank, his ears ringing with an uneasy tension. Still, at that moment, the thing that seemed to scare him the most was how incredibly calm he felt. He stared at the place where Alice had disappeared for half a minute, before suddenly, a thought pushed itself into his head and he turned to look behind him.

In the dark library, the area below Zane’s thighs had already disappeared. He looked at Ed, face pale, a fearful, miserable smile twisting his face. “Ed… Edward. This… This is the penalty for failing the game…”

“Zane!”

Bang!

The riot-stick he’d been holding fell to the ground, and it startled Ed into motion.
Immediately he rushed forward and reached out for the young man as he fell back slowly.

Ed only just managed to grab him before what was left of his body hit the ground too.

Tears flowed down his face, his entire being trembling in fear as he clung to Ed’s shoulder. His right one. If he noticed the stiff metal automail, it obviously didn’t register as he repeated over and over again, “I don’t want to die. I don’t want to die. Ed – Edward, help me. I don’t want to die.”

But there was nothing he could do. He was powerless. He tried pressing his hand over the areas that hadn’t yet disappeared, but once the line reached it, it merely vanished under his touch, and his hand would fall through thin air.

Only Zane’s upper body was left.

Ed… was lost. “Don’t be afraid. There’s gotta be a way.”

There was no way. Zane seemed to know it too as he cried, “There is no way. I don’t want to die, I really don’t want to die… Ed, please, save me! You’re the one who eliminated me, you have to save me! Help me!”

Ed couldn’t do anything… couldn’t say anything.

Zane obviously realized that because he no longer begged. He only cried as time seemed to slow around them.

Just as his chest was vanishing beneath him, he suddenly struck out and grabbed Ed’s hand, looking at him with swollen bloodshot eyes. Harshly, he hissed out, “I have a daughter. She’s in Luza and her mother and I are divorced. Please, check on her. See if she’s alive. Her name is Violet, Violet Allen. Help me by checking on her. She has to be alive, she has to be! Help me by looking for her!”

Zane’s hand disappeared.

“Help me, Edward. I’m begging you, please, help me. She’s gotta be alive!”

Ed didn’t even think about it. “Where does she live?”

“She lives in the Military District in Luza. She’s studying at the Luza Middle School, she’s in first grade. She…”

Zane’s mouth was gone.

The transparent line kept climbing, reaching the man’s ears, but he only stared at Ed with unblinking eyes. Those eyes were frightening, as if they had lost everything that’s ever mattered in the world.

“I’ll find her. I promise you, I’ll find her and she will be alive.”

Zane’s ears had already disappeared, but despite that, his eyes suddenly softened. He was still crying, but there was a sliver of peace there. He gave Ed one last thankful look before they finally closed, and disappeared. A single tear fell to the ground.

Ed was left there, kneeling in the library entrance. Alice had disappeared outside the door, while Zane had disappeared just inside it. He was strangely calm… strangely numb.

“Rock a bye baby on the tree tops, when the wind blows the cradle will rock…”
A gentle, kindly female voice sung throughout West City.

Ed turned his head stiffly, looking out at the black tower nearly 200 meters away from the library entrance.

Colorful lights seemed to flash on the tower. Just a day ago, there had been thousands of people around the tower, watching and protesting and.. *living*. Now, there were only seven or eight people sitting numbly, disbelievingly on the ground just like Ed himself. They all looked up blankly and watched as the black tower sung its morbid lullaby.

Once the female voice had done the first verse, a group of children’s voices picked up the song, singing above the soft female voice.

“When the bough breaks the cradle with fall.
And down will come baby, cradle and all.”

The voices sang over and over again, the wind blowing over the Earth, carrying the song to distant places.

It took a while, but once the song was finally finished, a familiar child-like voice pierced the stagnant air.

“Yes! 498.16 million players successfully loaded the game…”

“Game saved…”

“The game data is loading…”

“Players information is loading…”

“Save successful…”

“Loading successful…”

“Loading successful…”

“Yes! November 19th, 2018. Welcome all players into the game.”

“Announcing the three iron-clad rules of the black tower – ”

“First, everything is explained by the black tower.”

“Second, 6 o’clock to 18 o’clock is the game time.”

“Third, all players please attack the tower.”

“Yes! Have a Happy Game.”
Chapter 8 – Duty or Heart

Ed had no time for grief or fear.

Zane and Alice had disappeared completely, nothing left behind and therefore, nothing Ed needed to take care of.

Dispassionately, he walked out and closed the library door behind him.

There were only seven or eight people gathered under the black tower, some of them sitting on the ground, not understanding or registering what had just happened. In a matter of minutes, nearly all of their companions who’d marched and shouted right along with them had vanished into thin-air.

In addition to those people, there were also two middle-aged tough looking men staring sightlessly at the black tower from the plastic white wall the authorities had put up merely three days ago. Now, the armed police and scientists were all gone and there was no longer anything holding anyone back. The two men ripped a large hole in the white wall and approached the tower. Ed didn’t follow, he watched from a distance before finally bringing himself to start walking. His destination: away from the black tower.

Many scientists had spent half a year studying the tower without any clues, Ed didn’t think that he’d suddenly be able to figure anything out.

But that thought dragged another instantly into his mind.

Alphonse.

Had what happened to Alice and Zane also happened to Alphonse.

Ed’s chest seized in a sudden spasm of panic and crippling fear. No. Oh fuck no! Al couldn’t be… Al couldn’t have disappeared!

Ed needed to find him, Ed needed to set his eyes on Al, to make sure his little brother was okay. Was alive, was safe, was…

Fuck, he needed to breathe.

Quickly he pulled out his phone and nearly growled when he saw that there was no service. “It’s fucking useless…”

As he kept walking forward, his phone back in his pocket, he realized that many people had been driving when they’d disappeared. Now, those cars crashed into one another, blocking the road, buses ran into buildings, knocking down street lights, and power lines.

Ed needed to find some form of transportation.

Ed looked for nearly an hour before he found a bike chained to a bike rack near the high school. He only assessed it for seconds before clenching his teeth and grabbing hold of the chain with his right hand. He’d never done this before, but the automail was tough, and Ed knew he had enough strength for this.
Still, he was shocked when, after only one hard yank, the chain broke.

That… hadn’t ever happened before. The automail had always been tough, it was metal after all, but…it still relied on Ed’s own strength to be worth anything but a blunt weapon. Ed had always been strong, but this was beyond what he was used to.

Ed looked thoughtfully at the chain still in his hand, before tossing it away.

He took the bike and quickly made his way home. He was going to find Alphonse.

It took him nearly an hour to make it home, and that’s only because a lot of the main roads were blocked off by beeping, screaming cars. Every one of them empty.

Pissed off and overwhelmed with worry, Ed entered his community and tossed the bike down on the sidewalk. Everything was quiet, not a single presence anywhere. The only sound Ed could hear was the hollow wind blowing roughly through the leaves.

As soon as he was home, he took out the hiking backpack Al had gotten him and Winry almost two years ago… oh fuck… Winry.

Everything in Ed stopped.

Closing his eyes, he took a moment to breathe.

Al was fine. He had to believe that, because anything else wasn’t acceptable. Winry was alive and scared, but they’d had a promise. She would fight tooth and nail to find them, and she knew Ed well enough to know that the first thing he would do, was look for his brother. That meant, Central.

Zane Allen’s daughter was in Central, a small city nearest Central City to the west called Luza. He could go to the middle school to find the girl, and then to Central to find his brother. And there, Winry would find them both.

Feeling a bit more stable after coming up with a plan, Ed finished packing and ate his way through two boxes of cereal bars. He’d been in the library since yesterday morning and hunger was clawing at him, but he wouldn’t allow himself any time for a sit-down lunch. He needed to get going.

Yet, as soon as all his things were packed, Ed encountered another problem.

He needed a car.

He didn’t even need to think about it, rushing up the stairs, he knocked heavily on his landlord’s door. When no one answered after a couple of moments, he took a step back and kicked the door open with his automail leg.

The smell of gas was overwhelming.

Ed moved fast into the kitchen, turning off the gas and throwing open the window.

There were chopped vegetables on the counter, multiple ingredients scattered around, and the refrigerator door wide open. The owner of this house had been cooking breakfast right before they vanished.

Ed had rented the downstairs space from an old couple a little over a year ago. With Al off to University and Ed unwilling to conform to scientifical l norms, he’d fallen back on a job he’d had as a university student himself. A librarian. Sheska had been overjoyed to have him working at the
Central Library, and the two could often be found chatting in their off-hours, but Ed had been a different man then.

Still, the one thing he never had was a car, but he’d often run errands for the landlord, and he’d been given permission to borrow their car before.

Now, Ed took the car key from the drawer under the TV stand and gave one last look around. There was no one left in the house. He could only spare a second to mourn the old couple, before he tore out of the house with his hiking pack and a giant match.

Luza wasn’t far from Central City, but from West City was a different story. If Ed wanted to make it there, he would need fuel. Especially seeing as the landlord’s car was nearing the red E line. He wouldn’t even make it half way there.

He’d need to stop at a gas station first.

Ed stuffed the key into the ignition and turning, the car sputtering a bit before dying again. Just as he went to try a second time, there was a sharp stab of pain right through Ed’s chest. It felt like someone had grabbed hold of his heart and began to squeeze. Ed paled in an instant, his heart struggling to keep beating as his blood rushed in his ears.

His body temperature soared.

He wasn’t sure what was going on, but he knew that with how high his temperature was, his organs were supposed to be cooked inside his body. Yet he was still conscious when he felt another sharp dagger cutting cleanly into his heart.

Ed wasn’t sure how long it took, but when the darkness rose up to take him, he was almost grateful for the reprieve.

--

10 hours later, Ed finally awoke. The night outside the car was oppressive, and Ed’s clothes felt damp and cold. His sweat had soaked his clothes, and by the feel of it, it’d happened more than once. He wasn’t sure for how long his heart had gone crazy, but the uncomfortable pain was gone and relief nearly crippled him.

Ed’s face was still a mess. Blond hair damp and plastered to his skin in places, cheeks bright red while his lips were a pale white, but his light, golden eyes were clear and bright.

Touching his chest with his left hand, Ed found his heartbeat back to a normal rhythm, and upon checking up on the rest of his body, he found no abnormalities…

Well, that wasn’t true. Ed checked on his automail and found something odd. The ports of both his arm and his leg seemed to have sunken into his skin… that or his skin and muscle had grown over the ports, strengthening their perch on his frame.

Ed rolled off the silicone skin sleeve of his arm and examined the metal arm closely. Nothing had changed, not that he could obviously see, but something weird happened. As he slipped the sleeve off, he felt it slide from the metal limb like he would with his flesh one.

Startled, Ed clenched his fist and frowned.

There was feeling in the automail. More than just the nerves connected to the limb to make it move with his brain’s commands, there was actual feeling at Ed’s fingertips.
He moved to touch the soft interior of the passenger’s seat and nearly choked on his own tongue. He felt it. He actually, honestly felt the smooth, worn seat covering.

Ed closed his eyes.

Everything was… shifting. Odd things were happening at every turn and Ed’s scientific mind was struggling to keep up. But he needed to conform. Those that couldn’t adapt, died; and Ed couldn’t die before he found his brother.

Just accept it. Whatever is happening, and whatever happens from now on, accept it and move on. That was all he could do.

And just as that thought crossed his mind, as if on some kind of fucked up instinct, Ed reached out and grabbed a book from thin air.

He’d pulled the book out of some inner pocket dimension or something, but Ed refused to be surprised.

The book had a familiar look about it. Small, leather-bound, it looked exactly like the little notebook he used for his notes and research. Just like his own book, there was a small, E.E. engraved in the inner cover, right in the innermost top corner. Just like the one Alphonse had given him nearly a year ago.

The only difference was that the inside was completely blank.

Ed stared at the blank front page with a frown. Under his gaze, words began to appear in a tight neat script. His own handwriting… his right-handed handwriting.

[Ability: Inequivalent Exchange!

Owner: Edward Elric

Type: Special Type

Function: Collecting abilities.

Note: Life has never been fair for Edward Elric. Despite being a genius, his father walked out as soon as Alphonse was born, his mother died when they were 6, their childhood house caught fire at 10 causing most of Alphonse disfigurement and coma, and then he lost 2 of his limbs! For a person who believes in Equivalent Exchange, nothing has ever been equally given as it had been taken away. So here you go! Take what you can, give nothing back!]

Something dark crowded Ed’s face as he read the words.

Ability… what the hell was this ‘ability’? And what was with the backstory bio?

He wanted to throw this damn book in a fire, but he refrained. Nothing that the book said was wrong, and Ed realized that whatever this was, it was a boon. Especially the function of the ability.

‘Collecting abilities.’

There was merit there.

Ed flipped through the little black book, but other than the first page, everything else was blank. After a long while, more words started to appear on the back of the first page.
[Note: Of course, even if Edward is smart, he is still very stupid. Instead of heading to Central for the military HQ stationed there, he’s going to save his crippled brother who probably doesn’t even need to be saved in the first place.]

And that was it.

Ed threw the damned book out the window.

A minute later, the scorned, handsome young man got out of the car and picked the stupid book up.

Casually tossing it onto the passenger seat, Ed refused to look at it again. What the fuck did he care what a god damned book had to say about it. He would find Al, and he would find Violet. But first, he needed to stop at the nearest gas station.

The quiet, emptiness of the city would make anyone uneasy, but it was never clearer than when Ed stepped out at the gas pump, and looked around the dimly lit, completely silent, and utterly empty lot. Inside the gas station, the lights were bright, but the large windows let Ed know instantly that there was absolutely no one inside.

Fuck it. He had shit to do.

Pulling out his wallet, if for no other reason than that he wouldn’t have to go into the store to access the pump, Ed slid the debit card in and punched out his code. 1018. Like always, Ed had to close his eyes as he thought of that day.

Focus, Edward.

This was absolutely no time to get lost in his memories, or his thoughts. If Izumi saw him now, she’d kick his fucking ass for letting his guard down.

And even more so when Ed put the pump nozzle back on its stand, only to suddenly pause and tense.

Fuck.

He didn’t even need to turn around, hell, he didn’t even get the chance to as something pointy pressed against his lower back, and a voice spoke in a harsh whisper near his ear.

“Don’t move! Pull out your wallet and give it to me!”
Chapter 9 – Abilities

The weather in West City was cold in late November, so Ed was wearing the thick black coat over his usual red hoodie, and yet even the three layers of close, Ed could feel the sharp point of the object pressed against his lower back, poking a tiny hole in his thick winter clothes.

Mentally, Ed cursed at himself.

Izumi would have just killed him if she’d caught him by surprise like that, at least this mother fucker was giving him a damn chance to fight back.

The man, it seemed, couldn’t wait for Ed to finished scolding himself, “Dammit! I said give me your wallet!”

Ed didn’t even think about it. What the hell did money really matter at this point. Passing the wallet into his left hand, Ed held it out over his shoulder. “Calm down, man. Here you go.”

The knife was still pressed to his back as a quick hand snatched the wallet right out of his. The moment it was taken, the voice yelled again, “Fuck, this is it?! This car yours? Is the key in it?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t fucking move or I’ll stab you in the fucking kidney!”

Ed didn’t turn as the knife was removed from his lower back. He knew what he looked like. Blond, short, baby-faced, bundled in winter clothes like a child getting ready to play in the snow. Hell, the heating strips Ed had invented and sown into the inner lining of the silicon sleeve and the inner seam of most of his pants were the only reason his metal automail didn’t freeze in the slightest breeze.

As soon as he heard the man pull the door of the car open, Ed moved like lightning.

Yeah, he was short, but Ed had long ago learned to use that to his advantage. He moved faster than the guy could react.

In a move Izumi had used on him multiple times, Ed hooked his left leg over the man’s left and pulled it back just as his right hand balled into a fist and knocked the asshole to the ground.

Satisfyingly, Ed had heard his cheekbone break under the metal fist, but even more so, he’d felt it break.

“Fuck! Fuck! I’ll fucking kill you!” The man was quickly back on his feet, and that was a bit of a surprise. Enough of one that when the man’s knife slashed out at his left hand, Ed didn’t pull it back fast enough.

The knife scrapped his hand, tearing apart the white cotton gloves Ed constantly used, but… there was no sting. No blood. No wound.

Ed wasn’t about to hesitate again though.

Setting his feet, he grabbed the man’s outstretched arm, pivoted, and threw the shit-bag over his
shoulder. Not willing to allow the idiot to get up again, Ed stepped on the hand that still clenched the knife and snarled. “Fucking, drop it!”

The man did.

He cried out, hard, ragged face lined in so much fear that it turned Ed’s stomach. In a low whisper, he kept begging, “Don’t kill me, please don’t kill me…”

And suddenly, Ed felt like he was the bad guy in this entire situation.

Fuck.

He couldn’t believe he was about to do this.

Ruthlessly, he kicked the man’s hand and then maneuvered his boot’s toe under the knife before kicking it up into reach. Grabbing it from the air, he tossed it towards the gas station’s convenience store.

He and the thief watched it fly nearly 20 meters, to embed itself deep into the concrete wall.

Not willing to waste any more time with this clown, Ed finally moved away.

“Get the hell out of here, man. I won’t kill you today.” It was as nice as he could be. Despite his skills, despite his past, Ed had never killed anyone before. By accident, or intentionally, and he really didn’t want to start with this poor bastard.

Just as he turned his back and heard the man get up off the ground, his survival instinct screamed at him.

The second he turned back to the man, a large fluttering cloud of green bills suddenly covered the air between the two of them, but Ed was not an idiot. Sure, he’d turned his back on an opponent, and Izumi and Al would have yelled at him for that, but he’d been alert.

Out of the cloud of 100-dollar bills, the sharp glint of a knife caught Ed’s attention, and Ed didn’t even think.

Instinct drove him as he knocked the hand aside with his flesh arm, before cocking his fist back, and… stopped. Right in the tip of the man’s nose.

“You wanna try that again, buddy.” Ed growled, low and even, fist hanging in the air right between the thief’s eyes. The man whimpered.

“Where the fuck did you get so much money, and where the fuck did it come from?” Ed asked lowly. He had a guess, and if his guess was correct, it would give him a good opportunity to test out a theory he had.

“I-I’m a thief. This morning, everyone on the streets just disappeared, so I just went to a bank and… took everything I could find.”

That wasn’t what Ed wanted to know, “Where were you hiding the money?”

The man raised his right hand and showed him a light blue tattoo on his wrist. It was small, and in the shape of a dollar sign. “I took it out of here. I… when I stole the money, I found that I could place it in this tattoo, like some sort of pocket dimension,” – fuck, Ed was surprised the asshole knew what the words ‘pocket dimension’ even meant. – “I’ve had this tattoo for a long time and I
can only store money in it. Just now, I wanted to surprise you so I just... subconsciously took the money out of the tattoo to block your vision.”

Yeah. And he didn’t know that Ed would be a bit faster than him, so why not take the chance.

“I’m really losing my patience with you, asshole.”

The man swallowed thickly, the fear nearly palpable in the air around him.

There was a sudden flash and a half-foot long knife emerged onto the man’s left hand, it’s path directly headed for Ed’s eye.

“Fucking die!”

Ed didn’t think about holding back anymore. Brushing the knife aside with his metal arm this time, he reached for the only thing he had as a weapon strapped in a DIY holster down his left metal leg.

The giant match moved quickly through the air; nor did he notice that his metal arm had actually broken the man’s knife when he’d knocked it aside. All he saw was the red matchstick moving in an arc right before striking the man in the head.

Ed didn’t even get to see the man’s face as the match seemed to sink into his skull like it was made of honey. Only the slightest resistance.

When the body fell to the ground, Ed shut his eyes.

“He’s dead.”

Fuck, he was dead, there was no fucking way he’d survived that, not with what Ed had seen, and the sharp sound of something breaking when the match head smashed into the man’s face.

Gathering himself up inside, Ed opened his eyes and looked down at the man. Fuck, his face was caved in, the blood and bone visible as it pooled under his head and spread like running water. Like spilled milk.

With a complicated look on his face, Ed squatted down and lifted the man’s right hand up, carefully examining the tattoo there.

The night had been dark, and he’d been too far away, but Ed had recognized the $ symbol for what it was. When he picked up the man’s other hand, he found another tattoo on his inner wrist. That of a switchblade.

Ed watched for only a moment when suddenly, the tattoo disappeared and two knives appeared on the ground out of nowhere. Ed’s heart jumped, but when he looked at the guy’s face, it was still caved in. In the next second, another pile of bills fluttered to the ground, and when Ed searched for it, he found the $ symbol had also disappeared.

Fucking shit.

Pushing himself up, Ed grimaced as he moved back to the open car door and got in. Before he even tried turning the key, he took the book from the passenger’s seat.

It looked like part of his theory was right. As soon as he turned to the second page, new lines of text started to scribble themselves out in his own handwriting.

[Ability: Stacked]
Owner: Ian Banks (Stowaway)

Type: Special Type

Function: Stores the object in contact with the body and presents it in the form of a tattoo on the skin.

Grade: Level 2. Can store up to two types of inanimate objects.

Limit: Only objects of the same type can be stored. Has to be inanimate, non-dead objects, no bodies can be stored.

Remark: Death by match to the head, there’s a sort of poetic justice in there somewhere. If you squint.]

That entire batch of information had been in black, cursive text. The lines below that however, were blood red.

[Elric version usage instructions: Disposable items. Only the same type of object can be stored. Not replaceable. Mr. Genius, think about what you want to store here.]

Ed had quite a bit of question, but the first thing out of his mouth was, “Stowaway?”

What the hell was a stowaway? There was a feel to it that seemed to mean more than just the word itself, like the person didn’t belong here... or anywhere.

Ed stared at it for a long moment before deciding to let it go. He wanted to toss the damn book out the window, but this was his ability. Ed quickly understood the thief’s own ability and how to use it.

Ian Banks had been a thief with an awakened ability. The ability to store inanimate objects on his body, that could be used at any time, wasn’t insignificant. As long as they were the same item, the number of storage slots seemed to be unlimited. Ed wasn’t sure what ‘ability grade’ was, but Ed was smart enough to take some educated guesses. The ability could be upgraded. At grade 2, Ian Banks could only store two types of items.

He’d chosen money and knives.

Ed couldn’t help criticizing the guy. In a world where most of the earth’s population just disappeared, who the hell would actually worry about money? Without social order, money was useless; it was nothing more than waste paper. Yet, Ian Banks had been reluctant to give it up.

Sure, the guy had been a bit clever, he’d known how to deceive if nothing else. He told Ed the money was stored in a previous tattoo, a clear attempt to hide the fact that he had his own ability. It had given him a chance to attack Ed with his other stored item, the knives. Unfortunately for him, Ed had never lowered his guard after that initial ambush.

Ed couldn’t help but think that if the second object at Ian Banks disposal had been another weapon, the man might have had a chance at survival.

Ed looked down at the cooling corpse of Ian Banks, surrounded by knives and money. He didn’t even hesitate to press the giant match against his wrist. There was a red flash of light, and then the match was gone. The small matchstick tattoo that was left behind was the only mark on Ed’s left wrist.
As a weapon, the giant match had far more power than Ed had expected. The match had broken the man’s knife, and caved in his head without much of Ed’s own strength behind it. After all, he hadn’t wanted to kill the man, just knock him out. Storing the match meant that it could be used as a hidden dagger in times of trouble. It was like the knife he’d wanted Winry to add to his next automail upgrade… if he ever got that upgrade at all.

Ed had no doubt he’d encounter more people just like Ian Banks in the future. Human morality had a way of disappearing in times of crisis, Ed knew that better than most.

Looking down at the little black book, he saw that Ian Banks’ ability name had changed.

[Ability: Stacked (Used)]

He turned back to the first page, the one that recorded his own ability, and was a bit disappointed that nothing had changed from the last time. He spent a few more minutes re-reading all of it, gritting his teeth at the blunt little bio of his life, when, slowly, a line of text started to scrawl out near the bottom of the page.

[Remark: Edward Elric has finally gotten something back from life, taking everything that man had, including his life!]

Ed instantly frowned, the implication of that sentence not sitting well with him at all.

“Is it really only murder…” he muttered to himself.

Not a moment after he spoke, more words began to appear.

[Side Note: But how can I inform Edward Elric that he could get other people’s abilities without killing them?]

Fucking hell!

Ed clutched the book tight as a burst of irritation nearly had him tossing the thing into the darkness around him.

With one hand over his head, ready to throw, Ed paused. He took three deep breaths, and then his hand came down slowly. This thing, his ability, was useful. He needed to remember that.

Coldly, Ed squatted down to grab a handful of bills, before burying Ian Banks in his favorite thing, money. With that done, he made his way back to the car, and the drive to Central Region. He needed to stop at Luza first, before he went to Central City after his brother.
Chapter 10 – Li Wen

The main road into Central Region was blocked. Ed had guessed that would be the case, but the facts staring him in the face were more than a little annoying. He’d had to get out of his own car to push two of the vehicles blocking the road out of his way.

He almost wasn’t surprised to find that he could push the cars with minimal effort all by himself.

After the black tower incident, Ed started to realize that his physical condition and his psychological state had greatly improved.

For the physical, Ed found his strength had increased, his eyesight improved, his recovery capacity had heightened, and his skin had become just as hard as his automail. And then there was the automail itself. While the ports seemed to have sunken into his skin and bonded firmly into his nerves systems, he was able to feel using the metal prosthetic. The amount of pressure he put on an object, textures and temperatures, and all of the feeling Ed had lost with the actual limbs were suddenly back, and he wasn’t sure how to handle it. Would pain also return if the automail was disconnected or broken?

Fuck, every upgrade brought with it almost more pain than Ed could stomach. Connecting metal wires to your nervous system enough to allow your brain to send signals to the prosthetic limbs wasn’t supposed to be pleasant, and many adults couldn’t stand the pain. Yet, Ed had gone through it every year since he was 12.

If Ed did find Winry, and if she did carry his upgrade with her, would he even be able to take the disconnection and reconnection process?

Fuck, he needed to stop thinking about it so much. He didn’t even know if Winry was still around.

And there were the psychological improvements.

A mere few hours ago, just the thought of Winry or Al had brought with it panic and a drive to find them. Yet now, while the drive was still there, the panic had mostly subsided. Ed had never balked at making the hard choices. He wasn’t the ideal poster boy for humanity’s morality, but he’d always tried to do what he believed was right. He’d never stolen, never cheated or bullied. Yet he’d killed someone a few hours ago.

Sure, it might have been self-defense as well as an accident, but he had killed Ian Banks. Yet as far as he could tell, there was a sort of cold detachment inside him. His only focus was on moving forward. Finding Al.

He didn’t know whether this sudden bout of cold-bloodedness was due to the changes in his body, or if this was just who he was and he’d never had the chance to find out before, but Ed doubted the latter. Nearly Ed’s whole life had been one trial after another, one hardship to replace the last. He knew the taste of helplessness, of fear, pain, and suffering. Yet he would never have called himself cold-blooded. He’d cared about people, even as he’d kept them at a distance. The distance had been more for their benefit, not his own.

Ed glanced down at the little black leather-bound book on the passenger’s seat before shifting his
gaze back to the road.

Ed had been driving for hours, but due to the need to stop and clear the roads, it had taken him much longer than he’d thought it would have. He must have been just outside the boundary of Luza when he saw a toll station, and with it, the seven-car pile-up that blocked the entire highway.

“Oh shit…” Ed whispered as he stopped the car and got out.

Despite him moving quickly, it took him a while to move all six of the cars far enough away to open a path in the road. The seven cars had all had serious collisions, the front four cars had nearly been crushed completely while the fend in the middle of the expressway had been seriously dented. When he finally got to the front car, he was surprised.

“A sports car?” Ed snorted loudly.

The very first car was a Maserati sports car, cherry red and completely smashed to shit. It was currently stuck on one of the toll station’s guard rails, but it blocked up the only open area left in the station. The other four lanes had been blocked completely, the clear spikes of the control needles sticking out at the very entrance to each lane.

If he wanted to get through, he’d have to move the cherry red sports car.

The cold winter wind whistled between cars and structures as it blew past, Ed forcibly not thinking about the cold or his automail for the time being as he forcibly pushed the damn Maserati. He prepared to pry the door open to see if there was anything useful inside, when he stopped dead.

“Who’s there?”

Ed pressed cold silicone covered metal fingers against the match tattoo on his wrist, sharp golden eyes looking around carefully.

There was no one.

Ed didn’t bother to rush as he moved towards the Maserati again. His steps were light as he remained tense and ready for any attack. Placing a hand on the Maserati’s door again, he prepared to rip it out to use as a shield or a weapon. He stopped the moment he heard a trembling voice call out, “D-don’t! I… I’m coming out. I mean you no harm.”

Taking a step away from the car, he looked in the direction of the voice a saw a young man walking out from behind the Maserati.

Dark hair, thin white t shirt and jeans, his clothes torn and stained with an unusual amount of blood. There was a slight rise to the corner of his eyes that spoke of a Xingese bloodline. Annoyingly, he was about a head taller than Ed, but his injuries seemed to have already scabbed over, no longer bleeding, but likely still aching.

Another cold wind rushed through the spaces between them, and Ed took notice of the way the young man shivered, his thin lips pursed and tinted blue. When he put his hands up in the universal sign of surrender, the trembling increased and he watched Ed like prey watched a predator.

“I- This is my car. I don’t – I seriously don’t mean you any harm. I saw you earlier, if I wanted to attack you, I could’ve done it when you were pushing the cars.”

Ed eyed the young man for a long moment, then tilted his head lightly to the left. “Why didn’t I find you when I was pushing the cars?”
The young man paused, then his face crumpled completely as he tried to explain, “I was hiding under the highway. It was too cold to stay out here in the open, and the area with grass at least, is a bit warmer to lay on. I would have stayed in the car but…” They both looked at the smashed-up Maserati and then back to each other… “I was driving back to Luza from Veuc yesterday morning. I just got to Luza when the car behind me suddenly crashed right into me. When I woke up, I was laying on the pavement, thrown out of the front windshield window. I- I wasn’t dead but…” fear colored the young man’s face completely; Ed took a step back as the man took one towards him. “The other people… everyone was just… there was no one in the car that hit me, there wasn’t even a drop of blood they were just…”

The man was clearly still in shock, but Ed stared him down indifferently, not letting himself relax in case this was all a ploy. “They’ve disappeared. You must’ve been unconscious because of the accident, so you missed the black tower announcing the start of the game. There are less than 500 million people left in the world. The others- ” Ed pointed to the other six cars he’d scattered around the highway. “They're gone.”

Despite the fact that Ed was sure the man had guessed it by now, having someone speak the words seemed to have startled him. His eyes went wide, his whole body shaking as his arms came up to wrap around himself. Whether it was from the cold or the fright, Ed wasn’t sure.

He looked at the cars scattered around then turned his gaze back to Ed. In low tones, he whispered, “My family is in Luza. You… are you going to Central? Can- can you take me? I saw how strong you are to be able to push the cars out of the way like you did. I’ll give you how ever much money you want, just, please give me a ride?”

Ed couldn’t help himself, he made a soft sound of disbelief as he pushed a puff of air from between his teeth.

The young man stopped talking, he seemed bewildered by Ed’s response.

“I’m going into Luza, it doesn’t really matter if I give you a ride, but do you think money is still worth anything in this world?”

The man jolted like he was hit by a small shock of electricity, then he grew pale. No, it seemed he hadn’t understood what the world had become, but he seemed to get it now.

Ed could only sigh as he motioned for the man to follow him. Together, they made it back to Ed’s car and got in, allowing the young man to get into the passenger’s seat. He quickly moved to lift the book from the seat and push it back into whatever space it’d come from. When it disappeared, he didn’t even glance in its direction.

In the backseat was a large gray coat, likely belonging to his landlord, and Ed offered that to the young man before starting the car and beginning their drive into the city.

“My name is Li Wen.” Yup. The young man was Xingese. What was he doing in west city though? Xing was to the East across the freakin’ desert. It was clear that he was a bit uncomfortable with the cold when he pulled the coat even closer to himself, before continuing with a small shiver, “Thank you, by the way. I just woke up a little while ago. I tried running to the toll booths for help, but there was no one there. I didn’t know what to do, so I just… went back to my car. I heard your car coming and… I don’t know why but I got scared, so I hid in the highway’s underpass. My windbreaker was in the back of my car, but… I couldn’t even get into it. I almost died frozen solid. You’re really strong though, I saw you moving all those cars like it was nothing.”

“My name’s Ed.” He managed to get out when the man finally stopped rambling. “You.. You
don’t feel stronger or anything?”

Li Wen shook his head. “I… not exactly. I’ve always been fit, but never strong. I couldn’t push the cars at all, and I couldn’t even get to my windbreaker. I was really surprised to see someone as-”

Ed shot the man of vicious glare, and that seemed to stop the words in his throat. Li Wen coughed into his fist, shrinking into his seat a little as he fell silent.

It was a while before anyone broke the silence again, and this time, it was Ed. “But you’re not dead.”

Li Wen stared blankly at him.

Ed drove casually with one hand, his right hand balled into a fist on his lap, prepared for any kind of attack. “There was a severe car accident, but you survived. You didn’t lose an arm or your legs. Don’t you think that’s a little strange?”

If anyone knew how easy it was to lose some limbs in any kind of accident, it was Edward Elric. Yet despite having no real strength, that he would admit to, Li Wen had survived a possibly fatal car accident. There had to be new rules to this new world, and Ed needed to figure out what they were fast if he wanted to survive and find his brother in this strange new hell.

It was clear by his face though, that Li Wen was dumbfounded. Apparently, he hadn’t given his survival much of a thought.

Ed didn’t say anything more, he left the young man to his thoughts and watched each one pass through the young man’s expressive face from the corner of his eye.

Despite the fact that he seemed to be driving easily, Ed never let his attention stray from the stranger beside him. He was on alert and wary of any sudden movements, all of the training with Izumi finally becoming an advantage.

In times like this, being alone might be the safest option, but having a companion had its merits as well. Li Wen, like Ed himself, should have participated in a black tower game and won. He shouldn’t take this type of person lightly, but based on everything he’d seen so far, Li Wen seemed like nothing more than a spoiled rich boy. He honestly didn’t seem like a threat.

Yet, if he’d really left this confused, incompetent person on that highway… Ed believed the man wouldn’t live for very much longer.

After being lost in his mind for a while, Li Wen finally asked the question Ed was waiting for, “Can you tell me what the black tower announced while I was unconscious?”

Ed didn’t bother mincing words. With his memory, he repeated the events of the black tower incident perfectly.

“Are you going to Luza to find your family? I’m familiar with Luza, and I’ve been to Central City too. Do you need any help?” Li Wen asked, a light tilt to his voice that gave away his reluctance to be alone in this suddenly unknown world.

Ed had been to Luza several times before. He was used to the trips the University would send him on to share his research and give lectures to various other colleges around Amestris, but he wasn’t a local. It would be difficult for him to find a single person, especially if she was gone. ‘I’m going in to the north to find a student. I only know her name and plan to search for her at her school. If she isn’t at the school, I’ll use the personal files there to find her address.” There would be nothing
he could do if she wasn’t in either of the two places, but he was willing to keep the promise he made to Zane Allen.

Ed didn’t mention his brother. Everyone needed to keep their secrets, and Ed seriously wasn’t in the mood for a heart-to-heart with Li Wen.

“The north of the city? Isn’t that the Military District? I live near there; I went to junior high and high school at the military institutions. I’ll come with you.”

Ed narrowed his eyes a bit as he eyed Li Wen curiously. So that explained the ‘rich kid’ attitude. He was a military brat. But Ed hadn’t heard of anyone named Li in the military. Maybe it was his mother?

Still, to spill information like that as if it were natural, was this person really an idiot? The Military controlled Amestris in an almost passable dictatorship. There were military posts in every city and they were the law and order. Ed had more than a little experience with the Amestrian Military, but he didn’t think Solf J. Kimblee could be held up as an example for the average soldier.

Li Wen seemed to become chattier as his body warmed up in the large gray coat.

“We can go down the highway and pass through the city first. I’ll help you find the person you’re looking for. Do you know what class the kid is in? If you know the class, it’ll be easier to find the file.”

“I only know her name. She’s in first grade though.”

Li Wen nodded. “That makes it a little easier to find at least.” He hesitated for a moment before opening his mouth again, “Ed, can I ask you… do you know what’s happening with the black tower? Why so many people just… disappeared and some of us didn’t?”

He exposed so much with just that simple question.

Li Wen had been unconscious until now, and he’d missed a whole day's worth of information. He’d offered to help Ed for a reason, and though Ed could guess at why, it was better to know things for sure, and this was as good as an admission. On one hand, he wanted to thank Ed for stopping to help, and for bringing him into Luza. On the other, he wanted information on the current situation, anything that would help him stay alive.

However… that simple little question showed that he hadn’t participated in any black tower game.

Ed frowned slightly.

Was it possible that people could survive without having played the game? Or a game? He’d been pulled into Zane Allen’s game, but what if he hadn’t been? Would he have been the one to disappear like Alice, or would he be like Li Wen? Lost, confused, and weak.

Biting his lip, Ed was about to answer when a loud and cheerful song cut through the entirety of Luza.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!
Let us all say ‘thank you’.
We will all say ‘thank you’.
On this special day!

The children’s chorus that came after the bright feminine voice was even creepier. The pleasant jubilation of the melody a stark contrast with the dead and empty city. Ed braked hard, the car skiting and squealing to a stop, before both he and Li Wen raised their head in a sudden panic. Above them, hovering over the center of Luza, was the black tower.

Lights flashed as the song kept going, and Ed couldn’t help but hold his breath. When it was over, everything stopped, and there was about five seconds of silence, before –

“Ding Dong! In Amestris District 1, Stowaway Roy Mustang has successfully opened the first floor of the tower. In three minutes, all players in Amestris’ districts will begin to attack the tower!”

“Ding Dong! In Amestris District 1, Stowaway Roy Mustang has successfully opened the first floor of the tower…”

“Ding Dong! In Amestris District 1, Stowaway Roy Mustang has successfully opened the first floor…”

The black tower made the same announcement three times.

Ed’s eyes widened as the phrase ‘begin to attack the tower’ repeated in his head like a broken record. In the next moment, darkness engulfed everything and his entire body fell.
Chapter 11 - The Game

Ed recognized this feeling. He recognized it much too well.

Darkness didn’t mask the feeling of falling, and neither did it make controlling the fall easier. Unable to see the walls of the hole he’d fallen in, he kept banging heavily against each wall, his fingers scrambling to grab at some sort of ledge, but there was nothing. It was smooth, pitiless walls.

The improvement of his physicality made the entire process pretty painless, but the panic was still rising in Ed’s chest. He wasn't afraid of heights, never has been, never would be, but the darkness… the unknown… where the hell was the bottom?

It might have been minutes or maybe hours until –

Bang!

Ed finally landed. He wasn’t sure if it was lucky or unlucky to have landed slightly on his left, the jolt taking his breath away, even as the expected hurt and agony don’t come. He was jarred by the landing, but not injured.

Stretching out his hands, he realized that he couldn’t even see it. Touching the ground under him, he felt the moist soil he was standing on, earth. Right?

Pushing himself up silently, he crouched there, listening carefully. Is he alone in this darkness, or is there something more here with him?

Ed doesn’t really want to move around blindly, but he needed to find a wall if nothing else. He needed something at his back to feel the slightest bit more in control of himself. He walked carefully, his stance tense and ready to fight if he had to.

After a few minutes of searching and not finding anything, Ed crouched again, sticking close to the ground and staying on alert.

Suddenly, there was a familiar noise of vicious impact from above his head. He stilled completely, waiting.

It didn’t take too long before something big and heavy slammed savagely onto the ground, accompanied by a loud and very pained male voice. “Oh fuck, oh shit that hurt. Where am I?”

Ed recognized that voice. Carefully he whispered, “Li Wen?”

The male voice stopped groaning instantly, before replying, “Ed?”

At finding something familiar in all the darkness, Ed’s heart settled slightly, but before he had the chance to call out again, there is another noise. The familiar noise was back, and Ed went still and silent again as someone else fell down into this oppressive darkness with them. After that, four more people come tumbling down, one by one hitting the ground with screams or curses.

Ed counted each of them and found that, including himself, there are a total of seven people lost in
this pitch-black dark.

Suddenly, a dazzling bright light illuminated the darkness and everyone turned to find the source of the light. A small junior high student looked back at all of them, eyes wide and obviously timid. Her face was thin, her body haggard, and there was an obvious tremble in her voice as she tried to explain herself, “I… I had a flashlight with me. It was too dark so I turned it on.”

One of the other people, a man in a messy black suit nodded and walked towards her. “Can you hand me the flashlight? I’ll look around and find out where we are.” There is an elite air about him, a sort of commanding personality that Ed knew would rub him the wrong way given enough time.

Obviously, the personality worked on the young girl, because she was quick to hand him the flashlight.

The man made a calculated rotation around the cave they were in. Ed remained in place as the man moved, but he watched the lit-up areas closely, looking for any exit or hint to a way out. After he’s done getting a layout of the cave they were in, the man moved to what was most likely the center of their circular cave and dug a small hole in the soil. He pushed the flashlight upright into the ground, lighting up the majority of the surrounding area and making it possible for the seven people trapped within to see each other’s faces.

The man sat on the ground by the flashlight and looked around for only a moment before jumping into it, “First, we better introduce ourselves. My name is Leon Bin. I’m 29 and I work – well, worked at a PR company. I’m guessing no one else knows what’s going on here, but I think it’s probably related to the black tower. The only thing we can do at the moment is to unite and protect each other when whatever black tower creature or unknown event comes at us.”

Everyone stood around, staring at the man like they couldn’t believe he existed. Ed stood back a bit, watching carefully. The first one to crack was the young girl who’d given the man the flashlight. She sat down a little way away from him and introduced herself. “I’m Annabell Peng. I’m 15 years old and I’m a second-year student in junior high. You guys… you can call me Anna.”

The others all looked at each other, but no one else moved to sit down.

Ed silently rolled his eyes before taking a step forward. Suddenly he had everyone’s attention.

As he took a seat around the flashlight, Ed smiled. “My names Ed. 19, librarian.” It was simplifying things to the maximum, but Ed didn’t have a lot of trust in these people. It would do for now.

Li Wen obviously didn’t understand what had gotten into Ed that made him suddenly join the two people, but he followed not long after. “I’m Li Wen. I’m 25 and I… um… I don’t really have a job.”

Someone snorted, clearly catching on that this kid was someone’s spoiled son.

Among the seven people, four chose to group together. It really didn’t take long for the other three to follow the majority.

“Morgan Ro, 20 years old and I’m in university.”

“Tucker Roland. I am 32, and before the black tower incident happened, I was a chef. After everything though, my boss just up and ran away with his family, so I guess I’m unemployed too.”

Finally, the last person to sit down approached the group slowly. A young gentleman with glasses
sat down gingerly, his gaze lingering on Leon Bin. “I am Lloyd Marks. I am 28 years old and a game designer.”

And now, the seven people knew each other’s names.

With a gender combination of five men and two women, it was only normal that the two women would cling to each other. Morgan sat by Anna and the two of them began to talk in low whispers, getting to know each other. Soon, they were talking like old friends.

Li Wen scooted closer to Ed’s side. “Ed, what’s going on? Do you know?”

He shook his head, knowing he had no answers for this one. Instead, he offered the only guess he had, “It’s gotta have something to do with the black tower.”

“How should we attack the black tower?” Li Wen shivered. “Then, where the hell are we? Are we trapped here?”

“It should be an underground hole.” A sudden voice spoke out loud causing everyone to look worriedly at each other. Lloyd pushed his glasses up and spoke almost indifferently, “The moisture in the soil will increase as the distance from the ground increases. The closer we are to groundwater, the wetter the soil will be. At the moment, the water/soil potential of the ground under our feet is around three bars. Groundwater is unlikely to cause such a huge water/soil potential. If we are still in Luza, we must be near a water source. At best, this is an underground cave near a water source.”

Leon looked at him strangely. “You’re a game designer?”

Lloyd replied, “I majored in water conservation in university.”

And that didn’t sound any less suspicious than pretty much everything out of Lloyd’s mouth so far, but Ed was more curious about this person than anything. There was a knowing air about him, a scientific mind that Ed could almost relate to. Was this man really just a game designer?

Lloyd pointed up, and everyone turned to look at the seven holes on the ceiling of the cave. “These seven holes are more than likely where we fell from.”

Leon nodded before jumping in, “We should’ve all heard the black tower’s announcement right before we fell down. What did it say?”

Morgan raised her hand slightly by repeating, “In Amestris District 1, Stowaway Roy Mustang has successfully opened the first floor of the tower. In three minutes, all players of Amestris’s districts will begin to attack the tower.”

Of all seven people, the young Annabell Peng was by far the quietest, while the cook, Tucker Roland had a habit of listening closely and commenting sparsely. The one who did most of the talking was Leon Bin, as he tried to explain their situation to everyone who didn’t understand. Lloyd Marks was also silent after his initial conversation.

“There are several things I don’t understand about that, but we can table that for a moment. Do you remember the three important rules the black tower gave? They were released yesterday. Of the three laws, the last one told us that we had to work hard to attack the tower. I’m guessing that’s what we’re doing now. Attacking the tower.” Leon explained. It appeared that he’d assumed the role of ‘leader’ in the group of seven.

Li Wen decided to be curious. “How do we attack the tower?”
“I don’t know.”

Ed opened his mouth to offer an opinion. “We could try to find a hint or something. Should we look around again?”

Leon shook his head, “I ran a grid of the whole cave. There’s nothing here but us.”

Just as he finished speaking, a clear, familiar child’s voice rang in the darkness of the cave.

“Ding Dong! The black tower’s first floor (mentally handicapped mode) was opened. The seven-person survival game is loading…”

“Sandbox is being generated…”

“The game data is loading…”

“The main mission is released: The Seven People Chosen By God, Please Work Hard To Live!”

Ed’s stomach bottomed out as the cave fell back into silence.

He wasn’t sure how long it was before someone finally spoke again, and it was Li Wen, “Game? That was the black tower just now, right? What does it mean by a game? The seven-person survival game…”

Fuck, Ed didn’t even need to glance his way to confirm that Li Wen hadn’t participated in any black tower game before.

Chef Roland deliberately raised his voice in an attempt to hide his nervousness. “We should hurry up and get out of here. There has to be a way out of here.”

Leon sighed and calmly began to explain., “Stop worrying. Since the black tower already released a game for us, it’s impossible to leave now. Maybe there are traps.” If anyone looked closely enough, they would see Leon’s tightly clenched fists, and his trembling shoulders, but his voice remained steady and calm, “We need to figure out what our next move is…”

“Shh!”

“Shut up!”

Both Ed and Lloyd Marks whispered harshly at the same time.

Both of them looked back at each other, startled before Ed raised a curious eyebrow. “Did you hear that sound?” he whispered.

Everyone held their breaths, listening carefully.

Suddenly, the female university student Morgan Ro let out a sharp loud scream, immediately throwing her hand over her mouth as she muttered, “I heard it! I heard it! It sounds like digging, there’s something digging! I’m a fan of survival games and there are usually sound effects when performing certain actions, I recognize this one, there’s something digging!”

Leon sudden stood up, “It’s coming from there.”

They all stood up, slowly moving closer to each other, looking at the dirt wall Leon had pointed out.
In a fit of nervous rage, the chef Tucker Roland turned red, clenching his fists and taking a large step forward. “Damnit! What does it want?! I’ll punch it to death!”

Trepidation and a healthy amount of fear seemed to cloud around them in the illuminated darkness. The hairs on the back of their necks and on everyone’s arms stood on end as they looked in the direction of the digging. As the sound grew closer, Ed could hear his heart beating in his ears louder and louder, *thump thump, thump thump*.

The digging never stopped until it finally reached the wall of their cave.

*Boom!*

The last layers of dirt and soil were forced away, and everyone finally got a glimpse of what was within.

Blood red eyes glowed from the newly made hole, the small eyes sweeping across each one of the seven people. It held out huge claws that had pierced right through the damp soil and widened the new hole on the wall of the underground cave.

*Bang!*

The… thing… was a giant mole, apparently. It was more than two meters tall and its huge body was thick with muscle, resembling a beast. When it stood up, the large cave suddenly seemed smaller than it was just a moment ago. Everyone stumbled back away from it as it tossed a turkey half the size of a grown human onto the ground. Its tiny eyes focused on the seven people and its sharp teeth made a snapping sound as they clanged together.

The mole drooled and let out a strange laugh. Then in a lisping voice, it said, “The black tower is so good to me today! I was about to eat a turkey when it sent me fuel. Cooking the turkey with these seven humans and then sprinkle it with delicious cumin… Oh, thank you, black tower. Happy Thanksgiving!”

The chef was prepared to rage and strike at whatever would come out when he saw the terrifying rat. He stopped dead, stumbling back three paces, before turning on his heel and making a run for it.

“Don’t move!” Ed barked out.

Too late.

The moment the chef turned to flee, the huge mole shot forward in a flash of shadowed bulk before slamming a paw against the chef’s side, throwing the man roughly into the wall.

The chef hit hard, everyone heard at least a few bones break. Tension surrounded all of them, but most of them breathed a sigh of relief when they heard a ragged coughed out breath. They didn’t see the man move, but he was probably still alive.

The mole stared down at the other six with its crimson little eyes before its attention fell completely on Annabell Peng, the short, thin young girl. “This kindling is the thinnest. You’ll be the heart of the fire. The fattest ones I’ll leave for the end. The turkey will only roast on a big fire. Don’t tell anyone this secret, but this type of turkey is the most delicious!”

“Ah!” Annabell instantly went pale under the thing’s bloodthirsty gaze, her feet moving to take her farther away from the monster.
The mole rushed right for her, grabbing her head and pulling her back. Annabell cried out in pain, but Leon clenched his teeth and grabbed the girl’s right foot, pulling with all he had. He really shouldn’t have. “We can’t let this thing take this young girl away. If she’s taken, the next ones will be us!”

Ed didn’t think he was cold-blooded enough to watch a young girl burn alive, so he grabbed her other foot while Li Wen got ahold of her upper leg. The female university student, Morgan, scrabbled some courage from the bottom of her heart and grabbed onto the girl’s other leg.

Lloyd Marks had other ideas. Instead of going for the girl, he went for the mole. Pulling one foot up, he stopped down at an angle, stepping hard on the nail of the mole’s last small toe. He tried his best to make the huge mole react in some way, but the nails seemed to be as hard as iron. It didn’t even cause the mole to grunt, but it did make it release its grip on the little girl’s head. All of them nearly fell back on their asses when the girl was suddenly let go.

The giant mole growled now and shouted angrily, “I’m going to use all of you as kindling to roast my turkey!”

“Ding Dong! A branch mission has been triggered: Roast A Turkey For The Cute Mole.”

Fucking ‘cute’? What the hell made this gigantic rat ‘cute’?!

The surge of sudden irritation and anger had all six people wanting to tear the black tower down.

Ed got a sudden feeling of déjà vu, but he didn’t have the time to think of it before the mole swung its giant paws at Leon. The two female members of their little party fled in fear, moving as far from the situation as they could. Ed wanted to start growling himself, but instead, he yelled out, “Don’t run! Stick together now or we’ll be picked off one by one!”

The younger girl still ran, and sure, Ed could understand the instinct, but also, fuck her.

The older girl seemed to have a bit more courage as she ran back towards the fighting.

“Catch!” Lloyd pulled up two turkey legs from where the mole had thrown them and threw one at Ed. Apparently, the man had no control over his strength, because instead of moving towards Ed, it fell at the female student’s feet.

Jesus! This mole was fucking huge but the turkey wasn’t normal sized either, and that was even more apparent when in Lloyd Marks’ hands. The drumstick was hard and would make a passible weapon, but Ed doubted how effective it could actually be. Still, he didn’t say another as Lloyd and Morgan rushed at the mole.

The mole had been preoccupied with Leon Bin, but it had a keen sense of hearing. The second it heard the two people coming from behind, it stopped and turned towards them.

Leon was coughing up blood, but with whatever strength he had left, he grabbed onto the mole’s legs. “Hurry!”

Lloyd and Morgan flanked the mole, each one coming from a different side, waving their drumsticks like baseball bats. The mole was restrained by Leon, but it didn’t need to run. The iron-like claws rose, blocking both sides of its head.

The turkey legs hit the claws and sparks flew as if two pieces of hard metal had collided.

The mole slowly moved its claws and growled, “I will burn all of you and roast my turkey!”
Leon was losing hope fast. He used the last of his strength to keep hold of the mole, but he wasn’t sure how much more he had. Suddenly, his eyes went wide and a spark of new hope lit them from within. He saw Ed coming up from behind the mole.

But his hands were completely empty of any weapons…

Like being dunked in a bucket of ice-cold water, all of Leon’s hope was doused and he yelled out a warning, “Wait! Don’t! You’re gonna die!”

In the blink of an eye, a large match appeared in Ed’s hand. No one actually caught the moment it appeared, the chef was on the ground and it was unknown whether he was dead or still alive, the young girl had run as far as she could and no one could even guess as where she was, but Lloyd and Morgan only knew that at one point, Ed’s hands were empty and the next, they held onto a large match stick.

The sound of forcefully displaced wind warned of the power of the weapon.

They all looked on excitedly at Ed and the match in his hands as it made an arc right for the mole’s head.

Too bad it didn’t get there.

With a pair of stretched out claws, the mole caught the matchstick.

Ed’s heart dropped like a stone. While the impact of the match had made the mole stagger back, it hadn’t harmed it. It was quick to grab at the match before peering down at Ed.

Ed bared his teeth, brain firing from every cylinder in an attempt to come up with a plan.

Only… the mole didn’t attack. The left claw held the match, while the right one came up to softly pat at Ed’s head as if he were a dog. “Hey! How did you get Mosaic’s match?” The pinkish red nose moved in the air like a worm as the mole sniffed deep, then its eyes widened and it screeched, “Oh, you have the lingering taste of Mosaic on you! Oh, what a disgusting taste!”

Ed wasn’t sure what he felt at that moment.

Should he be grateful? He would have been. If he wasn’t so fucking pissed.
Chapter 12 – The Stowaway Part 1

The giant mole gently ran its sharp claws over the head of the big match. There was a spark from the bright red matchhead before raging flames soon devoured the entire stick. The giant mole placed the match on the ground, and then strung up the huge turkey with its long, sharp claws, roasting it leisurely on the fire.

Morgan Ro went to the corner to check on the chef and sighed when he found him still alive. “He’s okay. Just unconscious.”

Ed and Li Wen moved to help Leon up.

Apart from the unconscious chef, the remaining six people migrated to the side of the cave farthest from the big mole. It didn’t afford them much space. The underground cave was huge, and it certainly wasn’t ventilated enough to disperse the smell of the roasting turkey.

Hunger was like a physical beast clawing at Ed’s mental stability as he, and the other people, watched the firm turkey meat roast, oil dripping from the meat to the still burning fire. There were no seasonings, Ed was sure of it, but he’d never smelled a more delicious scent in his life.

The giant match brightened the cave, bringing everything into clearer focus. While the big mole was… odd, it was the damned turkey that captured everyone’s attention. Ed himself hadn’t eaten all day, worry had kept him moving and focused, but worry wasn’t working anymore.

Moister collected in his mouth and he had to swallow it back, he wasn’t the only one. Gulp could be heard from around the cave.

When the match finally burned out, the turkey was completely roasted.

The big mole sat on the ground with bright red eyes, sharp claws and giant teeth suppressing any urge the six people had to try and steal a taste of the turkey. Ed couldn’t help glaring as he watched the big mole take a large bite.

“I’d never tell anyone, but a turkey baked by Mosaic’s match is the most delicious thing in the world. This is the greatest Thanksgiving I’ve ever had.”

Annoyance was natural, but fear and trepidation tempered all of them. While they huddled together, the big mole ignored them studiously, lost in his meal.

In this situation, most of the people in the cave would most likely blame Ed. Sure, he’d attacked in an attempt to beat back the mole bent on killing all of them; he’d only collected one ability, but with that ability, he was able to launch a surprise attack and actually push the mole back. Unfortunately, he was blocked by a paw and robbed of his weapon, which became the fuel for the newly roasted turkey.

When a rumbling growl of six people’s stomachs echoed in the cave, the mole looked extremely pleased.

It seemed to be in a very good mood after eating one of the turkey legs, but as it picked up the other one, it asked, “How did you get Mosaic’s match?”
Startled out of his hungry glare, Ed’s eyebrow rose but he answered calmly, “I’ve unfortunately had the pleasure to encounter her before.”

The big mole hummed an agreeable sound. “Did the small Mosaic try to commit arson or murder? She’s actually a very sensible and obedient little girl, but she just has a special hobby. Don’t you think she’s cute?”

Why did it feel like that question was a field of landmines?

Very likely because it was, and in this kind of situation, Ed had no qualms lying his ass off.

“She’s really cute,” Ed said. Stoic, expressionless, cold.

The mole nodded, something like a smile on its face, “Yes! She’s as cute as I am!”

Before he could stop himself, Ed’s right palm came up to cover his face. The hard metal of his automail hand didn’t even hurt like it usually did as it slapped sharply into his forehead and the bridge of his nose.

Ed was on edge. As he watched the mole finish off the leg and start on the wings, he wondered why the creature wasn’t killing the seven of them quickly. From what Ed had seen so far, the mole had both the ability and the strength to take them out easily, but all this waiting and stalling… was it playing with them?

Though his mind was racing, Ed remained on alert, ready for any sudden movements, but it seemed that what the mole wanted, was conversation. As it ate, it murmured, “I really ought to thank you for the match this time. Mosaic’s match is the best for roasting turkeys, but that little girl isn’t sensible. She said she needed the matches to set fires and would never give me one.”

Ed almost bit his tongue, but in the end, his sarcasm got the best of him, “Didn’t you just say that she was an obedient and sensible little girl?”

The big mole used one large claw to scratch its head. “Did I say that? I don’t remember.” Quickly, the mole changed the topic. “Still, you really shouldn’t be attacking the tower right now. Mosaic’s match is a good weapon, if you have it on the second and third floors you’ll probably live through those nasty bugs. I’m lucky I met you in advance and got to enjoy my turkey! Ah, I’m so thankful for the black tower. Happy Thanksgiving!”

Ed’s eyes narrowed, irritation fighting with weariness on his face. When he felt someone brush against his hand, he startled, turning to see Lloyd Marks on his right, mouthing: ‘Try to find out more’.

Ed didn’t really need to be prodded, he’d already planned on gathering as much information as possible, and making full use of the mole’s apparent great mood was his biggest advantage. “Why shouldn’t we be attacking the tower right now?” It was as good a place to start as any.

“How many of you have awakened abilities at your current level? If you entered the first floor in ‘normal’ mode, you’d just die. Even if you didn’t enter this cave, an earthworm from above could kill you.”

Lloyd jumped onto those keywords, “Abilities? Normal mode?”

The mole’s nose twitched. “Yes, aren’t you playing in the ‘mentally handicapped’ mode right now?”
Hell, Ed remembered the black tower announcing that actually, and it irked him more than it probably should. Damnit, Ed was supposed to have let go of his pride a long time ago, but it looked like ‘pride’ wasn’t something that stayed gone for long.

The turkey was already halfway eaten, Ed wasn’t sure how much longer he had to ask questions, and he wanted to know more about abilities, especially his own, but there was something more important right now. “Mister… Mole, what does it mean to attack the tower?”

“Attacking the tower is attacking the tower. You really shouldn’t have attacked the tower yet, it’s all because that stowaway accidentally reached the maximum level allowed before being forced into attacking the tower. You were all forcibly pulled into the game because of him.” The mole paused for a moment, licking oil from his claws. “Oh, but I guess I should also thank the stowaway. If he hadn’t opened the game, you wouldn’t have been able to enter. If you hadn’t entered, I wouldn’t have been able to eat such a delicious turkey. Eh, but he is a stowaway…”

Ed instantly cut. “What is a stowaway?”

The mole suddenly raised its head, beady red eyes flashing in the newly dimmed cave.

“The stowaways are cheaters. They haven’t experienced a game, just logged into the black tower in other ways. They’re the most disgusting of all. If we can catch one and eat them, we can gain strong abilities. I like to eat stowaways the most. Their meat is fragrant and tender, and so powerful! Every stowaway has an ability of its own.”

Six pairs of eyes shared glances. Even the junior high school student, Annabell, understood that ‘people who logged into the black tower’ likely meant the ones who had survived the sudden disappearance of more than half the world’s human population.

Ed’s neck prickled, a bad feeling nearly kept him from asking his next question, but in the end, information was important. They needed as much help as they could get. “Then how did they manage to log into the black tower?”

The mole’s large teeth ground against each other, Ed wasn’t sure if it was annoyance or what, “There are three ways to enter the black tower. Each way results in a different type of identity. There are ‘Official Players’, ‘Reserve Players’, and ‘Stowaways’. Official players are those who participated in a black tower game within the allotted three days and won. They are officially recognized by the black tower and gain an ability. Reserve players didn’t participate in a black tower game, but won some other game, receiving the black tower’s recognition to some extent. Once they win a black tower game, they are allowed to qualify as official players. Finally, there are my favorites! The Stowaways…”

The mole said it in a harsh, nearly reverent whisper. Drool dripping from its muzzle.

“Stowaways are people who eliminated a player within those three days. Before the game officially began, every human was a hidden player. By eliminating at least one hidden player, you can log into the black tower. The elimination method includes but isn’t limited to playing games. Killing another player is also seen as eliminating them.”

Fuck… he’d been right.

He thought back to the first stowaway he’d met.

Ian Banks, the thief.

At first, Ed thought the thief was like him, someone who’d won a strange black tower game. In his
abilities book, Ian Banks’ name had been followed by a ‘stowaway’, and it had confused him then. After all, he hadn’t known what it meant, or how it was different from his own.

“Unfortunately, that stowaway didn’t come to me. I would’ve gladly eaten him.” The mole went back to chewing on his turkey, muttering, “A stowaway who opened the tower attack game in advance. How delicious would he be? How much power could I gain from eating him? Every official player and stowaway have awakened their abilities. The odds of a reserve player awakening their abilities is slightly lower but… Oh, I want to eat that stowaway…”

Ed stopped listening. He didn’t want to have the mental image of this giant mole tearing apart a human being. Still, the mole had been useful to an extent. They now had information that was rather valuable to know.

Out of the world’s remaining 400 million people, there were three separate types recognized by the black tower. Official players, reserve players, and stowaways. Reserve players may or may not have an ability, while all official players and stowaways definitely did. The only question Ed needed answered was, what were the differences between an official players abilities and a stowaways’?

Ed, as an official player, possessed the little leather-bound abilities book, while the stowaway Ian Banks had the ability to store objects within a pocket dimension in his body.

He wasn’t sure about the numbers of each of the three types, but he knew that stowaways would be among the minority.

In the three-day elimination period, the number of stowaways in the world couldn’t exceed 10 million.

If Ed had to take an educated guess, he would say that reserve players were in the majority. While the number of official players would fall below that of stowaways.

Out of the seven people present, four of them had obviously not participated in a black tower game. If Ed’s theory was right, then with him as an official player, there was a very strong likelihood that… at least one of those four left would be a stowaway.

Oh fuck, he hoped he was wrong.

As the mole started on the last piece of turkey breast, he continued to mutter to himself. “It’s a pity, that stowaway who opened the tower attack game must have been eaten by now. Why didn’t he come to me? Such a delicious stowaway, I really wanted to eat him. Ah…”

The big mole let out a sigh as it touched its full round stomach. The smell of the meal still permeated the air, and everyone tried to savor it as much as they could.

The big mole was no exception, putting its red nose in the air and sniffing forcefully.

Gradually, the scent of the turkey dissipated.

A clear child’s voice cut into Ed’s ears.

“Ding Dong! Branch task ‘Roast A Turkey For The Cute Mole’ has been completed.”

Everyone released a sigh of relief.

Right then, the sound of sharp laughter pierced the heavy air. The big mole opened his small eyes
and swept a narrow glance over all the people present. It giggled, a disconcerting sound like nails dragging over glass. Goosebumps trailed down Ed’s flesh arm.

When the mole spoke again, it was in a high, excited tone of voice. “What did I just discover? Hidden by the smell of the turkey, I just noticed there are two official players, four reserve players, and… a stowaway! Black tower, why are you so good to me today? I want to eat this stowaway! Happy Thanksgiving!”

“Ding Dong! Branch mission two triggered: ‘Find The Damn Stowaway’!”
Chapter 13 – The Stowaway Part 2

“I’d know that smell anywhere, the black tower hates stowaways the most. Eating a stowaway can give us lots of rewards and a boost in strength. They’re also really tasty. I haven’t told anyone about them.”

The giant mole narrowed its tiny eyes, crushing a large turkey bone under his paw. “There is a nasty stowaway among the seven of you. Give them over to me and I’ll eat them!”

The mole stalked closer.

By that point, the chef was finally coming to, but he was quick to regain his senses as he saw the mole’s sharp claws coming toward him. He let out a shrill scream in horror, only for the mole to scream back even louder. The man nearly fainted.

Ed couldn’t help touching his wrist, where the big match tattoo had now disappeared. According to the mole’s earlier comment, the match could have been useful on the second floor. It meant that the match had been stronger than he’d first predicted. It likely had more functions and uses, but Ed had only waved it around blindly like a blunt object.

If he’d had a little more time, he might’ve been better prepared for this.

Why had the attack on the tower started now?

The name of the stowaway who’d opened the tower attack game flashed back into Ed’s mind, but he had no time to complain. He needed to focus on the problem now, “Who is the stowaway and how do we find them to give them to you?”

Li Wen and Morgan Ro’s eyes widened as they looked at Ed in confused incredulity.

Lloyd spared him a glance but didn’t comment. The little girl, Annabell looked up at him blankly, her expression giving off the impression that she didn’t understand what he meant at all.

When someone did open their mouths to comment, it was Morgan. “Are you really going to hand them over, just like that? The mole said it would eat…”

Ed’s glance was cold as he put things in perspective, “Would you like to take the stowaway’s place as the mole’s dinner?”

Morgan froze, instantly falling silent.

The next one to speak was Lloyd, his voice soft but audible. “The stowaway is a murderer. Maybe they were forced to kill someone, or it might have been in self-defense. It doesn’t matter. Based on the law, they may or may not be sentenced to death. However, the black tower hates stowaways and according to its laws, it’s a death sentence. We are just looking for the stowaway. Anything after that has nothing to do with us.”

Leon’s once hard expression changed and he began to nod. “Yes. We just have to find out who the stowaway is.”

The big mole gave them a sharp-toothed grin. “How should I know who the stowaway is? My cave
isn’t big enough and all of you are gathered together. The smell of the stowaway already filled up this cave, I can’t determine who it is. I’ll give you an hour to find the stowaway though. If you can’t find them, I’ll eat one human every hour. That way, I’ll definitely find the stowaway.” The mole shot a look at Ed, “Oh right, Mosaic knows you… and you also lent me the match… well, I’ll just eat you last.”

Ed’s eyebrow rose. Was that supposed to be a gift?

The mole saw Ed’s indifferent expression and laughed, then it ran over to a corner and started digging. Likely it was expanding its own cave. It managed two holes before turning to the group of seven again. “It’s been two minutes. Have you found the stowaway yet?”

The group took a collective breath, looking from one to another with suspicion and fear.

Like he’d been doing so far, Leon stepped forward to take on the leader’s role. With a hard look at everyone else, he asked, “In those last three days, did any of you kill anyone?”

Naturally, everyone shook their heads in denial.

“Yeah, that’s what I guessed.” Ever since entering the underground cave, the man had been the undeniable leader and now was no exception. Carefully, he started to analyze the situation. “The mole said that the stowaway is a person who eliminated a player by killing them during the three-day elimination period. The stowaway will certainly have an ability and will stink. From what I can guess, the smell thing only applies to black tower creatures. Can any of you smell anything strange?”

Morgan shook her head. “No. I’ve always had a sensitive nose, but the only thing I can smell at the moment is dirt.”

Everyone else also shook their heads and Leon let out a frustrated huff. “Damn, how are we going to find the stowaway at this rate?”

Lloyd spoke up. “The stowaway has killed someone and they have an ability.”

The chef, who’d been unconscious for most of the explanations pushed his way in, his confusion causing a slight bit of aggression. “Kill? Ability? Wait, what’s going on here?”

There wasn’t time to explain things to the man. “Killing a person and having an ability? So what?” Leon said with a shrug, then his entire face changed as he rounded on Ed. “You have a power!”

Ed had pulled a big match out of thin air. It wasn’t something a normal human was capable of and so it must be an ability.

When Ed glared at him, Li Wen stepped in, explaining for Ed. “The big mole said that there are two official players, four reserve players, and one stowaway. An official player is someone who participated in a black tower game and logged into the black tower successfully. Ed is more likely to be an official player. He knows the person called Mosaic that the mole knew as well. It’s gotta have something to do with the black tower game.”

Ed rolled his eyes but confirmed it anyways. “I participated in a black tower game. According to the information the mole gave us, I am an official player.”

Leon shook his head, arguing, “Before today, you might have participated in a black tower game, but nobody can guarantee that your game happened in those three days. It’s been four days now since the black tower issued the ‘Earth is Online’ announcement. How can we know for sure that
you didn’t kill someone in those three days then played a game on the fourth?”

Ed actually wanted to laugh in the man’s face, but before he could even attempt to respond, Lloyd stepped in. “He is an official player. The black tower hates stowaways, and they’re tasty. If he wasn’t an official player, he would’ve been discovered by the mole’s companion, Mosaic, before he even met the mole here. He wouldn’t have survived and also wouldn’t have obtained the huge match.”

Ed turned a surprised look to Lloyd Marks, but the other person just stared back stoically.

Neither of them spoke, but it seemed that everyone else present had taken the explanation at face value. Leon frowned a bit, “It makes sense. There is a 90% chance that you’re really an official player, but there’s still a 10% chance you’re the stowaway. But then, you wouldn’t have known how to hide your scent or taste and would have certainly been discovered by Mosaic.”

Leon took a breath and suddenly moved forward into the center of the group. “I’m going to confess that I’m the second official player.”

Ed tilted his head, not exactly surprised by the words, but by the admission.

Leon smiled wryly and held his right hand up. “My ability isn’t very good and I’d rather not reveal the specifics. It’s really no use in this situation anyway, but I can show you without exposing the effects of my ability.”

An ability was a person’s secret, it was understandable to want to keep it that way.

Leon squatted down and stretched out his pointer finger of his right hand and pressing it against the dirt. Without even explaining, he started to draw a circle.

Ed couldn’t help snorting. What kind of ability was this?

Morgan grinned; eyes bright in sudden amusement. “Oh wow, it’s perfect! Does your ability allow you to draw the perfect circle without a compass?”

Ed frowned. “Okay, sure. The circle is neat and all, but that doesn’t prove you have an ability. You might just be a professional and learned to draw like that.”

Leon rolled his eyes, “Then look again.”

He used his pointer finger to draw another circle right next to the first one. It was full, round, and completely perfect. Ed furrowed his brows.

“Ah! It’s exactly the same size as the previous one!” Morgan exclaimed in surprise.

Leon shrugged with a helpless smile. “I don’t want to talk about the specifics of my ability. But do you believe I have one now? I am the other official player.”

“If you… if you have an ability, then why can’t you be the stowaway?” The little girl, Annabell spoke from behind Morgan, her small voice timid.

“If I were a stowaway, would I have taken the initiative to come forward and say I was an official player? Kid, the person who actually is a stowaway would most likely hide it. They wouldn’t even want to present an ability to the others, because what if? Out of the seven of us, only this guy’s the safest one.” Leon threw a thumb over his shoulder at Ed. “He really is an official player; the mole basically confirms it for us. Now, the mole also said that reserve players can also possess abilities,
but the odds are very low. Then the next person to present an ability to the group has a 50% chance of being the stowaway.”

Leon looked around at each of the other trapped players. With another shrug, he said. “In any case, I took the initiative to come forward and expose my ability. It proves that I’m not afraid or lying.”

Li Wen cut in from beside Ed. “Sure, but if you’re smart enough to think about all of that, then you’re also smart enough to use it. Reverse psychology, dude.”

Leon sighed, “If that’s the case, let the third person with an ability show themselves. As long as he comes out, he must surely be a stowaway. I know that I haven’t killed anyone. I participated in a black tower game. I’m an official player. The third person with an ability is definitely the stowaway.

“I believe you,” Ed admitted.

Leon had been trying to stay calm as he explained, but Ed hadn’t missed the shaking of his hands or the worry lining his eyes. After hearing Ed’s words though, he smiled in excitement and went straight to Ed’s side. “Fuckin’, thank you. I really am an official player. I can tell you the game I played and how I won it.”

Ed was actually a bit interested in that information, but for now, they needed to focus on something else. “It’s alright. You don’t have to give us the details. The rest of us need a chance to speak.”

They didn’t have time to focus on one target. They needed to hear everyone’s stories and decide who to focus on from there. That was the only way they’d get through this.

Lloyd carefully scanned everyone’s faces as he said, “To the best of my knowledge, there are roughly three types of murder in the world.”

“The first is a crime of passion. It’s the most common of murders. Many people get emotional and lose control of themselves. Usually, they kill someone else by mistake, in self-defense or a careless accident. It is unintentional. If the stowaway among us killed someone by accident, they would be emotionally scarred by it. They would feel exposed when we talk about it and are more likely to show their guilt.”

Li Wen started before crying out, “Damn! Why didn’t you say that earlier? It’s been a while now, who would remember everyone’s reactions from that time.”

Ed raised his right hand casually. “I noticed. At the time, everyone was normal. No one seemed agitated or on edge.”

Lloyd gave Ed a curious look but nodded. “He is right.”

Since falling down into this cave, Ed hadn’t relaxed his vigilance once. He’d experienced too much in life, and too much in a two-player black tower game to even think about trusting any unfamiliar ‘teammates’.

Lloyd continued. “Therefore, there is an 80% chance that the stowaway among us didn’t commit an accidental crime. They knew what they were doing and it was intentional. The second type of murder is the premeditated type. Usually to think about the act before committing it takes a special kind of person. Either psychologically abnormal or with a dark physical need. Basically, psychopaths.”

Everyone but Ed and Leon took a step back at Lloyd’s words.
Most murderers didn’t fall in that category. Usually, only serial killers and repeat offenders could gather that sort of cold apathy for human life within themselves.

Still, Ed frowned as he listened.

“But I don’t think the stowaway among us belongs to the second type. I think they’re in the third category. They deliberately killed a person, but they aren’t bloodthirsty. They know what they did is murder, but they don’t consider themselves a murderer. They had a reason to kill that, in their head, was justifiable. Once this person is exposed, they won’t be surprised or remorseful. They know what they did, and they’ll want to explain why.”

Li Wen gulped. “I don’t think there’s some kind of antisocial psychopathic murderer among us.”

Morgan shivered a bit, cold in her own fears. “I agree. So, it should be the third type.”

Ed had been listening quietly, but now that the explanation was done, he walked over to Lloyd and smiled. “It makes a lot of sense. Then how about we pick up where we left off? Let’s start with you. Mr. Marks, what did you do in those three days? Are you really a game designer and where did you work?”

Lloyd Marks raised his head and stared head-on into the eyes of the blond young man in front of him.

Ed’s expression, his entire demeanor wasn’t overly aggressive, but there were hints of suspicions and questions in his eyes.

The two looked at each other for a long time.

Then, with a small smile, Lloyd took out a plastic identification card from his pocket and handed it over. “It’s nice to finally meet you in person, Edward Elric. I am the official leader of the Central Black Tower Research Institute’s Group A Field Division. My name really is Lloyd Marks, but your brother knows me as Vincent Marco.”
Chapter 14 – The Stowaway Part 3

There was a ringing in Ed’s ears as he looked down at Lloyd Marks’s credentials.

The plastic laminated ID had no photo on it, but it had an electronic chip embedded in the upper right-hand corner. The left side of the ID bared a simple name and title. Three lines of words:

[Name: Lloyd Vincent Marks  
Division: Central City Group A  
Position: Team Leader]

This was the leader of the black tower research group. This was Alphonse’s boss… this was a person who’d seen Al in the last three months… in the last three days.

Ed’s eyes were hard and flinty as he shot his gaze from the ID in his hand to the man in front of him. He looked so young, only about 4 inches taller than Ed himself, pale skin, black hair, narrowed dark green eyes. There were questions fighting to burst free of his mouth, but they couldn’t get past his throat. Ed was choking on it.

“Why did you lie to us? Why’d you say you were a game designer?” Leon asked, taking the card from Ed’s frozen fingers.

Lloyd gave the man a long look. “Everyone here has their secrets. You hid your ability, for you that is what is most important, the most special. My identity is what is special to me. I didn’t want to expose it at the beginning, I didn’t trust any of you with it. Do you understand?”

He looked carefully at everyone in the cave before his full attention returned to Ed, who nearly recoiled back. “You don’t have to doubt the authenticity of my identity. As you all know, this attack tower game started very suddenly. There were only three minutes between the black tower’s announcement and our entry into this cave. I wouldn’t have been able to prepare a card like that in advance in order to pose as a black tower researcher.”

Ed still couldn’t move, couldn’t speak, could barely even breathe. He wanted to ask, needed to ask about Alphonse but… did he want to know? What if Lloyd Marks told him that his brother had, in fact, disappeared like everyone else. What would Ed do then?

Before Ed could decide, Morgan Ro seemed to get an idea, but just as she opened her mouth to ask, Lloyd interrupted. “I don’t have an ability to make ID cards in seconds either. If I really had that kind of ability, why would I make an identity card of a black tower researcher instead of a game designer? If I had stuck to my original story, there would have been no doubts in place and I might even be counted as one of the most trustworthy of us.”

Lloyd cleanly shut down the entire crowd’s arguments.

When he finally turned back to look at Ed, Ed finally swallowed back every. He needed to know. One way or the other.

But again, before he could ask, Lloyd continued. “Don’t doubt that I’m a black tower researcher. The black tower has been around for half a year now, and you should know that all tower researchers are protected and not allowed to contact the outside world. I’ve been studying the black tower in nearly every city around Central for months, and in those last three days, I was in Luza.
There would have been no chance for me to kill anyone.”

Ed balked.

Lloyd had been in Luza for the last three days? So he really didn’t know…

“I don’t know who else from the research department is still out there, but even so, if I had really wanted to kill someone back then, as long as there was a legitimate reason, I wouldn’t have had to do it myself. Someone else would have resolved the problem for me. In any case, I was protected and kept hidden by many people. I couldn’t kill anyone.”

And with that, Lloyd had answered the question eating at Ed the most. He didn’t know if Alphonse Elric was alive or dead. He did, however, know who Edward was and spoke his full name despite Ed not having given it earlier. Lloyd Marks may not know if Al was gone or alive at the moment, but he’d met Al at some point in the last six months.

Closing his eyes against the sudden wave of despair, Ed opened his mouth, but nothing would come out. Lloyd didn’t seem to need words though.

“He’s fine. As far as I know, he was worried about you. I called into the Central team just before everyone started to disappear. I don’t… I don’t know if he’s there, but…”

Ed nodded harshly. When he opened his eyes, a new determination seemed to light his golden eyes from within.

The crowd around him shuddered a bit at the intensity of his face. Ed knew that the researchers were all protected by the military as they collected frontline data and conducted private research. Al had been cut off from him and Winry for almost a full three months before the earth went online, but Ed knew his brother. Al was alive. If not as an official player, then as a reserve. He would survive anything until Ed could get to him because Alphonse was a genius who could take care of himself.

Putting aside the mountain ranges, the deep forests and vast oceans, as long as the black tower appeared in a city, it was always located smack dab in the center of the city. The country establishing an institute next to the black tower was tantamount to making themselves walking targets, especially since the whole world knew where their headquarters were.

If Lloyd Marks knew Alphonse Elric, then he really was a black tower researcher. And with that belief came the belief that Lloyd wasn’t the stowaway. To be a black tower researcher was too high profile. No stowaway would want to announce their identity, especially not that kind of identity. It would grab them too much attention.

The cook and the junior high student had clear doubt on their faces, but everyone else believed Lloyd. Especially with the way, Ed reacted to his words. No one asked, after all, they had all lost someone or something, but they knew the feeling well enough to read it on someone else’s face.

With that decided, they continued down the line. Everyone needed to disclose what they’d done during those three days, and with Ed and Leon temporarily tossed aside, it was Morgan Ro’s turn.

“Let’s see. I remember being in class when the black tower issued the ‘earth is online’ announcement. I’m not sure what class… oh wait, it was the 15th, it Wednesday so the first two classes were advanced mathematics. When the black tower spoke, a lot of people freaked out, so classes were canceled until further notice. Everyone returned to their dorms and the school had to make an announcement to try to keep everyone calm.”
Morgan touched her chin with her left-hand fingertips and admitted, “Actually, I’m a black tower optimist. I’ve always liked playing survival games, I think I’ve played every survival game on the market up to this point. I didn’t honestly take the black tower seriously at the beginning. When all of us returned to the dorms, I gossiped about the tower with my roommates for a long time. To be honest, that’s just about all we did. The cafeteria was closed and classes were canceled for all three days so we all ate takeout and played games. Cards, dice, domino, everything and anything anyone in the dorms had.”

Leon nodded, “Is that all?”

Morgan spent a moment thinking hard before shaking her head. “I really didn’t do much. All four of my dormmates were local to Luza, but my father died when I was younger, and my mother moved to Central on business. After the black tower accident, all three of my roommates when home the next day, but the people next door were staying, so when I wasn’t playing video games alone in my room, I was playing cards in theirs. The morning everyone disappeared, I didn’t even know. I got up, brushed my teeth, and turned on my computer only to realize there was no internet. Later, when I went to meet up with the dorm mates next door… everyone was just… gone…”

The female university student who’d been acting rather brave up till that point suddenly seemed to sag, the fear obvious in the set of her shoulder. Her arms came around herself as she tried to stay calm. “Those three days I was only playing games. I never killed anyone, I’m really not a stowaway. After… after everyone was gone I wanted to go to Central City to find my mother, I didn’t expect to be pulled here before even leaving Luza. Please believe me, I’m really not a stowaway!”

Leon nodded, deciding to believe her as he turned to see what Ed and Lloyd thought.

The other two kept their faces blank, so they could only move on to the next person.

Li Wen looked at Ed for a moment, before taking a deep breath to ease his tension. When he began, his voice was low. “On the first day I went to Luza to meet up with a friend, and the next day we mainly spent at the clubs. The third night, my dad called and told me to come home, but I knew I was too drunk to even attempt the drive, so I went to sleep and took some pills for the hangover I knew was coming. Early the next morning, I was driving on the freeway when I got into an accident. When I woke up, I saw Ed. I didn’t know anything about what was going on with the black tower, but Ed told me I was rear-ended because the other drivers all suddenly disappeared. I’m not a stowaway. I never killed anyone.”

Everyone turned to Ed, looking for confirmation.

This time it was Ed’s turn to nod. “When I met him, his car had been rear-ended in front of a pile-up of about 8 cars. But I don’t know what happened to him.”

Leon frowned, “That’s not enough. Can you give us more detail?”

Li Wen winced and thought for a moment before slowly shaking his head. “I’m trying to remember but I spent most of those three days clubbing with friends. Drinking, screwing around, just… it was nothing special, nothing that stood out for me. It was something we actually did fairly often. My friend brought some girls and we…” He sounded a little strained, and by the look on his face, it was obvious what he spent that time doing.

Everyone around stopped listening to Li Wen’s explanations, most of them looking at Li Wen with disgust and narrowed eyes.
Li Wen put up his hands in a gesture universally recognized as surrender. “Hey, I… We were just hanging out.”

As Li Wen made his excuses, Morgan quietly explained the current situation to the chef who’d been knocked out during the majority of the information dump. He looked particularly nervous after hearing the state of events. Wiping the sweat off his brow, he straightened a bit and once everyone’s attention turned to him, he immediately started to speak. “I – I was a cook. About half a year ago, when the black towers first appeared, my boss got scared and just up and left. I was unemployed for a while, but I got a job as a delivery guy. There was nothing special about those three days, I did my deliveries as usual, but due to many people not being at work, my list was smaller. Just… nothing really happened. I just delivered the food. When I headed out for deliveries on the third morning I… There were people just disappearing on the streets and panic and screaming. I got scared and rushed home, I didn’t want to be outside with all of that going on.”

Leon again frowned, “Can you give us anything else?”

The cook anxiously wiped at his sweat with the back of his hand. “I don’t – Wait, yes, I remember making deliveries to two high-end communities. Luza Park Street was on one side, but the guards there didn’t allow people on bikes to enter the gated community, so I had to stop at the gates and walk to the right house to deliver the food. Then there was one at People’s Square, and the other was… damn I… what am I supposed to say? What do you want me to say? I can’t remember, but I’m telling the truth! I didn’t kill anyone! I’m not a stowaway!”

Ed gave the man a long considering stare as he looked around anxiously, meeting everyone’s eyes. Ed chose not to comment, instead making his way to the only person who hadn’t spoken a word so far.

Annabell stood beside Morgan, timidly watching the rest of the group wearily.

Morgan put an arm around her, rubbing lightly at her shoulder. “It’s okay, don’t be scared, Anna. Just talk about what you did in those three days. The real stowaway won’t be able to hide for very long.” She looked between Li Wen and Leon, “Just speak.”

The young girl nodded slowly before beginning to talk in a small, soft voice. “I’m not a stowaway. I didn’t kill anyone. My school was closed down, just like hers.” She pointed at Morgan with her free hand. “My parents took me home and that’s where I stayed. My father had to go to work, but my mom didn’t, so she stayed with me. She was worried that with the school closed down, I’d fall behind my classmates, so she started homeschooling me. From 7 in the morning to 11, it was language and mathematics. Then I had a break until 2, and we would start English. At six in the evening, my mom was helping me with my homework… and… and then she…”

The little girl’s eyes watered, her head falling low. “Then my mother disappeared on the third day. I didn’t know what was going on, I didn’t… she just disappeared.”

Morgan grabbed the little girl’s hand, giving it a comforting squeeze.

Annabell sobbed quietly for a moment, before looking up at them, face pale and voice hoarse. “Before my mother disappeared, she told me the night before ‘Don’t be afraid. As long as I’m good, she’ll be fine.’ My mother… my mother is gone…”

With that, the little girl broke down.

With only two girls among the seven people, Morgan was the one to hug and comfort the young girl, softly shushing the girl as she rubbed her back.
Leon frowned a bit as he watched the two girls. Just as he opened his mouth to say something, Ed interrupted him, “Leon Bin, it’s your turn.”

Leon paused for only a moment before nodding. “I work for a PR company, I’m usually responsible for marketing and planning. After the black tower spoke, my company insisted everyone keep working as usual. Personally, I was against it, I wanted to ask to leave but we had a huge project for a difficult client and my boss didn’t allow anyone to slack off. I just kept working. I was pulled into a black tower game the next day. The game was called…” Leon paused for a long moment, before his face twisted, “It was called ‘The Sheep Look So Delicious. Do You Want To Eat It?’”

Everyone gazed at him like he was speaking German.

A bit frustrated with that reaction, Leon turned to Ed. “It should make some sort of sense to you, right? I was suddenly pulled into this strange place, almost like a large maze. It was me and three other strangers trapped together, and none of us understood what was going on, so we just stood there. Then, the black tower announced the start of the game and gave us a few bizarre rules. When the game started, we were all suddenly dressed in these weird sheep outfits. The black tower told us that we were playing hide-and-seek in the maze with a wolf. If we were caught, we’d be eaten. To win the game, we needed to find the egg hidden inside the maze before we were eaten. It was the only way we would beat the wolf and be allowed to leave.”

The game sounded too childish, but Ed only tilted his head, waiting for the man to continue. “The four of us decided to spread out when we started. With only one wolf, we would have a better chance of surviving and finding the egg if we separated. It didn’t take very long before I heard the screaming. By the difference in the scream, I could guess that two people were caught and eaten by the wolf so I… I just started running. I didn’t know where I was going and I didn’t really care, I just needed to get as far away from those screams as possible. I couldn’t find the exit and… the entire time I ran, I could feel the damn wolf breathing down my neck. I was going to be next I just knew it. Then, all of a sudden, the black tower announced that the game was over. The only other player left had found the egg. I didn’t understand what happened. I won and… just appeared back at the company building. I kept trying to talk about it, to just tell someone but I couldn’t… every time I opened my mouth, it was like something suddenly stole my voice. Everyone just thought I was late because I’d overslept, and I couldn’t tell them otherwise. I was too scared to go back to work so I just walked out and went home. I made plans to go back to my hometown and stay with my parents. Before I could leave, everyone disappeared.”

Leon kept his eyes trained on Ed, “Was it like that for you too? I couldn’t tell anyone anything. I physically couldn’t!”

Ed shook his head. “The moment I finished the game was the moment everyone disappeared.”

Leon cringed, but urged honestly, “I really am an official player.”

Lloyd’s low, indifferent voice suddenly cut through the other man’s pleading. “Actually, I left something out from my assessment earlier. It’s not only accidental killers who react when their crimes are exposed. Any killer, even someone who planned out the murder meticulously, would have some kind of reaction when their killing is discussed.”

Leon’s face instantly fell at Lloyd’s remark. “What do you mean? I really am an official player, not a stowaway. It’s gotta be someone else, I – ”

“He doesn’t mean you.” Ed cut in.
Lloyd gave Ed a long look before continuing. “Any killer would show some kind of reaction, a subtle shift in their expression when the big mole talked about the definition of a stowaway. It’s human nature. Only two types of killers would be able to remain completely indifferent. The first is psychopaths. They don’t think that murder is wrong. It wouldn’t matter to them. The second type are naïve murderers. Those too young or too ignorant to really know what they did. So even if they were exposed, the psychological burden would be virtually non-existent.”

Ed crossed his arms over his chest and nodded slightly. “I doubted you from the first sentence. I just didn’t want it to be you.”

The short but handsome young man walked forward until he was in front of the two girls. Fuck, he was only slightly taller than the younger one.

“Do you remember the first thing you said? That right there, was what exposed you. But you’re only what? 15? Who did you kill and why did you kill them?”

Leon suddenly shouted, “Yes! She’s the stowaway! That’s what I was gonna say!”

Morgan Ro quickly released the young girl’s hand and took five very large steps away, her eyes wide and fearful.

The young girl left alone under Ed’s stare, shivered and whimpered. Her arms wrapping around herself. “I… I didn’t. I wasn’t… I – I didn’t kill.. I – I…”

“You’re the stowaway,” Ed whispered into the air between them. Every inch of him calm but for his golden eyes.
Chapter 15 – The Turkey Egg

“The first thing you said was ‘I’m not a stowaway’. For it to be said like that, like you knew that the person who went before wasn’t the one we were looking for. The moment you said it, you incriminated yourself.” The young girl cried, her head shaking back and forth, trying to deny it. Ed didn’t give her the chance to try to speak, “As it is, out of the seven of us, there is no doubt that I’m the least likely to be the stowaway, followed by him and then him.” Ed pointed first to Leon Bin and then to Lloyd Marks.

Sighing quietly, Ed tilted his head to the left. “However, no one can really be sure who the stowaway actually is. I might be the stowaway. But your very first words admitted that the chef who spoke before you wasn’t the stowaway. You knew for certain that it couldn’t be him. So it had to be you.”

The little girl shook violently, wiping furiously at her tears. Still, no one dared come near her to offer comfort.

No matter how small and weak she looked now, she was a killer.

Leon began to nod. “Yeah, that’s why I felt like there was something strange about your words. Even the things that happened during those three days, you seemed to remember the clearest and you managed to point out specific times. You had to have thought about it carefully and made up a lie you thought would be the smoothest.”

It was an obvious fact, but it wasn’t until Leon pointed it out that the other’s suddenly noticed it.

“That’s it! You must be the stowaway! How terrible.”

The little girl opened her mouth to try to argue, but only a few sounds managed to come out before she began sobbing louder. She gave up. Likely feeling as if it were impossible now for anyone to believe her. She curled in on herself and kept crying.

Ed ignored the cook’s relieved sigh and turned to Lloyd. “Mr. Marks, do you think this guess is correct?”

Lloyd had been standing off to the side, watching but not speaking. Once Ed turned the conversation to him, he couldn’t help himself. “Do we still need to guess? Putting every other piece of evidence aside, your two clues are enough to prove who it is. I’m just curious though… who did you kill?”

Everyone’s attention narrowed to the little girl.

She kept crying, but everyone remained alert and uneasy.

In a corner of the underground cave, the big mole kept digging away, whistling sharp and loud. It pulled out a large piece of bloody meat from somewhere unknown and started chewing on it, quietly looking over the seven people. The girl continued to shake with fear, but the tears had stopped now. She looked to Morgan with pleading eyes. If anyone was the weak link in the group, it was her, but Morgan didn’t allow the girl to sway her. She turned away, resolutely not looking in the little girl’s direction.
After a long pause, a hoarse, tear roughened voice torn through the tense silence.

“So that’s it then? You’re all convinced I’m the stowaway? Yeah, I killed him, but it wasn’t murder!” The little girl lowered her head, her hair hiding her face from view. No one believed she was a poor little girl now, her voice was steady and ice cold. When she raised her head, there was something odd in her eyes, “How could it be murder? I was the one who gave him life. He shouldn’t have survived. He shouldn’t have!”

Her shrill yell echoed in the cave.

Suddenly, many people realized that though this girl was thin and small, she was 15 years old. She wasn’t a naïve child just because she was small. She was a teenager almost ready for adulthood. To drive, to vote, to make choices.

Ed took a moment to be surprised though. That wasn’t the answer he had expected. Before he could ask though, Lloyd beat him to the punch. “It wasn’t your parents you killed?”

The little girl’s pale face seemed to crumple helplessly. “How could I kill my parents? They were so good to me, the only ones I had. I killed the little bastard who never should have been born!”

And suddenly, a lot of things made sense. Even the not-so-bright chef seemed to understand.

The little girl’s voice suddenly went cold again, “You said I was lying, but I’m not. What I said didn’t even need to be made up. For the past three months, I lived that life. I was so stupid and snuck out to meet a friend at a night club. It was supposed to be fun, but as a result, I got a big belly. He didn’t want me, so I could only go back home. I was too ashamed to say anything and I waited too long. I couldn’t destroy the damn child. The doctor said it had been more than seven months so I couldn’t get an abortion. If I tried, it was possible that I wouldn’t be able to have children in the future and my life could have been at risk. I didn’t want it, but my mother didn’t want me to regret it later, and I didn’t want to risk my life. They would raise the child. I just needed to give birth to the thing.”

The little girl raised her head, her face tearstained but suddenly stoic. She stared down everyone present.

“I’m not as smart as you, not useful or talented. I just wanted to live a good life. I was hospitalized three days ago. On the third night, I gave birth to that thing.”

Ed raised a brow, a sudden lightbulb flashing on in his brain.

There had been two obvious loopholes in the girl’s earlier story.

At one point, she’d said that her mother didn’t care about the black tower problem, and often helped her with her homework. If her mother really wasn’t afraid of the black tower and had time to devote to and worry about her daughter’s education, why would she say ‘Don’t be afraid’? If she didn’t care about it, why would scared of the black tower?

Originally, he’d thought the little girl had lied. Now, it seemed that the ‘Don’t be afraid’ was referring to the childbirth. ‘No matter what happens, don’t be afraid. As long as you are okay, then so am I.’ It made more sense if that had come from a mother who would do her best to protect and shield her daughter.

The little girl’s expression was fierce, no trace of regret or horror at her own words. Instead, she spoke firmly. “He was crying that night. Screaming and whining, not letting me sleep. I couldn’t take it anymore… I killed him. I pressed a pillow into his face and slowly, he stopped crying. I
killed him, but is it really murder? He was my child. I gave him life. What’s so wrong about taking that life back? He wasn’t even supposed to exist!”

Morgan had to swallow hard before she could speak, “You gave him life, but that was your mistake. You and the child’s father. He had nothing to do with it. No matter what you think you gave him, he still had the right to live. You killed him!”

“He was going to ruin my life! I’m 15 years old!” The little girl’s eyes were wide, face red and sad.

“He was just born,” Ed stated lightly.

The little girl gaped, stunned by the words as her head fell, now silent.

Ed had guessed wrong. At first, he’d thought the little girl had killed someone by accident, most likely her parents. Due to her age and naïve innocence, she didn’t feel any guilt. Yet, everything she’d said had been a lie. The truth was that the little girl deliberately killed someone, knew exactly what she was doing when she did it. And it was her own child. She’d hated that child and wanted him to die. Even when the truth finally came out, she didn’t feel guilty.

The cook made a soft, relieved sound in his throat, before rubbing his hands together. His excitement crystal clear. “Then, we found the stowaway, right? We don’t have to die, right? The big mole doesn’t need us, it just wants her!”

It was a bit harsh but natural. Most humans would sacrifice anything for their own survival, especially a stranger.

However, it causes Leon to frown again. “I don’t know… she did admit to being the stowaway.”

Ed didn’t pay them any attention, focusing instead on the little girl. “What’s your ability?”

Like official players, all stowaways had abilities. The little girl had almost been caught by the big mole and almost eaten, but she hadn’t used her ability at all. Ed thought about it for a moment. “Does it have something to do with the flashlight?”

The little girl timidly wiped at the tears on her face. “You want to know my ability?”

The girl clenched her fists and then suddenly started to laugh. It was an odd, crazed sound. “Yes. I’m the stowaway, so you want to give me to the big mole. My mother is dead, my father is dead, I’m going to die… if that’s the case, every one of you will die right along with me!”

In the blink of an eye, a huge, familiar match suddenly appeared in the little girl’s hands.

Maybe it was because she had just given birth, but despite the ability enhancing her physique, the little girl was still short and far too thin. The match was almost half her size, and Ed suddenly got a visual of what he must have looked like holding it too. He managed not to wince as she waved the big match like a very large bat, running towards the other six players. The first one she targeted is the chef who’d gloated over her death and his own survival.

“I’ll kill you! If I have to die, then so will you!”

The group had seen the power of the big match.

After seeing the little girl pull that match out of nowhere, everyone recoiled. Ed was so surprised he couldn’t react for a split second. That match looked exactly like Ed’s. If it was indeed Ed’s match, then that match had enough power to push the big mole back two steps. None of them, as
normal players, would be able to compete with a power like that.

It was too bad for the cook, that he’d been unconscious during that demonstration. Unafraid, the man watched the little girl rush right for him, and only put out one hand to catch the match and drive his fist into the girl’s stomach. He didn’t even know what hit him.

Bang!

The cook’s head was smashed, caved in around the match’s imprint. Blood splattered and poured.

Ed had seen this scene once before. Ian Banks had died just like that as well.

But unexpectedly, the cook wasn’t dead yet. He fell back screaming, his face covered with blood and his body trembling in pain as the little girl lifted the match to finally finish him off. She didn’t get the chance. A dark shadow moved quickly, running at her from behind and grabbing the big match right out of her hands.

The big mole’s sharp claws held the match carefully, unable to hide his excitement. “Mosaic’s match? Another Mosaic’s match? Delicious turkey? Ah black tower, why are you so good to me today? Sending me a second gift…”

Click.

The mole’s claws clenched slightly and the match broke, falling into three pieces on the ground.

The big mole completely froze. Beady eyes staring blankly at the broken match. It was like that moment of silence right before disaster strikes.

“No! How can Mosaic’s match break so easily?! This isn’t Mosaic’s match! You lied to me!”

The big mole’s eyes flashed viciously as it turned towards the little girl in fury. The little girl turned pale and took a few steps back. The big mole didn’t give her the chance. Lightning fast, he rushed in, smashing the little girl’s head. Blood and brain matter flew. The mole didn’t give her any chances, he grabbed the girl’s hands, leaned in, and sunk his sharp teeth right into the bloody meat of the little girl’s face.

“Ah!”

The female university student reeled back. So frightened that she stumbled, falling back to the ground on her ass.

The cook twitched, lying nearly limp in a pool of blood.

Li Wen and Leon Bin couldn’t manage to watch, they instantly turned away and much like the university girl, stumbled back.

Ed didn’t watch for more than a few seconds before he himself had to turn away. In direct contradiction to all of them, however, Lloyd Marks didn’t even blink as he watched the big mole eat the little girl, bit by bit. He was frowning, but it was more like he was stuck in thought.

The putrid smell of blood flooded the cave like miasma, the sounds of messy chewing instantly make everyone pale. When it stopped, Ed turned back. There were pools of blood on the ground at the mole’s feet, a few small bones lying in the blood, colored vicious red and still clinging to pieces of meat.
The big mole took one of the little girl’s ribs and began to clean its teeth. It began digging into his own gums as it looked at the remaining five people.

Ed forced down his nausea and moved to the cook. He didn’t even need to touch the man to know for sure, “He’s dead.”

The other three people’s faces dropped, Morgan having to hide hers in her hands.

No one had expected the little girl to kill.

The big mole was frustrated. “What the hell is the use of a fake match? If it were the real match, he would’ve been dead the moment it hit him. This liar could only copy 20% of its power. It’s an interesting ability, being able to copy any item seen within 24 hours, and it could be used two times a day. Too bad for her, the ability was too low leveled. She could only copy useless things. She couldn’t make a true copy of Mosaic’s match.”

Ed startled suddenly, “How do you know her ability?”

“I ate her and the black tower told me her ability. This nasty little stowaway, if she’d really been able to copy Mosaic’s match, then I wouldn’t have considered eating her. I would’ve made her copy the match every day!” The big mole explained, its muzzle twisted and bloody.

Lloyd brought a hand up to his chin, lost in thought. “So that was her ability. Now the flashlight makes sense. Suddenly falling into a pitch-black cave, her first thought would be to finding a light source. She’d probably seen the flashlight in the last 24 hours and instinctively copied it.”

Ed bobbed his head in agreement.

From the very beginning, the one Ed had been most suspicious of had been the young girl.

They’d been dragged into the tower in bright daylight, so why would a little girl be carrying around a flashlight with her? Even if she’d actually been holding the flashlight in her hand when she came into the tower, she’d fallen down a long black tunnel. Ed himself had been knocked off balance from the fall, yet the little girl had managed to hold onto a flashlight?

It didn’t seem feasible.

“Ding Dong! Branch task 2 ‘Find The Damn Stowaway’ has been completed!”

For some reason, Ed felt as if the childlike voice sounded a bit happier. Was it because a stowaway had been killed?

Ed himself couldn’t enjoy winning the game. The two pools of blood, the cook’s corpse, and the little girl’s bones. All of it was morbid and disconcerting.

Li Wen and Morgan Ro couldn’t keep themselves from tossing cookies.

Ed only looked at the pools of blood for a moment before looking back up at the mole. “You just talked about Mosaic’s match. Is it really that powerful?”

The big mole seemed to grin, sharp teeth on display. “It’s strong, but the most important thing is that it can cook a very delicious turkey! Um…” Being that it had just eaten a turkey and a stowaway, it was clear that the mole was in a good mood. So it rubbed its head as it spoke. “Oh yes, it wasn’t good of me to take your match to roast the turkey. Then… I’ll give you a turkey egg!”
The big mole turned and began to dig into the ground. It made two or three large holes before finally seeming to find what it was looking for. There was a stock of countless white turkey eggs nestled in one of the holes.

“You humans can’t hatch turkeys, but the eggs are delicious. I really don’t want to, but…” The big mole took out one of the common white eggs from the pile of thousands, before turning to present it to Ed. “Here, eat this egg. You can’t say that I never gave you anything. I’m the kindest, most adorable animal in the underground city.”

Ed wasn’t about to contradict that.

“Ding Dong! You’ve received a prize for the quest: Giant Turkey Egg!”

Ed reached out for the turkey egg and found that the mole’s fur seemed shinier and its bulk was larger than it had been.

Did eating a stowaway really increase the mole’s strength?

Suddenly, there seemed to be a small dark mist around the mole’s head, but just as quick as it’d come, the mist was gone. Ed shook his own head, wondering if he’d imagined that.

Li Wen had apparently witnessed the interaction though, “Ah, don’t we get a turkey egg too? We didn’t roast the turkey for you, but we did help you find the stowaway. Isn’t that worth a reward?”

The big mole rounded to Li Wen, its sinister smile making the other man quickly back away. “Reward? Oh, you want a reward? Sure, I have one for you.”

Without another word, the mole turned, its round furry butt raised in the air.

Ed wasn’t stupid. Eyes widening for only a heartbeat before he gathered the bottom of his red hoodie and shoved it against his face, closing his eyes tight.

It didn’t help.

The foul, putrid smell penetrated everything.

“Your reward is a fart!”

Fuck, oh damn. Ed’s mind was going hazy at the edges, but he tried to hold his breath as long as he could. No fucking way was he taking a deep inhale of this sort of air.
Chapter 16 – Roy Mustang

The underground cave had no ventilation system, only many large holes going in all kinds of directions, that definitely didn’t help with the lingering smell.

Before he was ready to, Ed had had to take a slow breath through his balled-up hoodie and he gagged at the stink left behind. Everyone else had already doubled over, throwing up wherever they stood. The mole let out a strange giggly laugh before running to a corner and starting to dig again.

It seemed to no longer care about the five remaining players, and it wasn’t like any of them posed any kind of threat to the monster.

It took a while, but when the smell had disappeared enough for everyone to be able to breathe without getting sick, Morgan made her way over to the little girl’s bones with a long sigh. Taking off her long jacket, she covered the pool of blood with it. Leon moved to the cook’s body, repeating the move with the cold, stiff corpse.

Morgan sat against one of the walls, her arms wrapped around her legs. Leon paced a tight circle near the two dead bodies. Li Wen sat close to Morgan, looking around with wide, fearful eyes. Lloyd analyzed their surroundings, taking a collective inventory of the number of holes and where they were all located.

They all spent about five minutes like that.

The black tower had notified them that the second task had been completed, but no new branch tasks had been issued. They essentially had one main task, and that was to survive. A person could live without water for seven days, and they could hold out without food for 30, but Ed’s current physical condition was much different than a normal person. His best guess was that he’d be able to survive at least a month with no water, as long as the big mole didn’t kill him. His only fear was that the task to survive issued by the black tower, wouldn’t have an end.

Ed grew a little bolder and asked tentatively, “Mr. Mole, how do we get out of here?”

The big mole paused in all its digging and then let out a strange laugh. “You want to get out? You can’t even pass the mentally handicapped mode? All you have to do is live. Yet, you still want to get out?”

That didn’t help any of them what so ever, but no one was willing to argue with the monster mole.

The only sound in the cave for a while came from the mole’s harsh digging.

Leon sighed loudly before rounding again and grabbing the flashlight the little girl had created with her ability. He examined it with a pinched expression. “I’m not sure about this… do you think it has some effects left over? Is it dangerous?”

Ed looked over at him. “Do you want to keep it? Let me take a look first?” It would be interesting to study something that was made by pure ability. Would there be a difference from the original item?

Leon didn’t even have to think about it. He quickly pushed the flashlight into Ed’s hands. “Take it.
I don’t want it.”

Sort of startled by the move, Ed took the flashlight. Just as he opened his mouth to speak, his head suddenly shot up, a strange color flashing through his eyes.

“I’d like to see it too,” Lloyd said, already reaching out as he spoke.

Without conscious thought, Ed jerked the flashlight away from Lloyd’s reach. The man looked startled for just a second before a bright, cheerful song echoed in the underground cave. The familiar singing stopped all five humans and the huge mole in their tracks.

“What the fuck?”

The singing lasted a while, but directly after it, the usual child-like voice spoke.

“Ding Dong! Amestris District 1’s Stowaway, Roy Mustang has successfully cleared the first floor of the black tower!”

The big mole’s entire body jerked as if it had been hit by lightning. “How can that be?!”

Ed held tightly to the flashlight as the black tower repeated the announcement three times. As soon as the last one was over, Ed began to feel weird. Blurry at the edges, like he was disintegrating. Is this what the ones who disappeared felt before they were gone?

Before him, Ed watched the big mole begin to fade, its smaller head held in big, clawed paws. When Ed turned to look at Lloyd Marks, Li Wen, Leon Bin, and Morgan Ro, he saw them fading away too. Not like the ones who disappeared, but like mist, slowly turning to non-existent fog.

Then, his vision went completely black before sudden, unstoppably bright light nearly blinded him. He couldn’t help cringing back, his hand coming up to block the sun as his eyes squeezed shut. Despite that though, Ed began to heave like a drowning man, mouth open to take in as much fresh air as he could. He tried to adapt to the strong light, but it took a while. Once he could see where he was, he swore under his breath and pulled the steering wheel, right foot violently hitting the breaks. The car swerved and his whole body was jostled around.

The squeal of the tires on pavement had Ed gritting his teeth as he held the wheel fast, the car sliding over 20 meters before it finally managed to lose the majority of its momentum and allow Ed to park it on the shoulder of the high way.

His heart was pounding and he was confused, but he breathed deep through clenched teeth and darted his eyes all around him. He was still in the same vehicle; the car Ed had taken from his landlord and had been driving in with Li Wen right before the tower attack. Apparently, he was back…

“What about Li Wen?”

Ed managed to calm himself before driving back. He didn’t find even a trace of Li Wen.

There was no way to search for him now, so Ed parked the car on the shoulder again and looked down at the small flashlight still held tightly in his right hand. It was dented, likely from the bruising grip of his automail.

This was the flashlight Leon Bin had handed to him in the underground cave. It had belonged to the murderous little girl, so at the time, Leon had likely been very eager to get rid of it. He probably never imagined that when he’d given Ed the flashlight, he’d also given him something
Ed reached out his left hand, pulling the black leather-bound notebook out of thin air before turning to the third page.

Owner: Leon Bin (Official player)
Type: Special Type
Function: A casualty attack that will affect a specific object, making it unlucky.
Level: 1
Restrictions: Only one target can be cursed per day. The negative effect of the target being cursed cannot be controlled.
Note: Edward Elric kept the flashlight and gave nothing up! Keep at it!]

Ed rolled his eyes, irritation crawling up his spine at the implication of its words. He remembered how his own ability had been written, labeling everything he’d ever lost in his life so far. He and Al had always believed in Equivalent Exchange, but this… it made Ed think twice about what it actually meant to have a balance.

His life had never really had it.

[Edward Version Usage Instructions: Use only once per day. There is a 30% chance of actually activating a curse. Do you feel lucky? Do you, punk?]

Ed snorted at the reference.

He could make some guesses about his own ability. If he wanted to obtain another person’s ability, the first way was to directly kill them, like Ed had done to Ian Banks. Likely, that was the easiest way, it was just how this game seemed to be played. The second way was to make them give him something, and not return the gesture. With Leon Bin, Ed had taken the flashlight without giving Leon anything back. That could be the ‘Take it all and give nothing back’ aspect of his ability.

But being given the flashlight and not returning anything for it… was it really that simple to get someone else’s ability?

No matter how Ed looked at it, he could conform himself to the thought. There had to be other restrictions.

Just as Ed was about to close the book, more words began to appear in bright purple.

[Note: Draw a circle to curse you, (User: Leon Bin) has worked.]

“It worked? When did it work? And who did it curse?”

Despite being bright purple, the words were still faint and they didn’t have the same sarcasm or mocking edge that corrupted the book’s other parts. Ed looked for a long time, trying to find some kind of clue. Then, as if remembering something, Ed reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out some sleek, hard, and oval shaped.

“The turkey egg?”

The big mole had given him a turkey egg the size of an adult male’s fist. Ed had placed it in his pocket when he received it and hadn’t really thought it would follow him out of the game.

It seemed like an ordinary white egg, the only oddities being its size and its smoothness. The mole
had said that humans couldn’t hatch the turkey egg, and gave it to Ed to eat, but Ed wasn’t really sure he’d be able to even crack the egg. It was proven when he knocked it against the steering wheel.

*Crack!*

There was a dull sound, and Ed’s mouth fell open.

Rather than cracking the egg, it was the steering wheel that had cracked instead.

How could he possibly eat this? It would require stronger teeth than he had, that was for sure.

Ed didn’t know that currently, back in the underground Mole Cave of the black tower’s underground city, a large mole was clutching its head, whispering insistently, “How could someone clear the first floor now? How could anyone clear the first floor so early?” It repeated those words for a long time, before comforting itself, “Well, at least I wasn’t the one attacked.” The big mole relaxed with that thought and a sinister smile split its face. It began to dig at the ground again.

“It was still a very profitable encounter today. I could eat such delicious turkey. That stupid human didn’t even know how precious Mosaic’s Match is. When those humans come along again and bring me another match…” The big mole dug a huge pit, exposing thousands of large white eggs. It had taken one of the ordinary eggs from the pile and given it to Ed. With a proud smile on its face as it continued to sift deeper among the white eggs, it whispered to itself, “My precious baby egg isn’t for you. It's so precious I have to pull it out and hold it while I sleep every night. I gave that stupid human… a… Ahhh!!! Where is my egg?!”

There was a small iron cage among the white eggs, and it was hollowly empty.

**Black Tower, Turkey Nest.**

A giant turkey as big as a full-grown adult tiger, lay bleeding on the ground. Its sharp claws stained with bright red human blood, but it was no longer able to stand. If it received another blow, it would most likely die.

Fortunately for the turkey, the man who’d beaten it down also didn’t have the strength to stand back up.

The turkey growled through grit teeth. “Cluck… stowaway… cluck, eat you…”

A man in black tactical gear was severely injured, laying on his back on the ground a reasonable distance away from the snarling turkey. His leg had been pulled off by the monster and blood was making a large pool on the ground. His left arm was littered with bloody holes from the turkey’s vicious pecks, and his right arm no longer had a hand. From the rest of his right hand, there was a huge, long cone-shaped iron blade. It glowed with a purple metallic luster.

The man coughed up blood and weakly waved his right arm. The iron spear disappeared and a hand took its place. He used both hands to push himself into the turkey’s nest. Reaching around for a while, he finally found and took hold of the white egg hidden at the center. This was the turkey’s treasure.

The turkey roared, “Put my egg down!”

“You made sure to avoid this egg the entire time we were fighting.” The man replied, spitting a wad of blood and saliva to the side as he calmly clutched the egg. “This, should be a treasure.”
The turkey’s wings flapped furiously, but it had no strength to try and keep fighting. It regretted coming face-to-face with the stowaway, and it regretted acting on its mindless desire to eat him. If it hadn’t started the fight, if it hadn’t wanted to eat this stowaway and had instead hidden until it could stage a sneak attack, the stowaway wouldn’t have been able to survive and nothing would be light this. Who knew that a stupid stowaway could be so strong? Who knew that this stowaway could clear the black tower’s first floor?

Clearing the first floor didn’t matter. The most important thing was that turkey egg! It was the most precious treasure in the black tower!

“Return it to me!!”

The weakened turkey that had been too exhausted to stand, unexpectedly found enough strength to push itself up. It stumbled over to the human. Just when it was about to reach the human and tear the egg out of his grasp, the black tower announced the clearance of the game. The man’s figure suddenly, slowly disappeared and the turkey fell to the ground where the man had once been.

“Cluck Cluck… my egg… cluck… egg…”

All of the Amestrian players exited the black tower all at once.

Roy Mustang had escaped the turkey’s nest, but his torn off right leg had been left behind. Once he was out of the black tower, he lay on the ruined floor of a deserted construction site. There was a sudden strange sound from the base of his right leg, and as Roy rose to his elbows and looked down, he saw that flesh, bone, and muscle were all actually growing from his leg.

The healing was slow, but at least it was growing back.

Throughout the whole of Amestris, there were quite a few situations like Roy’s. All the Amestrian players that had been pulled into the black tower to attack it had returned. Many players hadn’t had violent battles, like Ed, who’d had Mosaic’s match to smooth the way. However, the number of people who’d avoided battle was incredibly low compared to those who’d directly fought with the creatures of the black tower.

The majority of the population had died on the first floor of the tower. Some had survived.

Some people had actually escaped with treasures. Despite being injured and near death, they all clung to their prize, relief, and helplessness festering in their chests.

As the muscles on his right leg grew back, Roy opened his eyes and took out the white egg from his pocket.

He watched it glow under the setting sun. A golden light illuminating the pearl white surface. That’s when small words began to appear on the egg’s pure shell.

[Prop: Momo  
Owner: Roy Mustang  
Quality: Rare  
Level: 2 (Upgradable)  
Attack: Normal  
Function: Save current game progress.  
Limit: Can only be used once every seven days, saves up to 1 hour.  
Remark: As an Amestrian living in the new era, what is most precious to you? Do you have a destination in your heart?]
Roy had no idea what to make of that at all.

At that very moment, Ed was carefully studying the hard, strange turkey egg. He’d knocked it against several stationary objects but none of it worked.

Ed couldn’t figure it out, but he no longer had the time to puzzle it out. Temporarily abandoning his study, he drove to Luza’s Military District. He put the egg in the passenger’s seat of the car. A beam of sunlight shone through the window and illuminated the egg, revealing golden words.

Immediately, Ed stopped the car and grabbed at the egg.

[Prop: ……. (Damaged)
Owner: Edward Elric
Quality: Rare
Level: …. (Upgradable)
Attack: Normal
Function: ………
Restrictions: ………
Remark: ………]

Shit, what was this thing?

Ed knocked on the egg a few times with his automail knuckles. The moment he’d hit it the third time, a low male voice suddenly erupted out of the egg.

“…Momo?”

Ed startled.

Was the egg alive? Was it a creature, or sentient? Did it just call him ‘Momo?’

Ed took a moment before softly replying, “Yes?” he wondered, “Are you a turkey or an egg?”

All sound from the egg abruptly stopped.

In the next moment, a stern voice called out, “Who are you?”
Chapter 17 – Communication

Ed’s mind tried to work fast. He realized quickly that the person he was currently talking to wasn’t an egg or a turkey. It might be a black tower creature, but most likely, it was…

“Are you human?”

The male voice paused for a moment. “Yes. I’m human. Are you human?”

Ed didn’t hesitate, “I am.”

Silence fell between them for a moment.

The car was parked on the side of the road, the sunset dazzling as it bathed the white egg in golden light. Even Ed’s hair seemed to glow under the brightness. His eyes flashing with ideas and plans. He needed to squeeze out as much information from this man as he could.

He pondered for a moment before deciding sincerity was his best bet at the moment. Deciding on that plan, he began to describe his situation. “Right now, I’m holding a large white egg in my hand and your voice is coming from it. Are you a human trapped in the egg or something?”

The other man’s voice was steady. “I’m not trapped in an egg. I also have an egg in my hand and I’m hearing your voice from it.” Pause… “It’s a turkey egg.”

Ed tilted his head to the right. “You’re from Amestris, or you should be. Did you just come from the black tower? I obtained mine from a black tower monster. It’s also a turkey egg.”

“Me too. I got the turkey egg from a black tower monster.”

The two men on either side of the conversation understood that the turkey eggs in their hands acted similar to mobile phones, allowing them to communicate with a stranger neither had ever met.

That being the case, Ed wanted to know the distance limitations of the egg.

“Where are you?”

“What city are you in?”

They spoke at the same time, and the near echo of each other’s thoughts startled both of them.

The man on the other end of the egg was the first to respond, “I’m in East City.”

East City?

East City was nearly clear across Amestris, at least a few thousand kilometers from Luza. Yet, the turkey egg seemed to have a direct link. Were these things really like cellphones?

Ed decided to answer honestly as well, “I’m in Luza, in Central Region.”
Ed looked down at the egg in his hand and came up with a vague idea. The egg in Ed’s possession seemed to be damaged, still, Ed didn’t believe that his carelessness with the egg had been the thing that damaged it. It hadn’t been the turkey egg that had cracked, it’d been the steering wheel. It seemed like the items from the black tower weren’t very fragile.

The likelihood that the egg had been damaged by Ed was less than 20%, but the possibility that it had already been damaged when Ed acquired it was more than 80%.

Either way, the damage to the egg was a restriction Ed couldn’t get past. He didn’t know the item’s functions or how to use it. The only words that actually made any sense was:

[Quality: Rare]

It was a rare prop.

It seemed like the black tower really was just like playing a game, and it made sense for the players to gain props and items to help them through higher floors. Rare props were precious in any game. Ed didn’t know what role this damaged turkey egg played, but he could learn more from the player on the other side.

A rare prop couldn’t just be used as a cellphone. Human technology could already make global video calls. There was absolutely no way that something as mysterious as the black tower wouldn’t be able to do something more. Since it was very likely that both eggs were similar in appearance and were connected, it was likely they had the same functions.

Ed picked each word carefully. “When I was playing the black tower attack game, a big mole gave me the egg as a reward. It isn’t a normal egg, it’s unusually hard to break. I tried smashing it against the steering wheel, a stone, and several other things. My steering wheels cracked now, but the egg didn’t break.”

He tried to give as much information as possible without giving anything vital away. He needed the man to be comfortable with him so they’d be able to share information, but Ed didn’t want to end up sharing too much.

Ed kept going, “… The big mole that gave me the egg said that us humans can’t hatch a turkey egg. I thought I was the only one in possession of one, I didn’t expect you to have it. But I don’t think that’s the eggs only function. Do you have any hints on your side?”

The male voice didn’t even pause for thought, “No.” he answered decisively.

Ed scowled.

That was a little too obvious.

It seemed like the other man was also playing it safe. Too safe, because he hadn’t given Ed a damn thing. Normal people would communicate and share information with each other in an attempt to raise the odds of survival for both. Yet this damn bastard didn’t take the initiative to give back any information.

Ed was silent for a long while, before making another attempt, “How did you manage to contact me? I heard your voice first before I answered.”

He’d pretty much lost any hope of getting answers, but it didn’t hurt to try.

“A few lines of words appeared on the egg and I tried to study it. When I tapped it with my finger
three times, it suddenly flashed gold.” The man finally allowed a sliver of information through. “Whenever I speak, the egg glows with soft golden light.”

Ed suddenly remembered that when he knocked on his own egg three times, it also seemed to flash. Then the male voice came and the light all but disappeared.

“Do you know how to end the call?”

“I’ll try.”

Both of them cut off the connection as they attempted to test it. After 10 seconds, the male voice sounded again, “I held the egg in both hands and the call terminated.”

Alright, so that was something. Knocking on it three times would initiate the call while holding the egg in both hands would stop it.

Ed made a suggestion, “Then you cut off the call first, and then I’ll try it.”

“Okay.”

First, he remained still as the man made his attempts, and then Ed tried it for himself. He discovered that he could also open the call at any time, and terminate it if need be. After many tests in an attempt to gain more information on the egg, the two people made some more discoveries. No matter who it was, both of them could start a conversation by simply tapping on the egg’s shell. If either party held the egg, the call would drop.

There seemed to be a sort of instinctual understanding between Ed and the man on the other side. As the experiments went on, neither made jokes or spoke idly, while also sharing as much information as possible about the results of each test.

Ed couldn’t help the strange feeling that bubbled up in his chest as they studied the egg together. The owner of the other turkey egg seemed to work very well with him as if they’d done this sort of thing many times before. It allowed Ed’s initial impression of this guy being a bastard to shift a little. His impression of the man would be better if he’d been more cooperative, but Ed could understand the hesitance.

The man never let up, no pieces of key information managed to slip by from beginning to end, and it was obvious he was hiding something. Despite that, Ed tried everything he could to subtly worm facts and information out of the man.

None of it was successful.

Now that they’d both shared what they could, and neither one of them wanted to let slip any important information like their identities or exact location, it was meaningless to keep at it. Ed couldn’t let the man know that his own turkey egg was damaged or he’d be at a disadvantage. As it was, the man already had the upper hand, and he wasn’t giving Ed any kind of useful information. It was like the other person was on guard against an unknown stranger like Ed.

The man’s voice was smooth and deep, undeniably nice to listen to. “Do you have any more questions?”

“I do have one last question.”

“What is it?”
“When you first spoke, you didn’t say hello. You said… Momo?”

The line between them was quiet and Ed vaguely felt like he’d made a mistake. He’d showed his hand somehow. He wasn’t sure about how though.

There was deep laughter from the turkey egg and it seemed like the man was smiling for the first time over the line. “You don’t know what this egg is called, do you?”

Fuck.

How the hell did he know that? What had Ed given up? And why the hell would he say it out loud?

Ed knew that the man had been deliberately on guard against him. He also knew that the man must have guessed that Ed had pieces of information missing, but Ed hadn’t been expecting the guy to actually point it out. Embarrassment colored Ed’s cheeks but he couldn’t help his own helpless laugh. Now that he’d been figured out, it didn’t really matter. For some reason, laughing with the man had Ed feeling a little closer to him.

Well, at the very least, the man wasn’t an enemy.

“This egg is called Momo. After I saw it shining, I reflexively called out the word.”

At least now Ed could understand where he went wrong before. “My name is Ed. What’s yours?”

The man was silent on the other end, a bit of trepidation and hesitation in the pause. It was a long time before he said anything, “My name is Flame.”

Ed jerked, he couldn’t help it. “Flame?”

“Yes, goodbye.”

He wanted to argue, he wanted to ask questions, he wanted to know if this Flame could possibly be his Flame. And if it was, no wonder there was an instinctual understanding between them…

But Ed knew that now wasn’t the time. If he wanted answers, he would have to wait. And if it was Flame, his Flame… what did that mean?

“Goodbye.”

As soon as the call cut off, Ed pressed the egg against his bottom lip and closed his eyes.

It couldn’t be. With most of the world’s population gone, what were the chances that his Flame had survived?

Then again, Ed didn’t know anyone else as good at games as Flame was. If the only thing someone needed to do to become a player, reserve or official, was to win any kind of game, then the chances that Flame would survive were far greater than any other human chosen at random.

But… Flame didn’t live in East City. Well, actually, Ed wasn’t sure where Flame really lived. Usually, the man traveled for his work and every time he played with Ed, he’d inform the blond of where he was currently laying his head.

Fuck, was he getting his hopes up for nothing?

Did it matter?
Fuck, fuck, fuck. Fuck it.

Ed had a mission already. He needed to find Al and then Winry. Well, first, he needed to find Mr. Allen’s daughter. He had goals and priorities; he couldn’t just drop everything on the chance that Flame was still alive…

Mr. Flame on the other side of the egg was very smart and defensive, and it reminded Ed of the first time he’d started chatting with the Flame he knew. The chances of getting personal information out of the man were slim… more than likely, this would be their first and last call. There was no benefit to either of them calling each other. And even if Ed perked up at the name, Flame didn’t know his own. And for some reason, Ed hesitated to reveal himself until he was sure.

Despite all of that though, there was still the issue of the prop. A rare item that Ed was unable to use because he didn’t know the parameters at all. He also didn’t know if the egg was damaged beyond the point of being useable.

And none of this thinking in circles was getting him anywhere.

With a long sigh, Ed got back on the road and continued the drive to find the Luza Middle School in the Military District.

He was able to drive right up until he reached downtown Luza. The number of vehicles rammed and piled up on each other increased sharply from there, and choosing to drive wasn’t the wisest course of action. Ed would have to walk it.

Alert and guarded, Ed walked along the edge of the road, using any kind of object large enough for cover when he could and staying low when he couldn’t. Training with Izumi had sharpened his instincts, but he could still be caught by surprise unless he paid attention, and paying attention was never as important as it was now.

Four days after the Earth had come online, Luza had become a deserted city.

As the sky darkened, Ed was able to take note of the sheer number of businesses on both sides of the street that remained brightly lit. Their owners all disappeared.

Passing by a KFC, Ed carefully glanced through the large clear glass windows. While completely illuminated, the place was empty. Food of all kinds sat abandoned on the tables and littered the ground, sodas knocked over and dried on the floor.

The closer Ed got to the city center, the more cautious he got.

There were actually people living in the city, Ed spotted them every once in a while. A young woman in a full dark blue tracksuit stocked up on various snacks and instant noodles from the convenience store. She wasn’t surprised to see Ed, but she was vigilant and careful as she kept up her search for food and water.

Around the seemingly abandoned city, Ed saw a lot of people searching and scavenging for food and water, and Ed was more than aware that he was suspicious looking, with his large heavy backpack and a flashlight.

There were several small groups that watched everyone who passed by, and many people covered in dried blood, injured and scattered on the side of the road, broken and groaning in pain.

Surprisingly, there were many people left in the city after the events of the black tower.
Ed estimated that in the center of Luza, there were approximately four people per square kilometer. It was around dinner time, so most of the people were eating, but with Ed’s improved physical fitness, hunger was virtually non-existent so far. It’d been an entire day and night since he’d eaten, but he still felt no need to stop for it.

Luza Middle School was a famous school in the area, but Ed didn’t know that. Rather than trying to ask anyone for directions, he went for a deserted little newspaper kiosk to find some kind of map of Luza.

“Military District… Luza Middle School…. Here.”

Ed shouldered his bag once more and began his trek.

Suddenly, the god damned cheerful voice echoed around the city.

“Ding Dong! Richard Wells, an Official player from the United State’s 3rd district has successfully opened the black tower’s first floor. In three minutes, all American players please begin to attack the tower!”

Ed stopped in his tracks, the two people eating on the side of the road by a hotdog stand also paused and looked up at the distant black tower. Turning his head to look at the clock hanging on the wall of the kiosk, Ed took note of the time.

19:18

“The game time is between 6 to 18 o’clock every day. The game time for Amestris is already over, but the United States… it’s an 11-hour time difference. Does the game time calculate according to local time zones? But the announcements seem to be global…”

Ed shook his head and continued moving.

This game announcement wasn’t like the one that came when Roy Mustang opened the black tower’s first floor. This one had stopped broadcasting after one announcement, instead of repeating it three times.

The difference was also in the country. Instead of an Amestrian player, it was an American who’d opened the black tower attack game.

Damn it to hell, Ed needed to stop overthinking things. He needed to focus on what he had to do and where he was going. He reminded himself of that as he passed by a middle-aged man lying bleeding on the ground. By the sheer amount of blood pooled around the man, he was very likely on the verge of death. He kept mumbling to himself, but Ed didn’t really care enough to even try to catch what the man was saying.

It was 11 at night when Ed finally reached the Military District.

Countless smashed cars blocked the streets and Ed had to climb over them, slowing down his trek. It didn’t help that he’d also taken a wrong turn somewhere and had to double back.

When he’d finally reached the edges of the Military District, that fucking voice came again.

“Ding Dong! US District 2’s official player Maisie Williams has successfully cleared the black tower’s first floor!”

Ed halted, tilting his head. The player who’d cleared the floor wasn’t the player who opened the
“Ding Dong! November 19, 2018. A total of two players in the world have cleared the black tower’s first floor. The remaining 416.23 million players, please try to attack the tower.”

Ed’s brows furrowed as he looked up at the giant shadow suspended in the air.

The tower had said, only yesterday, that there had been more than 490 million players logged into the game. Now that number had gone down by a little under 80 million? Was it because of Amestris and the United States attacking the tower, or were there other players who died outside the tower attack game?

But how could 80 million people die just like that?

Ed’s face took on a grim expression, his teeth grit as he kept moving. The streetlights constantly flickered on and off, and Ed had to pull out the flashlight from his backpack to try and read the map. He didn’t speak at all as he made his way through three more blocks, finally arriving at an intersection that displayed traffic signs concerning school zones and speed limits and he knew he was close.

Click.

Ed paused as he stepped on shards of glass. Looking down, he saw a long path littered with pieces of glass, all of them shining a bit in the dim light of Ed’s flashlight. When he looked back up, he saw that there were many street lights broken, like a yellow-brick road leading right to the school’s iron gates.

Only two lights gleamed in the darkness, and the late-night wind whistled hard through the trees on both sides of the road. The branches cast dark shadows like silent ghosts, and Ed furrowed his brows as he kept on, more alert than before.

It looked like whoever was currently residing inside the middle school had at least some tactical understanding. All of the glass on the ground acted like a warning system. The sound of footsteps unescapable in the quiet, cold air.

The wind blew at Ed’s bright red hoodie, as he kept his pace steady, alert but seemingly clueless.

Suddenly, Ed took a quick, neat step to the left, almost like an awkward skip as he avoided a large, thick nail sticking up from the ground. If he’d stepped on it, the likeliness of the soles of his feet being pierced would have been extremely high.

Ed’s narrowed eyes surveyed the darkness keenly, vigilant like stalked prey.

About 100 meters away, the school gates glittered dully.

It was early morning, the night was cold, and there was no one around. Ed resolutely continued forward. The magic nails appeared four more times, one of them blatantly floating right in front of his face when he’d glanced to the side in one of his detailed sweeps. If Ed’s reflexes hadn’t been as heightened, or his physicality as keen, the nail would have pierced him right in the eye. He was grateful for whatever had increased his… everything really.

It seemed the closer he got to the school, the more nails he seemed to find. He was only about a dozen meters away from the front gates, if he wanted to return to the intersection, he’d have to walk four times as far.
Ed only hesitated for a moment, before deciding it was better to just continue on and investigate.

Instantly, a small, urgent voice cried out. “Stay right there!”

The voice was young and shaking, but it was loud enough to be heard.

Ed didn’t hesitate. “Are you a student here?”

“D – Don’t come any closer! You – who are you?”

“I’m not here to hurt anyone. I’m looking for a student attending this school. She is my friend’s daughter.”

The big nail that had floated right in front of Ed’s face fell to the ground with a ping, seeming to have lost its support. Ed moved forward again unobstructed, finally arriving at the school gates and looking in through the iron bars. There wasn’t anyone in sight, not even the young boy who’d just spoken to him. Slowly, Ed’s eyes moved to the left, taking in the small structure used as a guard building.

“Where are you?” Ed asked, loudly.

“Y- You’re not a bad person, are you?” the voice asked timidly.

“No. I’m not. Do you need any help? I have some food and water with me, if you want it.”

“I – I’m in the guardroom next to the gate. Put the food and water down in the doorway, but don’t come in.”

Well, alright then.

Swinging the hiking pack off his back, Ed pulled out a bottle of water and a roll of cookies. Once he had that in hand, he shouldered the pack again. He walked slowly but stopped when he got about half-way to the door.

The little boy was confused, “You… why aren’t you coming any closer?”

Damn, the kid really thought Ed was just that stupid.

Ed snorted under his breath as he continued. There was a ringing type of silence as neither of them spoke. He made it about five steps from the doorway when Ed suddenly veered, increasing his speed sharply and heading straight for the small guardroom window.

With a light leap that allowed Ed to clear the hard concrete, he crashed right through the glass window, arms over his head, protecting his face.

Fragments of glass seemed to scatter all over, and as they landed out on the two front steps of the guardroom, the ground seemed to suddenly disappear. Where there had been two deep steps, there was now a hole around seven or eight meters deep. The bottom shining with many sharp objects embedded on the damn, deep ground.

“Professor! Professor, he got in! Help! Help!”

Ordinary glass couldn’t hurt Ed in any way, and with his speed and strength surpassing that of most normal humans, Ed was able to grab the shouting little boy before he could even turn and run. Grabbing his arm and dragging him back, Ed frowned.
“Don’t move! Who are you and what do you want?!” An anxious voice called out from another doorway leading into the school from the guardroom. A young man stood there. Jeans, white shirt, messy hair, and a flushed face. There were pillow creases on his face.

“Why did you try to trick me like that? Were you trying to kill me?” Ed growled.

The young man in the white shirt glared, “Put him down first! Don’t hurt him! We’ll give you whatever you want!”

Ed didn’t believe that for a second. The boy was planning something, it was in his eyes. Just as Ed opened his mouth to refute, a sudden, familiar voice filled the room. “Ed? You’re finally here! Hey, let go, it’s alright. Mr. Li, he isn’t a bad person. His name is Edward, he’s the friend I was telling you about. He wanted to come to the school to find someone, but we ended up separating. I came here to see if I could run into him again.”

Ed looked up and over the young, glaring boy’s shoulder only to see a familiar face to go with the familiar voice.

“Li Wen?”

Chapter End Notes

So... I had a breakdown today. I had this chapter written beforehand, otherwise, I wouldn't have posted anything, and I'm sorry for that. But today is going to be just one chapter. I usually post two at a time or more if I feel confident in my progress, but... yeah, no second chapter today.

Sorry guys.
Chapter Notes

Long chapter guys, so I'm not sure I'll be able to post on Wednesday, but I'm going to try for it, promise. I need to shut everything off for a while, because after my breakdown I've been having a hard time finding my own balance again. So here you go, next chapter is basically the end of Luza and we'll be moving on to Central soon. Stay with me guys, it'll get really fun. At the next game.

Chapter 18 – Violet Allen

Li Wen stood behind the bed-headed boy and a man who must have been a teacher pushed past both of them to get into the room. Behind him were four huddled up middle school students.

Ed’s grip on the fat boy eased, and the kid was quick to break away and run to stand behind the teacher.

Li Wen smiled, “You finally came. When I woke up after the tower attack game, I found myself just lying on the street. When we went into the game, we’d just arrived at the junction between Sanni and Metal districts, but when I woke up, I was in the Military District. I didn’t really have to think for long to decide to come to the middle school first.”

Ed glanced at the teacher and each of the students, all of them still on guard against him, before looking back to Li Wen, “When did you get here?”

“Around 7 o’clock. I went to this middle school, so I knew the way pretty well.” Li Wen looked at his companions and found everybody tense and silent, so he quickly flew into introductions. “Mr. Li, this is Edward Elric. He’s the person I mentioned before. He isn’t bad and he isn’t a stowaway. No need to worry.”

The teacher didn’t seem to really care, he gathered the students behind him, protecting them as best he could with his body. “Li Wen said that you were looking for someone? Who’re you looking for?”

Ed took in the situation, taking special note of the way Li Wen deliberately explained that he wasn’t a stowaway, before deciding that answering might be his safest bet now.

“I’m looking for Violet Allen. She should be in her first year.”

“Ah, Violet?”

“You’re looking for Violet?”

That reaction took him aback, but Ed spotted a girl with short hair and about 1.6 meters in height walk forward past the other kids. She looked cold and indifferent as he pierced Ed with a glare. “I’m Violet Allen. Coming all the way to Luza just to find me, what is it you want?”

So she was alive. For some reason, that lightened something inside Ed’s chest. He’d made a promise, and here he was, seeing it through. Wherever Zane Allen was, at least his daughter was
safe.

Li Wen let out a soft sound of surprise. “I didn’t think you’d be looking for Violet. If you’d told me her name sooner, I’d have found her already!”

Ed paid him no mind. Instead, he peered down at the calm little girl. She was shorter than him, thank god, because Ed had met kids who weren’t before. “Your father and I are friends. Your father’s name is Zane Allen, and I worked at the West City Library where he often came to read books. He asked me to come to Luza to find you. To make sure you were safe.”

“That’s my father’s name, but what other proof do you have that you’re telling the truth?”

“Violet?” Li Wen and the teacher both frowned. Li Wen had pretty much trusted Ed’s word since they met, and the teacher could feel that Ed was being sincere. Yet, Violet still doubted him?

Ed smiled a bit, for some reason proud of her suspicion. It would keep her alive longer. “Your father is around 1.75 meters tall. He’s been unemployed for almost a year. He told me that his father, your grandfather, was a doctor. Your father is also a very religious man, and he’d wear a red agate bracelet on his wrist.” Ed paused, but smirked, “Of course this only proves that I know your father, not that I’m here to fulfill his wish.”

“His wish… or a final will?”

Geez, this girl was smart. Ed’s smile dropped, “His final will.”

The little girl’s suspicious expression seemed to falter for a bit, but she was quick to turn and walk back to the other students. As she went, she threw a few words over her shoulder, “I believe you.”

Li Wen seemed to sag with relief. “Why didn’t you believe me? I told you before. I was on my way to Luza from Veuc and met Ed on the highway. If he really was a bad person, it’s not like he would need to run to a whole other city to harm a middle school kid that he doesn’t even know. If he wanted to do bad things, he could have just stayed in West City. He really isn’t a stowaway.”

Now that had Ed on edge, “What happened?”

The teacher stepped forward, interrupting Ed and Li Wen, “This really isn’t the place for this conversation. Connor, work with Anthony to reactivate the traps. We’ll go inside and talk.”

The chubby kid whose name was apparently Connor, nodded his head as he grabbed the other boy, the one with the crazy bedhead, by the arm and began to drag him out of the room. They needed to restore the pit trap on the stairs that sprang when the broken glass fell on it. Ed only glanced at them once before following behind the teacher as the man lead their way into the school.

As they walked, the teacher attempted to explain, “I’m sorry about that, we didn’t know whether you were to be trusted. We didn’t really want to take the risk. The world is far more dangerous now, and it’s hard for us to judge the people that pass by correctly. We would rather have killed you and been wrong, then have something happen against us.”

Ed didn’t begrudge them that. Nothing was as it had been, and trust even less so. “From 11 to 2 in the morning, a person experiences the deepest sleep. It’s the most dangerous time, and perfect for anyone who wanted to ambush the school. You don’t have to feel bad for protecting yourselves.”

One of the middle school students walking a few paces behind them suddenly rushed forward, cutting in, “Violet said the exact same thing!”
Ed turned to look at the short haired girl.

Along with the two boys who’d been manning the front gates and Violet Allen, there was one more girl and another boy. Violet kept her head down, her steps sure as she kept quiet, but beside her, the boy and the girl tried to comfort her in some way. Ed had just told her that her father was dead, yet the little girl wasn’t crying. Still, she was young and it was impossible for her to completely erase her own sadness.

The teacher beside Ed released a deep sigh, “You’re right. We were afraid we’d get ambushed and killed this late at night. There used to be more than 1,000 people in this school, students and teachers… but after the black tower officially began the game, most of the school’s population disappeared. In the end, there were only two teachers and sixteen students.”

“Where are the others?” Ed asked, fearing he already knew the answer.

“They’re here.”

The group walked towards the big gym pushed into the left side of the school building. When the teacher pushed the door open, Ed was able to look inside.

In the long hallway of the gym, six bodies were lined up neatly side by side against the wall. Coats covered their faces. Three of the bodies were small and short, obviously young children. The other three were around 1.7 meters each, a little older, but still so young. While the moonlight illuminated their bodies from the large window across from the wall they lay before, the silence seemed stifling.

When he spoke, the teacher’s voice was rough. “We had too many students and only two teachers. The 16 students all lived in different places, most of them quite far away. It was impossible to send them all home and the military buses that picked up the students had no drivers, even if we wanted to. After the game officially started, Mr. Blake and I decided to stay at the school and wait for the parents to come pick up their children. If their parents hadn’t disappeared, I believed they would want to come get their children. But if we blindly sent the children home, they might end up missing their parents along the way. In the end, only five parents came to pick up their kids. Eleven children remained, and we decided to stick together.”

Ed looked down at the six bodies lining the hallway and closed his eyes for a moment. He pictured his own mother’s body after the illness had taken her from them. He pictured Al, covered in soot and burns and held tightly in Ed’s arms as he tried to get them out of the house as it turned to charcoal around them. When he turned back to the teacher, his eyes were hard. “How did they die?”

By the shape they were in, it was clear that they hadn’t fallen in the black tower. One of the child’s bodies was covered in open knife wounds like he’d been hacked to death by a sword or something similar.

The teacher, Ed thought his name might be Mr. Li, clenched his fists in anger. “It was a group of stowaways!”

Li Wen stepped in, knowing Mr. Li wouldn’t be able to say much more. “Ed, when the tower attack game was opened, everyone was sent into the black tower to participate in the game. The teachers and these students were no exception. When the game was over, only two of the kids didn’t make it back. Nine students and Mr. Blake ended up returning, but of those nine, three children were sent into the same game. There were a total of six players, the kids, and three other adults. Among the adults were two stowaways. The three kids are reserved players, they only
wanted to survive the game. The didn’t expect that one of them would accidentally complete a branch mission and receive a big match as a reward.”

Ed jerked his gaze up at Li Wen, “A big match?”

Li Wen nodded. “Yeah, exactly like your match.”

Mr. Li gestured to the students, and a tall boy went into the gym’s equipment room, coming back out with a very familiar looking big red match. Ed took the match and inspected it. “It’s exactly the same. The kid saw Mosaic? Did they finish Mosaic’s mission?”

Li Wen shook his head, eyes shiny. “I don’t know. The kid died. He’s one of the bodies lying in the hallway.”

Ed had collected Ian Bank’s ‘Stacked’ ability, and it was restricted to a one-time use kind of power. When Ed took the big match from the kid, he found that he could store it in his body if he wanted to… but he didn’t. It wasn’t his, it belonged to the students who’d lost someone for it. With a small smile, he turned the match to the boy.

The boy took the match from him, his eyes watering as he quickly tried to wipe away the tears. “This match belonged to Chris. The three students who died were all killed by stowaways. Before he died, Chris told me that after he received the big match as a reward, the stowaway tried to take it from him. The man could see that it was a treasure, something valuable. Chris wasn’t… he wasn’t brave. He would have given the man the match… but he didn’t get the chance.” The boy choked on a sob, rubbing his face into his own shoulder, “The monster told them to find the stowaway so it could eat them. If they didn’t, it would eat them all.”

Li Wen stepped in, a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Like us, the kids were dropped into the same type of game. With them though, two of the three adults were stowaways. They took it upon themselves to hand over the children first. With two against one, the last adult didn’t know what to do, but the kids were scared. Chris, the kid who died, panicked and said that one of the adults was a stowaway. The monster decided that the adults had more meat and turned to eat the adult… it turned out…”

“The man the boy pointed out really was a stowaway?”

“Yeah. The three children were just scared, they didn’t want to be eaten. So they pointed out the one who’d tried to hand them over. They didn’t expect to be right.”

“Did the monster eat the stowaway?”

The teacher, Mr. Li grit his teeth as he shook his head. “No. Chris said the monster only managed to bite off the man’s arm when the tower attack game suddenly ended. They didn’t die, all six of them managed to leave the game. Originally, we all thought that that was it, the game was over and whoever came back from the black tower attack game alive had won. We didn’t expect the two stowaways to recognize the school uniform the kids were wearing. They attacked the school half an hour later. Apparently, they had their own group, and five stowaways attacked a group of children and two teachers!”

The young boy narrowed his eyes, red eyes burning with a rage Ed hadn’t ever seen in a child before. “They said we had to give them Chris and the match. We didn’t want to hand anything over at first, it was a reward that Chris earned himself… but all five of the stowaways had abilities and they were too strong. They killed one of us, so we decided to give them the match, but it wasn’t enough. The stowaway who lost his arm wanted Chris to pay for it! We couldn’t just hand Chris
over! We fought, managed to kill two of them but… Chris and Mr. Blake…”

Mr. Li motioned for Ed to follow and took him to two of the bodies lying on the ground.

Other than Violet, the two other middle school students kicked at two of the bodies, their young expressions twisted in vicious anger and pain.

Mr. Li didn’t even try to stop them, obviously, that hadn’t been the first time. “It’s not as simple as just giving them the match. Two of them died, but several children and Mr. Blake died because of them. We won’t rest until we’ve killed all of them!”

“Kill them!”

“Kill them!”

The harsh… violent words weren’t unusually. Ed had been there before. In that pit of anger, hatred, and pain.

Ed didn’t want to comfort them or urge them to let go of their anger.

The world had changed very quickly. It wasn’t peaceful, and it wouldn’t protect these children anymore. They could only protect themselves. A certain pain flashed in Ed’s chest at the thought. He’d been even younger than these two children when the world had stopped protecting him and Al. He had to grow up fast and learn to protect them himself.

Pain… suffering… fear, these things were abundant in their world before, but now? The previous Amestris had been kept peaceful and lawful because the military had a stranglehold on everything, but now there were no soldiers, no law. It was everyone for themselves.

Ed felt a long-buried fury bubbling in his stomach, an old and familiar partner. Taking a long deep breath, Ed thought of Al. He would have lost himself in his despair when he was 10 if it hadn’t been for Alphonse. Ed’s brother was a bright beacon of light, even after they’d lost everything. At least they had each other.

Looking at the clock on the gym wall, Ed turned back to face Mr. Li. “It’s already three in the morning. With only three stowaways left, if they’re smart, they won’t attack the school again tonight. Still, we should set up a watch for the night.”

Mr. Li was quick to make a suggestion, “Of the six people left, only Rina and Connor are official players. They’ve both got abilities and they are physically stronger than the rest of us. Connor’s got guard duty for the next few hours.”

Ed’s eyebrow rose, “You all know what official players, reserve players, and stowaways are?” It actually made some sense. Surely the big mole wouldn’t be the only creature to spill vital information. With the number of people in the school, the likelihood of one of them taking part in a game with a party that managed to obtain that information was higher than not.

Violet, who’d been silent thus far, finally spoke up, “Today we had thirteen people enter six different games. All of the games were different, but they had one thing in common. Each game pit the players against a black tower monster, and all six monsters spoke about the three types of players. They all mentioned them, but didn’t tell us what any of it meant. It’s thanks to Li Wen that we understood what the difference between the three types of players was. Then again, we already knew about official players and reserve players from the start.”

Ed couldn’t help his surprise, “How did you know?”
The only other girl in the group, the one hanging back, took a few steps forward. “It’s because of me. I’m an official player, but my ability is mostly useless when compared to Connor’s. I can only see the status of other players.”

Oh, that was curious, “You can see the status of other players?”

The little girl nodded shyly. “Yes. I see the words suspended over everyone’s heads. After the game officially started, I saw ‘Official Player’ over Connors head, while ‘Reserve Player’ was above Mr. Li and Violet’s heads. I can only use it five times a day, and I can only use it once for each person. After reading five people, the words above any other players just get blurry for the rest of the day.”

Ed’s head tilted to the left, “You were at the school gates just now, right? Didn’t you get a look at my status?”

The little girl shook her head. “It’s odd. I haven’t used my ability at all today, but I can’t see your player status. Your head is also just… an odd mosaic.”

He took a moment to assess the little girl before holding out his left hand. “Are there any requirements to trigger the ability?”

“No, I can just see it directly.”

Ed nodded, “Touch my hand and see if that changes anything.”

The little girl was hesitant to come forward, but with a small push from Violet, the girl reached out to touch Ed’s hand and looked up. “Ah! There it is! Official player! How curious, with you I could only see it after touching you. Before, I just had to look at Connor and the stowaways to see their statuses clearly.”

He’d guessed it’d be like that. From what he could understand so far, every ability has some kind of trigger or requirement. Ed’s was a prime example of that, while Leon Bin’s also made the point.

The boy in charge of the traps came into the room sans his chubby companion. “Mr. Li, we set up all the traps again. Connor said he’d keep watch, so I could get some sleep.”

“Official players and stowaways both possess abilities and its clear that they gain some kind of physical strength. We reserve players don’t.” Violet spoke up suddenly. The whole group turned to look at her, but her focus remained on Ed. “Can you tell what your ability is? If you don’t want to give us details that’s fine, but I need to know if you’re going to stay in help. Is your ability like Rina’s, with no combat capability? Or is it offensive like Connor’s?”

Ed took his time assessing the girl before he answered. “I don’t have an offensive ability type but I’ll stay and help out.”

The group as a whole seemed to sag in relief.

Gradually, the room began to brighten as the sun began to rise.

As morning came, the nervous children seemed to relax, even Mr. Li seemed to lose some of his earlier tension.

“We should be safe for now.” Mr. Li whispered, “They shouldn’t attack during the day. It’d be too easy for us to see it coming. I think we should get some rest during the day so that we’re prepared for night fall. I’ll go call Connor back in. He hasn’t slept all night; he deserves the rest too.”
Ed watched the man walk away, before his eyes turned to the six bodies lining the gym hall. There was no expression on his face as he examined them one by one.

“How did you become an official player?”

Ed didn’t jump, but he was startled by the stoic voice of the girl leaning against the wall. Violet’s stare measured and keen.

He didn’t know how to answer for a moment. Would it be better to tell the truth? Or lie? “On the third day after the earth came online, I was pulled into a black tower game. I won. It was a one verse one game. The other player was your father.”

Violet tensed sharply before she forced herself to relax again. “You don’t need to feel guilty.”

“I don’t.”

The calculating stare was back.

“It was father who pulled me into the game. If I’d lost, it might have me who disappeared and I couldn’t afford that. Now, I’ve fulfilled his last wish and confirmed that you were still alive. It was a game where only one of us could win and survive. I refuse to feel guilty, especially now that I see you’re alive. I also don’t think your father blamed me.”

For the first time, Ed saw the young girl’s thin mouth curve into a small smile. “You’re very strange.”

She was shorter than Ed, not by very much, but at least she was shorter, yet Ed had to admit that there was a maturity about her that reminded him of himself. Of Al.

“You’ve very smart.”

“My grades are in the district’s top ten all year round. I won first place in the Olympiad and the computers national competition. I also participated in various academic competitions on behalf of my school.” Violet shrugged a bit, not seeming to bragging, but just making a point, “After the earth came online, everyone’s physical strength seemed to improve, even reserve players. I just seemed to get smarter. For example, do you know how reserve players became players at all?”

That piqued Ed’s interest instantly. His eyes narrowed, “No. How?”

Official players were people who’d participated in a black tower game during the three-day elimination period, while stowaways were people who’d killed someone within those same three days.

But what about reserve players?

“After the game official started, there were only eighteen people remaining in this school. Only Rina and Connor were official players while the other sixteen were reserve. I asked all of them in detail about their experiences during those three days and only found one thing in common.”

It was an experiment, a hypothesis she’d been able to test in a small pool of players. Ed hadn’t met too many people, and wouldn’t have thought to question them even if he had. Violet was in a better position to gather information and explore the cause. The very fact that she’d thought to do that kind of thing was amazing, but it seemed that she’d actually found a plausible answer.

“All sixteen people, myself included, played games during those three days and won. It wasn’t a
black tower game, but any kind of game. Computer games, mobile games, real games, it didn’t matter. Mr. Li himself is a special cause because he didn’t play any games, but he won a bet with another teacher and managed to survive.”

Ed frowned, his head tilting to the left as he crossed his arms over his chest. “It can’t be that simple. If it was just about winning any kind of game during those three days, more than 400 million people would have survived.”

Violet conceded the point with a nod, “Yes, it isn’t that simple. I myself both won and lost games during those three days, but the classmate I lost to failed to survive. I made some careful inquiries and found that all of the opponents of the surviving students admitted to being ‘eliminated’.”

That made Ed pause, both eyebrows shot up in surprise. “They admitted it aloud? They actually said that they were eliminated?”

“Yes. They spoke the word ‘eliminated’. Before the black tower issued its announcement on the 15th, notifying the world that the earth was online and that we should start eliminating other players, no actually used that word. Normally, when playing games people would say they lost, or something to that affect. But because the black tower said that word, eliminated, in advance, it made the word stick out in people’s minds. No one knew how or what it meant to eliminate other players, and most people might have said it as a joke or a casual remark, but that was their most vital mistake.”

Ed bit his lip. He’d never thought it would be that simple. The power of verbal vocabulary suggestion.

Violet leaned back against the wall again. “There might be other ways to become reserve players. Out of sixteen reserve players, only two didn’t hear the word eliminated, yet they still survived. I’m not sure, the sample size was too small. I could only analyze that much.”

“That’s still amazing. I wouldn’t have thought of that.” Ed seldom dolled out praise like that, especially given that he himself was a genius. Then again, he’d been single-mindedly focused on getting to Alphonse at all costs. He hadn’t really given much thought to the how or the why just yet. What was important to him now was finding his brother.

Violet bowed her head, her gaze on the six bodies laid out on the ground. They had been her teacher and classmates. Maybe she didn’t know any of the six people, but she’d seen them die right in front of her.

“They’ll make their move tonight.”

Ed nodded. “Yeah. It’ll be tonight.”

“I want to kill them. I want to survive.”

And wasn’t that just so familiar. Revenge and fear. It hit too close to home and Ed knew he wouldn’t be able to just walk away.

“Good,” he spoke carefully, but intently. “We’ll kill them and survive.”

Mr. Li called out for Violet and as she walked away Li Wen approached. “Everything was very dangerous right before you got here. Violet Allen, that little girl is very clever. The traps were all her ideas, especially the one by the guardroom door. As long as you enter through the door, you’ll fall right into that trap. It was lucky you used another method to enter. But how did you know there
was a trap there?"

“I picked up a map of Luza from a newspaper kiosk. The middle school is extremely large, especially given that its in the Military District.”

Li Wen furrowed his brows, obvious still confused, “Yeah, the school is one of four prestigious schools in Luza. It’s probably one of the largest in the city, but why does that matter?”

Ed smirked, “Middle schools are different than elementary schools, and especial in big cities like Luza. Most middle schools have more than one cafeteria on campus. Schools are big as this one might even have a campus supermarket. Only two days have passed since the game began. If there was a supermarket on campus, the students wouldn’t be lacking for food or water. I deliberately told the chubby boy that I had food and water and was willing to share it. Usually, if they had food, and let’s be honest it’s only been two days, then he would have just told me to get lost. But he didn’t.”

Connor walked into the gym scratching his head and looking sheepish. “Ah, I was trying to lure you close enough to fall into the trap. It turns out you were playing me.”

Ed couldn’t keep himself from lecturing, “You’re still young. If you want to actually deceive people in the future, you have to think ahead. Find the loopholes in your own plan and use those as traps as well.”

Dazed, the cubby boy slowly nodded.

“You’re teaching a middle school student how to be more devious; you realize that right?” Li Wen attempted to joke.

Ed shrugged, keeping his attention on the boy. “Based on what Violet told me, your power is an offensive type. Can you tell me about it? Did it have something to do with the nails I encountered on the way here?”

Connor sat down and spoke, face open and honest. “Yes, that’s my ability. Rina and I are official players. Rina might be short and thin, but we’re both stronger than the others. We’ve got more stamina than even Mr. Li. Rina is a girl, so I volunteered to take first shift in the guardroom at night to prevent those guys from sneaking up on us. Violet said that the most likely course of action for the stowaways is attacking from between midnight to two in the morning. You just so happened to stroll up at that time so I thought you were trouble and attacked.” Looking a bit chagrined the boy bowed his head. “I’m sorry I almost hurt you.”

“It’s alright. You didn’t actually do anything wrong.” Ed’s main concern was something else entirely, “Where you the one who broke the street lights lining the path up to the school?”

The chubby boy nodded. “Violet told me to break them. She said that if there was broken glass on the ground, anyone approaching wouldn’t be able to do it silently. I have really good hearing since becoming an official player. As long as someone steps on the glass, I’ll be able to hear it.”

“So, what’s your ability?”

The boy grinned, “It’s something like telekinesis. I can move any object near me within a 100-meter radius, but it’s not very strong. I can’t move anything too heavy, and if I try moving a knife or something bigger than my nails, I can’t maintain a good speed.”

Behind the boy, Ed saw a knife slowly rising from the ground before it drifted in front of him long enough for him to grab it.
Connor’s face was red with the effort. “It’s too slow to be able to attack people, but with the nails and needless,”

**Whoosh!**

A small thin needle the size of a thumb appeared right in front of Ed’s face. Instinct had Ed ducking back, but the needle didn’t move. It hung in the air in front of him. Ed had seen the path the needle had taken, but he hadn’t been as prepared for it as he’d thought he was. If he hadn’t been paying enough attention, he might not have been able to escape the small needle.

Connor saw Ed’s quick evasion and grinned again, “You’re fast. You’re probably fast than me or Rina.”

Ed reached out with his right hand and grabbed the needle examining it closely. It was a sowing needle. “You’ve been using nails and needles as weapons.” It was a question, but Connor nodded all the same.

The ability had potential. If the boy could manage to strengthen it, he could become a formidable opponent. As it was, Ed had no doubt that the stowaways were weary of this one.

Ed held out the needle and assessed the chubby boy. “Don’t tell anyone else about your ability.”

Connor’s face twisted in confusion.

Ed smirked, “You should keep some secrets safe. You never know when you’ll need it.”

Connor glared. Hadn’t it been Ed who’d told him to talk about his ability? Rolling his eyes, the chubby boy groaned and walked away. It was clear to see that he didn’t understand just yet… but Ed was sure that he would. Sooner rather than later.

Li Wen snorted helplessly, “Ed, you really shouldn’t be bullying children.”

Ed cocked a brow, “I’m trying to help him grow.”

It was Li Wen’s turn to look dubious, but he didn’t say anything else.

Throughout the day, Ed and the others laid out several traps both near the school gates and inside the school itself. The traps were conveniently laid out thanks to the chubby boy’s ability. All the while, Violet filled Ed in on the details about the three remaining stowaways and their abilities.

“We don’t know much about the two stowaways who died, they didn’t have any obvious abilities and we killed them quickly. There are three left and two of them have very dangerous abilities, while the last one is still mainly unknown. The only information we managed to obtain about his abilities is that it had something to do with flowers. Mr. Li saw flowers blooming in the wake of his steps. They were ordinary roses and we only managed two hits on him before he retreated. We don’t know if there’s anything special about his ability, but he seemed to have some fighting skills. He was fast and fought fiercely, but he was the stowaway who’d lost his arm and wanted to take Chris’ match during the black tower game.”

Ed had seen all sorts of miraculous abilities, how own book being one of the oddest yet, but an ability to grow flowers? Whether or not it was a passive ability was up in the air, and he couldn’t afford to take it lightly. He needed to keep alert and plan for anything.

Violet continued, “The other two seemed to have the more dangerous abilities. One could spit fire.”
“Wait. Spit fire?” Ed actually did a double take, a look of pure confusion on his face.

It was the first time Ed had heard of an ability regarding natural elements. In movies and books, many powers and abilities involved the classic elements: fire, earth, wind, and water. Even so, by everything that Ed had witnessed so far, elemental abilities were a rarity with the black tower. First was his own book, then Ian Banks. Leon Bin, Annalisa, Rina, and Connor all had abilities and so far, all of them were oddly against nature.

“Yes, from what we’ve seen, he sprays fire from his mouth. Like something out of an anime. With careful observation I found that he could only use his ability in three-minute intervals, and the temperatures are very high. It can melt marble but not steel. It might have been too dark last night, so you might not have seen it, but the ‘Military Middle School’ sign at the entrance to the school was melted by his fire. The melting point of steel is around 1500°C, whole marble is around 800°C. I estimate that the temperature of his flames is below 1000°C.”

Ed nodded, taking mental notes of the ability and its danger. His leg and arm were made of a lighter metal than steel, and it is very likely his automail would melt or deform due to that amount of heat. He had to be extra careful with that one.

“And the last one?”

The last one has… well, he’s got a gun.”

Ed startled, “A gun?”

In Amestris, guns were strictly controlled by the Military and to even be able to carry one you had to be a soldier in some branch of the military or a member of the police, which was also carefully controlled by the military. Sometimes, guns would manage to find their way out into civilian hands, but it didn’t take long for the military to catch wind and come collect. Most murders in Amestris are bare-handed or due to the use of knives or household items. Guns are much too rare and monitored.

If that stowaway had a gun, there is no doubt that he killed people.

Violet shook her head, “It’s not really that scary. Connor likes playing survival games and is reasonably familiar with firearms. He said that the gun seemed to be a police issued piece, not military grade. His best guess is that the stowaway must have stolen it from a police station after everyone disappeared and the game official started. Still, the gun isn’t the scary part. The thing that terrifies us is that the man’s ability seems to be related to the gun. He has unlimited ammunition.”

Ed’s jaw clenched.

“Connor said that the average police issued gun has eight bullets in each clip. But the stowaway shot at least 30 times without reloading once. I couldn’t get a beat on how many bullets he can actually fire, or if there is a limit to his ability, but in a worst-case scenario, his ability is limitless.”

Ed’s automail hand came up to cover his mouth, his other arm tightening around his torso to support the weight. “Official players have better physical abilities than normal. I’m not sure how we cope with guns, but ordinary knives can’t cut us. Without the gun man, the stowaways would lose combat effectiveness, and it is unlikely he has another gun in reserve.”

“Yes. I guessed that as well.”

Ed took a moment to debate his next move before he came to a decision. “Can I use the big
He’d just finished asking his question when the chubby boy ran in with the match in his hands, offering it to Ed once he was close enough. “We’ve been waiting for you to ask for it. You’ve got the strongest physical abilities among the three official players, and you have a better chance of using it more efficiently than either me or Rina. Violet said it’d be best if you used it.”

Ed turned a surprised glance to Violet, but the girl merely stared back solemnly. “This match… it must be powerful.” It was a statement, not a question.

Ed actually grinned, white teeth on full display. “In my hands, it will be.”

With that, Ed pressed the big match to his wrist. Instantly, the match was gone and the red tattoo appeared on his skin.

That seemed to have shocked both Connor and Violet because the two watched the entire process with wide eyes and open mouths.

Ed shrugged one shoulder lightly, “This is my ability.”

Connor started to chuckle as he understood. “A hidden weapon. That’ll come in handy with catching the stowaways by surprise.”

Ed nodded.

As the time passed and the sun gradually sank below the horizon. Everyone who’d been relaxed during the day, began to tense up as evening drew closer. Everyone was on edge and prepared.

Ed made his way to the little girl called Rina, he’d been watching her most of the day, but it was only now that Ed had found the change to approach her. The small, weak middle schooler had a large stick in her hands, a kitchen knife tapped to the end with silver duct tape.

She might have been a girl, and she might have been small, but she was an official player. She was stronger than Mr. Li when it came right down to it.

“You don’t need the stick, it’ll be enough to use the knife. You aren’t tall enough to use a makeshift staff like that effectively. You’re more suited for lightweight weapons. Give me the stick.”

Connor looked down at her DIY weapon and frowned. Slowly, she nodded her head. Tearing the knife off the end of the stick, she handed it over to Ed, “Okay.”

Ed took it and just as he expected, a strange power traveled from the stick into Ed’s body. Walking over to an quiet corner, he pulled out his ability book.

[Ability: Friend or Foe
Owner: Rina Brim (Official Player)
Type: Special Type
Function: Determine a player’s status
Level: 1
Restrictions: Ability can only be used five times a day. If the target is stronger than the owner, direct contact is needed for the ability to be affective.
Note: Look at you! You’re getting the hang of this!]

Rina’s ability really did have a restriction, it was what Ed had expected but it was good to have
Ed had intended to collect Rina’s ability just as he had Leon Bin’s the other day. Vaguely, he was aware of himself gaining more than just the ability. It seemed that with every ability he collected, he became stronger. Eyesight, reaction speed, physically, and mentally.

Before having gained Leon Bin’s ability, Ed couldn’t guarantee that he would have been able to escape that first nail. Collecting Rina’s only confirmed his theory, verifying that he got stronger with every ability he stole.

Holding the stick in his left hand, Ed pressed down with his fingertips. The wooden stick gave easily, four shallow imprints sinking in like knives on warm butter.

This was the benefit of his ability. Not only did he gain some one else’s power, but he also strengthened himself. He had usage restrictions, but this more than made up for those.

With that in mind, Ed moved to the other official player.

Walking up to the chubby boy, Ed crouched down to be on the same level. “Hey. I’m kinda hungry, can you pass me that piece of bread?”

Connor looked up, his face perplexed and eyes questioning. He looked from Ed to the pile of food by a small fire. “There’s a lot over there. You can get it yourself.” He mumbled.

Ed actually rolled his eyes. “That’s the last cinnamon roll.”

The chubby boy narrowed his eyes, but he quickly sighed and gave in, handing it over reluctantly.

Li Wen was been close by and he laughed as he saw the boy’s face. “Wow Ed, stealing food from children now?”

Ed didn’t answer, his face twisting in annoyance.

He’d taken the bread from the chubby boy, but there was no strange feeling.

What was going on? Why didn’t he get the boy’s ability?

Ed didn’t give up. Connor’s ability was offensive, it would be much too useful to just let it pass. Ed kept asking the boy for cookies, a bottle of milk, water. Everyone noticed that Ed only took food from the chubby boy, and it was driving the boy near tears. “Why are you only bullying me?”

Ed scowled. “Just hand over another cookie.”

Despite eating two boxes of cookies, one cinnamon roll and a bottle of milk, he still failed to obtain the boy’s ability.

The others seemed to be amused by the entire situation, chucking and laughing randomly as they watched. The only one really paying any kind of attention was Violet. When Ed finally gave up and turned away, she picked up another box of cookies and ran after him.

The small, short-haired girl wasn’t actually ‘cute’. She was mature, her eyes hard and strong. Her figure thin and tired. Looking up at Ed, she took a deep breath, “Are you trying to get something from someone else? It’s related to your ability isn’t it? If I give you something, will you become stronger?”
Ed was startled, but he couldn’t help but smile.

She was smart, much smarter than Ed had actually given her credit for. Like himself. Like Al.

Violet didn’t have an ability; Ed wouldn’t benefit from taking anything from her. Still, the small girl stared at him seriously, the box of cookies in her hand, and Ed couldn’t bring himself to say another. Through grit teeth and narrowed eyes, she declared, “I will give this to you. But you have to kill them. Whatever you need, I will give it to you if you kill them.”

Ed didn’t even bother to reject the girl. He couldn’t. Reaching out for it, Ed took the cookies and froze. There was it was.

Eyes wide, Ed didn’t bother to explain anything to Violet as he snatched up the cookies and rushed towards his backpack. He hadn’t stored the book back into its pocket space, he’d placed it in his backpack, and he grabbed at it quickly.

As soon as he opened it, his jaw fell slack.

[Ability: Intelligent Intellectual Thinking
Owner: Violet Allen (Reserve Player)
Type: Genotype
Level: 3
Restrictions: Judgment Accuracy limit 50%, Physical Improvement limit 0%
Note: I may have guessed, but I know I’m right because I’m smarter than you.

Ed version usage instructions: Accuracy 10%. Apparently, Ed has some very good luck! There is a diamond in the rough!]

“What’s wrong?” Violet came up from behind, Ed rounding to her.

Ed looked down at her.

The big mole had told them that official players and stowaways would definitely have abilities, but there was only a slim chance of it for reserve players.

So, this was why she was so smart.

“I will definitely kill them.”

Violet eyed him quietly for a moment, before nodding tightly. “Thank you.”

Bang!

A loud gunshot viciously broke the stillness of the night and Ed turned to see the silver bullet fly right over his head. It nicked Mr. Li’s cheek before the teacher flinched back. The bullet lodged into the gym’s back wall and Ed quickly turned his attention to the direction the bullet had been fired from.

“Fatty, break the gym’s overhead lights!” Ed shouted, climbing to his feet.

“Okay!”

A nail flew quick and easy through the air and smashed into the gym’s lights, plunging the entire area into darkness.
Li Wen reeled back at the scattering plastic, “Ed, what are you doing?”

Ed was squatting again, drawing a neat, perfect circle into the ground. It was too dark for the others to see exactly what he was doing, but they saw him suddenly go down.

When Ed got back up, he grinned, “I’m drawing a circle to curse him.”
Chapter 19 – Conflict

Stationed at different entry points around the gym, everyone held their breath, waiting for the next shot.

*Bang!*

Another bullet pierced the concrete floor and most of the students startled. They’d never heard a gun before, and the last time they had, six of them died.

“The average range of a police-issued firearm is between 50 and 100 meters,” Connor said quickly, giving everyone a reference point.

Everyone was divided into three separate groups. Li Wen and Mr. Li gathered the two reserve students and held their ground behind a large concrete wall. It would be enough to protect them from a sneak attack and give them a chance to keep an eye out for the other stowaways. Violet stayed with Rina. Ed knew Violet had an ability, but the chances of her being any stronger than ordinary reserve players were low. The restriction on her ability was a heavy price to pay for her intelligence.

Connor and Ed were in charge of attacking.

“Why didn’t the stowaways make a sound when they went through the path of glass? And the traps at the entrance didn’t trigger at all.”

Ed had two guesses about that. In a low voice, he told the boy the most likely one, “They tried a sneak attack twice now. The second time they were discovered by you and its likely that they made precautions. They aren’t stupid, they wouldn’t repeat the same mistakes twice. They should have other ways to enter the school.” *Or they hadn’t actually ever left*, but Ed wasn’t about to say that out loud.

The two of them left the gym quietly, sticking low and close to the wall.

Ed’s narrowed eyes scanned the surroundings carefully, looking for a hint of an ambush or an attack.

The night was a silent black beast, watching everyone with bloodthirsty eyes. The many surrounding trees made shadows through the ground as the breeze made nearly everything sway. The wind was the only sound.

Ed tilted his head to the right, listening carefully, “Give me a nail…”

*Bang!*

Ed lunged to the left, but he wasn’t fast enough. The bullet grazed his right arm ripping apart his red hoodie and a piece of his silicon flesh sleeve, before embedding itself into the wall behind him. The glint of Ed’s automail caught a stay light and Ed’s hand come up to cover it. Connor and Ed shared one loaded look before they split up.
It was the best plan to expose the position of the gunman, and if bad came to worse, the man would have two targets to try and fire on. For now, though, it was Ed and Connor who stood waist deep in shit creek. Facing a gunman in the dark was far more dangerous.

**Bang bang!**

Ed twirled the large wooden stick in his right hand and dashed into one of the school buildings flanking the gym.

The bullets came rapid-fire, kicking up dirt on the ground at his heels with each step. Right at the building entrance, Ed suddenly stopped. A bullet slashed the air right before his eyes, hitting the wall by his head.

Ed rolled into the school building.

The second his upper back hit the ground, the sharp sound of a blade whistled through the air just over his head, nearly cutting his blond braid. “Mother fucker!” Ed hissed as he twisted into the roll, crouched on the ground left knee on the ground, right hand clenching the wooden stick that had been cut in half by the knife.

As Ed rose, his opponent took two steps back.

“You’re strong…” Hoarse laughter followed the sarcastic comment, “But you’re still gonna die!”

The man lunged and Ed brought the stick up to bare.

The knife and the stick collided constantly, the movement fast, nearly blurring as each move parried another. The knife was longer than Ed’s stick, and the man was using it to his advantage as he kept nicking at Ed’s weaknesses. His shoulder, his waist, his elbows, his forearm. Ed was constantly forced to retreat.

The attacks became more brutal as the man pressed his advantage. The damn stowaway had two things going for him, the length of his knife and the strength of his blows. Every time he swung the thing, the wind itself became a weapon, able to cut into him if Ed didn’t dodge fast enough.

The weapon wasn’t swung haphazardly, each move was measured and smooth, and Ed’s speed was starting to slow.

Quick and brutal, the knife stabbed toward the left side of Ed’s head. Moving faster than he had before, Ed dropped to his haunches, hands stabilizing his momentum as his left leg swung out catching the man right in the knee.

The man groaned in pain, the sound of bone cracking under pressure seemed to echo loudly in the dark.

The man staggered, falling back to one knee and using the knife to keep himself upright.

Ed somersaulted backward, only stopping a few steps away as he rose from his crouch, wiping the blood off his cheek with his gloved left hand. The bright red liquid seeped into the cotton white glove, and for the first time, Ed got a look at his opponent.

Tall, strong, built. The glint of his shaved head and the thick black outline of a tiger tattooed on his left arm. It’s obvious he was here laying wait to spring an ambush on anyone who ran to the building for cover. It was the building closest to the gym.
They stared at each other, both of them on alert as they slowly healed. Official players and stowaways alike were in better physical condition, and the healing was quick and easy for shallow wounds. Ed could feel the nicks and slices start to itch on his skin, letting him know that they were all scabbing over fast.

The man’s knee was still injured, and Ed needed to take advantage of that while it lasts. Swiftly, he moved forward, raising the stick for a clean hit. Just as the stick came down, the man was able to stand, raising his knife to meet Ed’s stick.

Just like that, the situation shifted. Ed was on the attack, keeping the big man off balance and on the defense with the knife. The longer the fight lasted, the fast the man seemed to get. His knee injury was likely almost completely healed.

The man yelled as Ed finally managed a clean hit to the man’s face, driving the man back a few steps.

“Damnit! Fuck hiding!” The man dropped the knife, placed both hands on his hips and faced Ed squarely. Ed faltered, and that was all the man needed.

The man’s stomach tightened, his eyes wide as he roared, “Fire Fist Ace!”

Ed had no idea what the words meant and he didn’t get enough time to even think about it. Instinct had Ed abruptly changing the direction of his swing, throwing all his power into hitting the wall beside them and using the momentum of the recoil to push himself to the other end of the corridor.

He watched, completely taken aback as he saw the muscular man open his mouth.

Ed had seen fire before. He thought he’d seen the worst of it at 10 years old. But this went beyond even that. Monstrous flames filled the corridor, coming straight at Ed.

Ed turned to run.

The flames were faster than Ed by a small margin, he could feel the heat at his back and his hair catching fire. Frantically, Ed threw himself into a barrel roll at the end of the corridor, letting momentum take him farther down as the flames continued coming. Panicking, Ed stayed on his knees as he grabbed at his braid, smoothing the small flames scorching his blond locks. “Fuck, fuck, fuck!”

The walls at the mouth of the corridor seemed to be melting, the one across from it charred and blackening into a bright red. The temperature rose and Ed watched. Ed’s wooden stick had been left behind, and he had no doubt that it was nothing but kindling now.

Finally, the flames disappeared, and Ed remained on his knees. Eyes wide, breaths coming out in a heavy pant, face marred with sweat and ash.

The man seemed to have recovered fully. Big knife in hand, he rounded the corner and dashed towards Ed, laughing maniacally. Unarmed and off balance, Ed could only scramble to dodge.

The once methodic swings now became crude and manic, like a man desperately swinging around a bat. The only thing saving Ed’s ass was the sheer amount of martial arts training he’d been through for the better part of 12 years.

“Those who witness my power will all die!”

The knife came down fast and hard towards his skull and Ed had to virtually throw himself
backward to try to avoid the direct hit. Knowing he wasn’t going to be able to keep this up, Ed allowed himself to roll with his momentum until he was back on his feet before he turned and ran. The big man right on his heels.

_Bang!_

Just as Ed took his first step out of the school building, a bullet fired into the ground right between his feet. Ed didn’t even stop.

He was sweating, breathing heavy, chest heaving, but his golden yellow eyes were calm and sharp as he narrowed in on the position of the gunman.

The muscled man chased behind him, and bullets fired at his feet, but Ed was quick. He kicked himself out of the way of the bullets, maintaining his speed out of sheer desperation and years of training. He’d barely avoided two of the shots, but just as the ninth shot was fired, Ed and the muscular stowaway burst into the gym.

The two of them crashed through the door, and six dead bodies lined against the wall made the man falter for a split second, taking him by surprise.

The man was quick to collect himself, a snarl on his face as he swung his knife at Ed again.

He didn’t expect the escaping young man to suddenly stop and turn, confronting his attack.

“What the fuck?!” Instinct screamed in the man’s gut, but his body moved faster than his mind. The knife kept its steady path right for Ed, but the young man only raised his left hand.

Yet he had no weapon!

The muscular man stared. He didn’t blink at all, but in an instant, a large match suddenly appeared in Ed’s hand.

The steel knife met the huge match and the impact had vibrated the air around them. The _clang_ of metal meeting metal startling the man badly.

The knife in his hand broke and the match head slammed straight into the big man’s skull. For the second time in his life, Ed heard the crisp sound of the match breaking bone before the big man fell to the ground. Blood and gore seemed to cover the hallway behind the man, but his body continued to twitch on the floor, not completely dead yet.

One eye stared up at Ed, his mouth open in an attempt to talk or scream or… it didn’t matter. Nothing would come out but a low wheeze.

The man’s strength meant that he’d lived through a hit with Mosaic’s match, but by the look of the man, he probably wished he hadn’t.

Ed slowed his breathing. The heavy panting coming under control in mere moments. The man didn’t speak, but he didn’t need to, Ed could see the questions filling that one remaining eye. The other side of his head caved in and gruesome.

“You’re wondering why I pretended to be weak aren’t you? You’re wondering why I didn’t use my weapon until now?” A choked off groan was Ed’s only answer. Ed leaned against the match, hard eyes looking down at the man. “First of all, I needed to cheat your ability. Violet told me that you can only use your ability in 3-minute intervals, and it’s been exactly 3 minutes and 2 seconds since
you last used it in the school building corridor.”

Holding up his right hand, a rip cut into the white glove and the silicone flesh sleeve underneath, the glint of metal shining faintly as he held up two fingers. “Second, I needed you to think you could win this. It kept you off guard, kept you stupid.” Calmly, another finger came up. “The last, most important reason is that I didn’t actually want to kill you yet. I wanted to find your sniper.”

The man’s body was twitching violently in an attempt to heal itself or react, or anything, but Ed doubted the man could heal that much damage at all.

Just at that moment, a voice echoed from the clock tower not too far from the gym building, “What the! Where did you…”

Bang!

One last gunshot punched through the night. There wasn’t another one.

“You guys think you’re so smart. Your little sniper friend tried everything to keep hidden, he just didn’t try keeping on the move. With the way he kept low though, I’m pretty sure his fighting ability with melee or close combat is virtually non-existence. If he’d been careful, or on guard, he’d have changed position after every shot. As soon as a sniper is found, he becomes the target. But he wanted to back you up, right? With you chasing after me, he didn’t have the time to move, he had to keep his eye on you and me.”

On the clock tower, a chubby boy leaned out the window and waved his hand, shouting excitedly, “He’s dead! I killed him! He’s dead!”

Ed looked up at the boy and nodded before looking back down at the big muscular man laid out bleeding and broken on the ground. He likely didn’t have much longer.

The man tried to breathe, his body shaking as his chest rose and fell slower and slower by the second. The eye that had closed when Ed looked away popped back open and a strange sinister smile pulled the man’s face. Ed’s heart sank as the smile remained. The heart stopped beating and the man finally dying.

That was something wrong.

Suddenly, two shrill screams pierced the air.

“Mr. Li!”

“Teacher!”

Ed didn’t hesitate. He ran out of the gym and into the track field.

He appeared just in time to see a short, slim man pull a knife out of Mr. Li’s chest. Ed could see the wet, bright red blood scatter as the man whipped the knife down, shaking off the blood still fresh on it. That’s when Ed noticed that the man only had one arm.

As Mr. Li stumbled back, blood tracing a line down the side of his mouth, it was Li Wen who caught him. It didn’t take much to see that the man was also wounded, cut and sliced, but still standing. Ed hadn’t noticed when he’d stopped, but he stood stock still a few meters away as he watched Li Wen and the two reserve students try to staunch the flow of blood from Mr. Li’s wound. Ed could see instantly that it wouldn’t work. The man had been stabbed in the heart and it didn’t take long for the blood to nearly blanket both reserve students.
From What Ed could tell though, they were otherwise unharmed.

On the circular running track, a dozen flowers began to grow rapidly, rising from the artificial turf like weeds. It should be impossible, there was no grass anywhere on the track field, but it didn’t seem to stop these flowers. They hadn’t yet bloomed, but they looked like ordinary, if large than normal, roses.

The man standing just in front of the patch of flowers was short, probably just a few centimeters taller than Ed himself, but he was lean, nearly gaunt. His jacket hung off him awkwardly, the right sleeve tied off mid-way. As Ed assessed him with more care, he finally noticed the ugly, terrifying scar running from the corner of the man’s left eye to the very edge of the left side of his mouth. In his left hand was the blood-soaked knife, and it glinted eerily, just like the man’s cold smile as he assessed Ed right back.

“Are they all dead?”

It was almost a casual question, almost a throw-away concern, but Ed saw the man’s grip on the knife tightened slightly.

“They are. You’re the only one left.”

“Not yet, but I will be.” The man’s smile grew sinister as he pointed the tip of his knife at Mr. Li, who lay motionless in a pool of his own blood. “All of you are going to end up just like him. Dead.”

Li Wen crouched by the two students, hand out to check for the teacher’s pulse. Ed didn’t need to be told. He already knew. “He’s not breathing…” Li Wen choked out stiffly.

The two reserve students didn’t even seem to hear him as they sobbed, trying to put pressure on a wound that had already finished the job.

From a dark corner of the running track, a figure suddenly stepped out. It paused in obvious shock at the sight, but it didn’t take long for whoever it was to start screaming. “I’ll kill you!”

In the blink of an eye the one-armed man moved, and Ed followed only a beat behind. A furious Rina didn’t even have the chance to inhale before Ed reached her side, grabbing the little girl’s arm and wrenching her behind him as the big match in his hand rose to block the on-coming knife.

Clang!

The man’s eyes went wide as he noticed that his knife was the weapon broken in two.

He looked at the big match in Ed’s hands with wonder and awe. “I knew it would be powerful!”

Rina was frozen with shock as she stood behind Ed, but all it took was Violet running out to grab Rina’s hand before both girls were dashing to Li Wen’s side.

A grinning Connor made his way back from the clock tower, clear pride and happiness on his face. All of that disappeared the moment he stepped into the track field, gaze instantly falling on Mr. Li.

“Teacher!”

Ed had guessed that the stowaways would try a sneak attack. He’d arranged traps in every point outside the school building, but as Ed had said earlier, the stowaways hadn’t stepped on the glass or gave themselves away because they’d been expecting it. It was why Ed had left a deliberately
open path. His own ambush.

If the stowaways were smart enough to avoid the glass and remain unknown, they would follow the winding, curving path Ed and Li Wen had left that morning, and expose their position. If they were smarter, they would figure out Ed’s plan and deliberately not take that path at all. Either they would expose themselves by stepping on the glass, or they would avoid taking the main path.

The worst-case scenario had been exactly what had happened. There had been no warning and Ed’s group had been caught unprepared. Their saving grace was the plan Ed had prepared with Connor. If Connor hadn’t taken the sniper, their current situation might’ve been more dire than it currently was.

Ed twirled the giant match on his automail hand, ironically noting that both he and the stowaway had lost their right arm. “How did you get on school grounds?”

They hadn’t taken the main path, but they also hadn’t triggered any of the other traps. Ed was curious as to how they’d managed that.

The one-armed man bellowed out a laugh. “Get in? We never left, you idiots!”

The small chubby boy recoiled. “W-what?! No way! How could you have never left? You’ve been on the school grounds the whole time?”

“This school is a basic fortress. A military middle school.” The man snorted, “You would have never found us, even if you’d looked.” The man’s gaze swept over every person, stopping quietly on Violet. “For the past two days, I’ve watched you lay out all those useless little traps. I’d planned to just attack you last night, but I wasn’t expecting this boy to show up. I figured I’d let you live for one more day.”

The students were horrified, all of them showing surprise and fear, but Ed merely nodded. He’d been afraid of that and had planned for it as best he could. It was why no one else knew about the strategy he’d set in place with Connor.

Violet grit her teeth, her expression pure self-reprimand, “I didn’t think of that.”

Rina shook her head beside the taller girl, squeezing her hand lightly. “Don’t blame yourself. No one could have guessed that this group of bastards would flee just to turn back and hide in our school. It’s all their fault!”

The man listened intently to the two girls talking, the smile on his face a creepy slash of white teeth.

Ed took a step to the side and blocked the two girls from the man’s line of sight. With a raised eyebrow, he spoke, “Your companions are all dead. Why are you still here?”

“Why shouldn’t I be here? You’re the ones who are going to die.” The tip of what was left of the man’s knife came up, pointing straight at Ed. There was broken in half, but that didn’t seem to bother the man at all.

Ed couldn’t help the sudden sense of unease that prickled his skin. His eyes flicked to the dozen flowers, and like a light turning on, Ed realized, “The flowers! We’ve got to destroy the flowers!”

The one-armed man scoffed at him, “As if you could!” He waved his knife to stop the students who’d moved forward to follow Ed’s orders.
Ed didn’t let him get much further. Swinging the match quickly, Ed rebounded the broken knife back, but just as the match and knife met, the blade splintered and cracked, breaking the silver blade completely.

“Destroy the flowers!” Ed yelled, baring the man’s path.

Two of the reserve students remained with Mr. Li’s body, but the other four rushed forward. Connor took hold of one of the rose’s stems, close to the roots, and forcefully pulled. It wouldn’t move, “I can’t pull it out! This thing is harder than steel!”

Connor was the strongest player among the students, if he couldn’t destroy the flowers then the others would be even more helpless.

Ed growled, finally understanding the tension and trepidation that had filled his chest before.

The man wasn’t just strong, but he had skills as well. Training in some form of martial art that utilized his small stature and lean body. The man looked like a willow flowing on the breeze as he dodged all of Ed’s advances. It was getting frustrating. The only person Ed knew who could evade him at this level was Izumi.

“Use your ability!” Ed growled out.

The short chubby boy gave a sharp cry of sudden understanding, a sharp, long nail appearing from his pocket. He focused it, aiming it straight at the rose’s roots, Connor struck. The long nail flew straight and true, penetrating the root with a sharp metallic sound of collision.

“I got it!”

The chubby boy’s face went hard and determined as the nail retreated and struck again. The nail was too thin to do much damage every time, but about 20 stabs, and two minutes later, the flower was finally destroyed.

“It’s destroyed!” Connor moved fast to the only other official player in the group of students. Holding out the gun he’d taken from the stowaway sniper, he pushed it towards the girl, “Use this. The roots are almost the same as a steel bar if you use the gun you might be able to destroy it. There are at least eight rounds, you can destroy one of the flowers.”

Rina stared at the gun in shock, unable to process it. Despite the fact that this was a military middle school, she’d likely never seen a gun up close before in her life. “This… this is a gun.”

“Yes. It’s a gun. Focus and aim for the roots.”

Rina took a fortifying breath, swallowing down her hesitation as she was shown how to cock the gun and load a round. She couldn’t help the shake in her hands as she reached for the weapon. Before she could get ahold of it, someone else took the gun away. Calm and steady, Violet’s hand didn’t even quake as she aimed, breathed, and shot.

Bang!

The bullet pierced through the rose’s roots, leaving a perfect hole behind.

The powerful recoil caught Violet to rock back, but her feet were planted. She didn’t even wait for anyone to speak again before she raised the gun and fired twice more.

Rina’s face dissolved into a relieved smile, “It’s working.”
The two reserve students and Li Wen quickly ran to help. While Connor pierced the flowers using his ability, Violet took out two with the gun. Rina and the two students joined Li Wen and began hacking at another flower with knives and anything sharp they had at hand. With their combined effort, they managed to destroy the damn rose after 10 strikes each.

While they all handled the flowers, Ed kept the one-armed man busy.

Ed had experience with fighting both hand-to-hand and with weapons, but it was clear that so did the stowaway. Ed managed to take out the man’s right shoulder, breaking it under the power of the match, but it didn’t seem to slow the damn stowaway any.

Ed wasn’t unscathed. A hard hit to his torso just under his guard had broken a rib, and the pain was startling, but not as sharp as Ed knew it should be. He’d broken bones before, specifically that rib, but while the pain packed a punch, it didn’t really cripple him either.

The man had true fighting skills.

Flashes of sparing sessions with Izumi and Al spiraled through Ed’s mind as he fought. The man only had one arm left, but he was managing to not only evade Ed, but counterattack as well. If it weren’t for the big match, Ed wasn’t sure he’d even have a chance.

The man hadn’t seemed to notice the differences of Ed’s limbs, apparently, his new improvements made his natural limbs fill just like his automail. If no one saw the metal, no one saw the difference.

But Ed had lived a few years with only one arm and one leg himself. He knew the limitations, and the knew the weaknesses. And that’s where he managed to get the upper hand.

Taking advantage of the opening in the man’s guard, Ed used his left fist to punch at the man’s side, knowing the man would block the blow, just as he aimed the match at the man’s head.

If the man blocked his punch, he’d die from the strike of the match to his head. Ed wasn’t surprised when the man didn’t even hesitate as he raised his left arm, throwing it into the path of the match and using the momentum to drive it slightly off target, avoiding his head by mere centimeters.

\textit{Crack!}

A scream of pain cut the still air of the night, and Ed backed away quickly as he watched the man’s hand broke and tore away from his arm. Blood flew as the hand landed limply on the field.

“I’ll kill you!” The stowaway screamed, all of his calm was gone in the face of pain and disbelief.

Ed didn’t even flinch, not bothering to speak at all as he raised the match to strike again. He was stopped in his tracks when the man suddenly threw his head back and began to laugh. The sound like something out of a horror movie. “You’re going to die. You’re all going to die! I’m the only one who can survive now!”

Ed followed the man’s gaze, looking up into the vast night sky.

The moonlight was dim and there were no stars visible in the city. A large black cloud drifted in the distance, blocking most of the moonlight, slowly taking away the natural light completely.

“Do you even know what my ability is? Did you think these were just ordinary flowers? They aren’t! My power is much stronger than the idiot who spits fire, or that mortal who had 100 bullets
per gun! My flowers have spent this entire time drawing in the essence of the moonlight. In a moment, the cloud will completely cover the moon and my flowers will finally bloom!”

Startled, Ed instantly turned to look at the flowers.

Connor had managed to destroy six of them, Violet taking out two, while the others, with a combined effort, had managed to destroy one.

There were only three flowers left.

As the dark cloud finally covered the moon completely, the flowers all began to tremble gently. Like something out of a cartoon, everyone heard it as the soft, pretty looking petals began to slowly bloom. The petals swaying evenly on the evening breeze. The more the petals opened, the deeper the purple color of the stamen became.

“Once my flowers finish blooming, you’ll all die! No one survives the flower’s poisonous gas! Only I will live!”

Ed ignored the insane man, rushing straight for one of the flowers instead. One quick strike –

Clang!

The rose shook, and Ed could see that he’d dented the stem a bit, but the match hadn’t broken the rose.

“You’re all going to die! Hahahahaha…”

The dark clouds moved, and Ed swung again, finally breaking the flower.

But it was too late.

“You’re all dead!”

By the time Ed made his way to another flower, it had almost completely bloomed. One last layer of petals covered the stamen, and the flower shone a deep, eye-catching purple that was clearly toxic.

Ed raised the match, ready to strike down on the flower when he paused. A dark fog had Ed’s eyes flicking up and he saw the one-armed man’s head nearly ingulfed with a faint layer of dark fog.

At that very moment, strong and persistent gusts of wind blew through the field, startling all of them. No one had time to even react when a pale stream of moonlight sliced through the dark, illuminating the field and slowly growing thicker.

The manic smile on the one-armed man’s face suddenly dropped. He looked up with wide, disbelieving eyes. “No! That’s impossible! How could-”

Ed looked at the man again and saw that the dark fog that had covered the man’s head had already dispersed, just like the wind had already blown the dark clouds covering the moon away. Once the moonlight reached the flowers again, the petals stopped dead. Ed didn’t hesitate, it took him two minutes to destroy the last two poisonous flowers.

The man had seen all of his flowers crumble and he turned on his heel to run.

He was knocked to the ground instantly when a small nail came flying at him from behind, stabbing right into the back of the man’s head and out through one of his eyes.
As the body dropped, Connor’s trembling voice echoed in the silence, “Is he… is he dead?”

Ed’s grip on the match relaxed, the tare in his jacket exposing a glint of his automail as he took a long deep breath. “Yeah. He’s dead.”

No one but Ed understood why the dark clouds covering the moon suddenly moved the way they did. They all believed it was nothing more than coincidence, but Ed knew better. When he’d drawn the circle before the battle, he hadn’t cursed the fire-breathing man or the sniper. He’d cursed the man they knew the least about.

It is easier to deal with the devil you know than the demons you don’t. With plans in place for the two men Violet had gotten information on, Ed had prepared a trump card just in case. It was a certainty that the ‘Draw a circle to curse you’ ability would work, or have any kind of advantageous effect. But the results spoke for themselves.

With their enemies dead, the students all instantly relaxed, the majority of them collapsing to the ground. Violet cradled the gun on her lap as she sat on the field. Despite the lack of ammo, she held the gun tight, like a life-line.

Slowly, the students began to gather together, joining forces to move the bodies of the three stowaways next to the two who’d died during the first ambush. They kicked at the five bodies, crying and screaming for the losses they’d suffered.

Mr. Li’s body was moved to the gym corridor with the other dead children, Li Wen taking the man there cradled in his arms.

The bodies all lay quiet and cold on the floor, and Ed wasn’t sure who’d cried first, but soon the sobs were echoing around the gym, bouncing off the wall like rubber balls and affecting every living being in the building.

Ed leaned against the far wall away from the children and Li Wen. Carefully, he pulled his backpack next to him and searched around in it for a moment before finding the sowing kit he’d packed earlier. With that in hand, he unzipped his favorite red jacket and peeled it off his body.

The silicon flesh sleeve was littered with cuts, exposing the hard glint of metal beneath, but Ed didn’t care about it enough to either fix it or pull the thing off. Instead, he threaded a thin red string into the needle and began to sew up the open patches in his jacket. It wasn’t the first time he’d done this kind of thing. Back when it was just him and Ed, after the death of their mother, Ed had taken care of them as best he could. With a serious lack of money and no way to work for it, they’d had to rely on the Rockbells more than Ed liked, but with simple things like this, mending clothes and fixing tools, Ed had become a practiced hand.

As the group of children gathered together, coming to terms with what they’d had to do, and the fear of what it meant for them, Ed thought about his brother. His past was riddled with more suffering than he knew what to do with. He’d had to make some terrible decisions since the loss of his mother, and he’d learned to adapt fast or die standing still.

These kids would learn that too.

--

“You know, this might not be the last time you’ll have to kill someone.”

The cold, calm voice had the chubby boy whirling around so fast he nearly threw himself off balance. He’d been throwing up against the outside guard building, and he hadn’t expected to be
found quite yet. When he turned to take in Ed’s sympathetic face, he sagged.

Ed effortlessly tossed the water bottle in his hand towards the pale boy, watching him catch it before he spoke again, “This world has changed. If you want to survive, you’ll have to grow up fast. Your ability is useful, with it, you can protect yourself and many people.”

Connor wiped at his mouth, swishing the water twice before spitting it out on the ground. When he looked up again, his eyes were terrified, thin lips trembling. It took him a long while to come to himself. Once he had enough control, he grit his teeth and hardened his eyes, “I know that if I hadn’t killed them, they would have killed me. I know that! It’s just… it’s hard to adapt. It’s hard to think like that.”

“I know. You’ll adapt slowly.” Ed gentled.

“Ed… were you this afraid when you killed someone for the first time?”

Connor knew that Ed had killed before. He just didn’t know that the person Ed had killed first was a stowaway as well. Quietly, Ed responded, “I was scared, yeah. But I was more afraid of dying than I was of killing someone else. I can’t let myself die yet. I have to find my brother first, have to know that he’s okay.”

Connor nodded dazedly.

Ed didn’t bother to say anything more as he turned and walked away.

If he had to choose between himself and anyone else, he wouldn’t hesitate to be the cause of the other person’s death.

As soon as he was sure he was out of Connor’s sight, Ed reached into the air and pulled out the slim leather book from its space. Turning the pages, it didn’t take long for him to find a new entry.

[Ability: The fires of Protgas D. Ace
Owner: Victor Tanner
Type: Atomic
Function: Spits a hot jet of flames from the mouth for 30 seconds at temperatures up to 961°C
Level: 2
Restrictions: Cooldown time – three minutes. Before use, you must place your hands on your hips and yell “Fire Fist Ace.”
Note: Victor said that all those who’ve seen his ability are dead, except for Edward.
Edward Version usage instructions: Can only be used once per day. The maximum temperature is 800°C. Before use, place both hands on your hips and roar “Fire Fist Ace”. I think this ability is very suitable for Edward. Now you have an ability to match your temper!]

Ed didn’t even bother being angry at this point. With a roll of his eyes, he closed the damn book and cursed under his breath.

“Would you like some water?” The soft female voice came from behind him, but Ed didn’t startle.

Quietly putting the book away, he turned to face the little girl.

Violet held out a bottle of water and a wrapped piece of bread. Ed took the bread, “I’ve got water, don’t worry about it.”

Violet nodded.
Connor had retreated back into the gym with everyone else, the only two left outside being Ed himself and Violet.

“They’re all asleep. Li Wen came back a little while ago, but he said he wouldn’t be able to sleep so I think he’s just wondering the ground of the school for the night.”

“I see.”

“Edward… I really want to thank you.”

Ed glanced to the short-haired girl standing beside him, but she wasn’t looking at him. Instead, her attention was up at the glowing moon in the sky, her face resolute and calm. “It’s not just for what you did today, I wanted to thank you for remembering my father. For coming to find me. I’d like to stay with my classmates. We’ll leave the school and see what the rest of the outside world is like.”

Ed’s eyebrow rose before he could stop it, and the words came unbidden. “Did you know I wanted to take you with me?”

“I guessed.” Violet nodded expressionlessly. She didn’t seem like a teenager at that moment. Instead, she felt much like Ed himself did. An adult in the body of a child, forced to grow and survive in a world that only wanted to see you fail. “But now… with Mr. Li gone and no one to look after them… I don’t want to leave them alone.”

And wasn’t that just something Ed could understand bone deep.

Looking carefully at the determined girl beside him, Ed didn’t say a word as he smiled. A small and sad thing.

He’d been hoping to take the little girl with him on the last legs of his journey to Central City. Not because it was what Zane would have wanted, or any kind of misguided notion of pity or protection. He’d simply wanted to introduce her to Al. She was clever and her ability was strong, and she reminded him a bit of himself… of Al. Hell, even Winry if he squinted.

She might not be strong physically, but she was more useful than Li Wen.

In an unknown and dangerous world, Ed wouldn’t have minded having a smart teammate along for the ride.

However, Mr. Li was dead and Violet deemed set on her course of action. While Ed felt a bit of regret for that, he wasn’t going to try to persuade her. Everyone had their own paths to take and he respected hers.

“Can I… Can I call you, Big Brother?”

Something inside Ed stilled at the little girl’s words. A cheerful, high voice seemed to ring in his head with those words: Big brother! Brother! Ed!

Fuck, he needed to find Al.

“You can if you want to,” Ed agreed, breathlessly.

The little girl suddenly laughed, a smile pulling at her lips and revealing a set of dimples that seemed to brighten her entire expression. And there, Ed no longer had to squint to see Winry in this girl. “You’ll be leaving tomorrow, right? I hope we can meet again in the future. When that time comes, I’ll be stronger. Big Brother, thank you.”
Ed’s mouth fell open, his mind scrambling for something to say when a deep, magnetic voice sounded from within his head.

(… Am I interrupting something?)

Ed’s eyes widened as he recognized the voice almost instantly.

Violet, being the sharp little girl she was, noticed instantly. “Brother Ed? What’s wrong?”

The little girl was calling him ‘brother’ very familiarly, and by her voice, it was clear she was young. Usually, the words wouldn't bother Ed all that much, he was used to being called ‘Brother’ or ‘Big brother’ by Al ever since they were children, but after the phrase ‘Am I interrupting something?’ Ed couldn’t help the blush that heated his face.

Before he could, the other person spoke again. (I’m sorry for bothering you. I’ll call again next time.)

Ed couldn’t help it, he instantly blurted out, “It isn’t what you think!”

Violet recoiled at the loud call, but her look of confusion and concern was back in seconds. “Big brother?”

Ed wanted to laugh helplessly at the entire situation, but instead, he forced his face to calm, though he could do nothing for his erratic heart. “Go back inside first. I’ll keep watch with Li Wen.”

Violet eyed him suspiciously before seeming to come to a conclusion on her own. She didn’t bother to ask again as he quickly turned and made her way back into the gym.

Ed pulled out the white turkey egg from his pocket and frowned at it. Sure enough, the egg was shining a faint gold.

He glared at the thing in his hand. “Flame? Your voice is in my head, this is different than the last time we talked, but that’s not important right now. What's wrong?”

Chapter End Notes

Okay guys, I missed Wednesday, but here is a Friday update.

It's come to my attention that I can't write this story and edit it myself, I just don't have that kind of time if I want to keep to the scheduled twice a week updates. With that said, I need someone to help me.

I've got this story on Google Docs, and if I get one or two betas to agree to it, I'll share an edit link with them and they will get to read the story as it goes as well as edit and correct any mistakes you see me making from place names, to character names, and just about anything else I don't catch. This is important because I need someone who will be able to do it consistantly.

Also, you'll get to read it as I go, so no real waiting for chapters. Since I write a little nearly every day, it'll be fun and easy for you to keep up!

Let me know on the comments if you're interested on helping me finish this little tale,
or message me on Tumblr, my account name is Ashrelfury.

Thank you guys! Now enjoy this super long ass chatper. And please ignore the mistakes. I'll fix them when I get the chance I promise.
Chapter 20 – Game Save, Game Load

Ed tried to listen carefully and attentively, but he could only hear the faint sounds of rustling in his mind.

The sounds were so slight they were hardly noticeable, but it was still strange. It wasn’t like wind or leaves, but a bit like static from the old black and white TVs Ed heard as a child.

Since the start of the Black Tower game, all electronic appliances had lost their signals. TVs, computers, cell phones, all of them became no more useful than paperweights. No one could use any kind of electronic device, let alone an old-fashioned black and white TV.

“The sound is coming from inside your head?”

Rather than a direct answer, Flame responded with a question. For some reason, that made Ed smirk. “Yes. I hear you in my head.”

“Maybe it’s because I contacted you using a different method.” The static grew louder in his ears, and Ed struggled to listen carefully. For some reason, he heard the sounds of metal collisions. Despite that, the other man’s voice was unusually calm. “I didn’t tap the egg three times.”

And wasn’t that just as strange as this entire conversation so far? They’d run multiple tests on the eggs the day they received them, and there had been no other way to initiate contact with each other than the tapping.

Ed was tempted to say so, but the only words he got out were, “You mean...” before he was cut off completely.

“I want to use the egg’s function. Mr. Ed, I’ve unfortunately entered a very strange Black Tower game, and I would rather not get into any specifics, but I don’t feel confident that I can win this game on the first try. Therefore, I want to use this prop to help me succeed in the end.”

Ed wasn’t stupid, he could understand what the other person was getting at, but the sheer implication of what he was holding was making his mind stutter. Obviously, his silence was enough to push the man into giving away the most important nugget of information Ed had probably ever gotten in his life. “This egg is called Momo, and it is a game archiver. If you’ve ever played games like RPGs, you should know what a save point is.”

Fuck!

Holy fuck!
Ed didn’t expect any kind of prop to have such a rare and coveted function!

Many single player role playing games had a saving capacity that allowed players to document and save game progress at any time. After saving, the player would be able to quit the game for a time, before loading the saved file back up when they wanted to continue. It had the ability to shorten wasted game time, as well as respawn a player in case of death.

For a moment, Ed wasn’t sure what to say. He had questions - oh fucking so many questions - but he knew he had to play this calmly. Flame wouldn’t give up information like this for nothing. There had to be a reason he was telling Ed any of this, as well as asking him for help. He just had to figure out the man’s angle.

Ed took a minute to calm himself down before he tried to speak again. “What are the restrictions?”

The Black Tower wouldn’t just give the players an unlimited save point. There would be restrictions, and Ed wasn’t sure if they were a price worth paying.

Flame seemed to have anticipated him though, because the reply came swiftly. “There are three limitations. First, it can only be used once every seven days for each of us. Second, the save time is restricted to one hour, and it is limited to Black Tower games only. It records one hour after activation, but after that, it no longer works. The third reason is why I’m contacting you now.”

Okay, now it made more sense. “Explain.”

“To use Momo, the owners of both props have to open the function. This means neither one of us can open it alone.” There was a pause, almost a hesitation. “Mr. Ed, the only way to activate the archive function is to draw an ‘S’ on the turkey egg. First, the one who’ll use it, and then the other owner.”

Ed couldn’t hold back his smirk if he tried, which he honestly didn’t. Now he understood why the man was offering so much information for free. He needed Ed.

“When do you need to open the archiver?” There was no use beating around the bush. If Ed hoped to use this function in the future himself, he needed to cooperate. And if this was his Flame… all the better.

The man actually paused this time. Not a mere hesitation, but a full five-second pause. Apparently, he hadn’t expected Ed to be so forward. After a moment, he whispered softly, “Now. if you wouldn’t mind.”

Not knowing if the automail would work on the prop, Ed held the turkey egg in his right hand and drew an ‘S’ on the white egg shell with the index finger of his left.

The moment his skin pulled away from the shell, the letter began to flash gold on the surface of the white egg. Slowly, the gold turned to blue and flashed three times. If Ed had to guess, he’d say that the archive function was now open.

“During the archiving period, both owners will be forced to keep the connection open. I’m sorry, but I’m afraid you’ll be stuck hearing my voice for the next hour.”

Ed wasn’t sure how much he actually minded, but it wasn’t much. Flame had a deep, smooth voice that was actually rather pleasant to listen to. With the kids still sleeping in the gym and Li Wen having retreated not too long ago, Ed was walking the campus alone, his steps crunching down on fallen leaves. It wouldn’t be a big deal to listen to Flame’s game progress for an hour as he walked.
Even so, Ed let his teasing nature take one last dig at the man. “Mr. Flame, I believe you failed to warn me of that in advance.”

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In a vast and endless white-washed world, the sky mirrored the ground, making the world seem far more vast and endless than Roy was sure it was. Littered all over the ground were piles and piles of household appliances: old washing machines, sewing machines, radios, and hundreds of old television screens flashing black and white static. The noise was actually starting to get to Roy, if the drag in his movements were any indication.

The tall, handsome man moved between piles of vintage appliances, a white turkey egg held in his left hand at chest level, the small ‘S’ character shining blue on the pure white shell.

The second Roy heard Ed’s teasing words, he nearly ground to a halt. Lifting an eyebrow, one corner of his mouth involuntarily twitching up, Roy nearly snorted.

“I didn’t exactly know about the restriction until the archive was activated.”

The lilting young voice didn’t give him any quarter. “Still, you’re kinda cutting into my beauty sleep.”

This time, he couldn’t help it - Roy started to laugh. Despite the tension that had filled him when he’d entered this game, the other player’s voice brought a feeling of lightness Roy really wasn’t expecting. There was a familiarity to this Ed, and that wasn’t something Roy found very often.

Putting the egg back in his pocket, Roy tried not to think of Riza. Of Maes.

--

Ed heard the laugh and smiled, putting the egg back inside the pocket of his hoodie as he continued his walk, his focus fully on the strange sounds that seemed to echo in his head. Sometimes, he would hear the incessant chatter of sewing machines, or even the dull thumping Ed recognized from when he’d washed his and Al’s sneakers in the washing machine at the Rockbell’s, instead of at home over the tank like his mother used to. Even with all of the strange and familiar noises, Ed didn’t question it, and Flame didn’t offer an explanation.

While his words about cutting into Ed’s sleep had been an attempt to tease the stranger, it was also a clear message: You owe me for this.

Ed had no doubt that he’d need a save point during one of his own games, if what he’d seen of the Black Tower so far was anything to go by, and giving this to the stranger now would ensure that he would get the same courtesy back later.

20 minutes passed in their odd version of a peaceful silence before Ed made a full circuit of the campus, ending right back where he started, sitting on the steps of the library and looking at the reflection of the crescent moon on the surface of a small pond to the library’s left.

Flame had 40 minutes left.

Ed doubted he could even attempt to sleep with the sounds of someone else’s adventures in his head, but what would he do to pass the time?

He didn’t have long to contemplate before something seemed to change on the other side of their connection. Five minutes later, the sounds of a fierce and violent fight captured all of Ed’s
attention.

Huddling into his knees, hands over his ears to see if he could focus better on the sounds coming from the other end, Ed tried to breathe deep.

There was the clang of metal hitting metal, but the sounds came too fast. There wasn’t more than 0.5 seconds between each attack. And if Ed wasn’t mistaken, there were multiple things attacking Flame. Five minutes of endless fighting later, and Ed couldn’t hear if Flame was struggling. Ten minutes, and he finally heard the sounds of small gasps and panting.

Countless times, Ed heard heavy objects hit the floor, implying that Flame had already taken down many enemies, but still the attacks never stopped.

Ed wanted to speak, wanted to ask if the man was okay, but he knew how stupid that would be. In a fight like the one he was listening to right now, he couldn’t afford to distract Flame in any way. It could be the difference between Flame’s death and his survival.

Ed didn’t notice, but his breathing began to match Flame’s, the heavy drag of air seeming just as hard for him as it was for the other man. Ed counted the minutes like clockwork.

55 minutes had passed since the save point.

Ed bit his lip, closed his eyes, and straightened, listening carefully to the fight happening somewhere he couldn’t help. He couldn’t step in. He was helpless. Just like before - just like with Al.

But this wasn’t the same. Ed could tell early on that Flame was strong. If he managed to get the turkey egg, then he had to be. But to fight non-stop for nearly half an hour? There were probably hundreds of enemies, but he hung on.

He was stronger than Izumi.

*Boom!*

Ed jolted, shocked by the sudden explosion. If he’d been startled, then what about Flame, who’d actually had to face it?

“I… I can’t hold on…” The familiar voice was hoarse and strained, and Ed had to grit his teeth for a second.

“There’s still one minute left until the save point deadline! Load it, quickly!”

“It’s too late.”

“Fuck!” Ed screamed into his hands at those words, and bit his left palm as the voice in his head suddenly disappeared.

Scrambling for his pocket, Ed pulled out the turkey egg and examined it. The ‘S’ had disappeared, and it was no longer flashing blue. Before he could even think to tap the egg to try and initiate a connection, the egg began to glow in his hand. Ed felt his breath hitch.

“Fuck. I failed. I had to reload the file.”

Ed wasn’t even sure he’d been breathing, but the burn in his chest let him know that at least now he’d taken a breath. Everything had happened in what seemed like seconds, and Ed distinctly
Remembered the sound of the man’s hoarse voice not even minutes ago.

Now, it sounded normal. Calm, low… familiar.

Ed could feel his temper rising on the heels of his terror. “God fucking damnit! Flame! You said you were too late to load the file!” He was screaming, he knew he was screaming, but he wasn’t really able to stop himself at the moment.

The fact that the man on the other end of the line sounded so fucking normal wasn’t helping him much. “You need to draw an ‘S’ on the egg to save a file, and an ‘L’ to load it. I was fighting one of the Black Tower monsters, and it took me by surprise how much stronger it was than the others. There was less than a minute left. After that, trying to load the file would have been useless.”

Ed wanted to growl and scream some more, but he was more aware of the quiet night around him and the students sleeping in the next building over than he had been before.

Closing his eyes and gripping at the long strands of blond hair still braided at the back of his neck, Ed tried to calm down. “You didn’t get the chance to load the file, then? How did you…”

“There’s another way to load the file,” the voice intoned so fucking calmly it had Ed squeezing his eyes shut, left hand over his face. “After the game archiver is opened, if you die within the allotted hour, the file will load automatically. So I killed myself.”

Ed… had nothing to say.

To kill himself with no hesitation in an emergency situation… Ed wasn’t sure he’d be able to do the same thing. Maybe if Al’s life was on the line, maybe if it would save someone else, but…

“You wasted an hour because of me. I’m sorry. Are you still busy?”

All of the anger that had filled Ed’s chest to near boiling was gone as he allowed his head to drop back. There were still no stars to be seen, but the moon shone brightly. “It’s okay. It doesn’t matter.” This favor would be repaid in the future. Of that, Ed was sure.

“I was just playing the second floor of the Tower Attack game.” The man’s low voice was almost soothing, despite speaking words that almost made Ed choke on his own tongue. “Once a player’s strength reaches a certain level, you’ll be forced to open the Tower Attack game. There are probably other ways to open a Tower Attack game, but I’m not sure of them yet.”

For some, that would be a small amount of throwaway information. For Ed and Flame, it was more. With the words ‘second floor of the Tower Attack Game’, Ed could suddenly take a guess as to who Flame really was.

And the moment that thought came, so did the low, magnetic voice, a hint of an imperceptible smile tilting the edges. “Hello, Ed. My name is Roy Mustang.”

And just like that, the connection was cut.

Ed sat like a statue on the stairs to the library, calmly taking in the white turkey egg in his hand.

Roy Mustang.

The stowaway Roy Mustang.

When he’d opened the first floor of the Tower Attack game in Amestris, every player dragged into
the tower had cursed his name. If possible, they’d wanted revenge on the man.

Even Li Wen had joked a while ago that if he ever met Roy Mustang in person, he was going to punch the man in the face.

After loading the saved game file, Roy Mustang had said he would find a way to leave the game. At his current level, he couldn’t clear the second floor, so he had to temporarily give up.

Mustang had offered up a lot of free information this time.

Ed knew that it wasn’t because the man wanted to become friends all of a sudden. If anything, the way Roy had said ‘you wasted an hour’ was probably the whole reason for the sudden spilling of secrets.

Because of Mustang, Ed now knew that if a person’s strength reached a certain level, they would be forced into the next level of the Tower Attack game. Mustang hadn’t opened the first floor voluntarily. He, like everyone else, had been pretty much dragged into it.

But no other players had been forced into the second floor of the Attack game, only Mustang. Ed thought there were possibly two explanations for that.

The first possibility was that the Black Tower had a special scenario for the player who opened the Attack game first. It would broadcast the beginning of the game globally, and pull everyone from the entire area in to attack the tower. Secondly, Roy Mustang was the only player in Amestris to clear the first floor. There could be no one but him with the requirements needed to attack the second floor. Therefore, no other players were able to be pulled in.

All of this information was important, if not completely useful to him at the moment.

Ed stared at the still, dark water of the pond as he finally allowed himself to contemplate. If everyone in Amestris had been pulled into the first floor Tower Attack game, then it meant Al had been too. Hell, even Winry, if she was still…. No. He had to believe they were both alive. He had no other option.

If the goal of the handicapped level of the first floor was just to ‘survive’, then Ed was sure Al could manage it. Despite the scars and burns that covered quite a bit of his skin, Al wasn’t weak. Years of physical therapy, and then more years of martial arts training, had given Al his body back in a way Ed never could have. He’d always been worried and guilty about what had happened, but it had been Izumi who’d pulled both young boys from their pit of despair and suffering.

And Winry…

Winry was strong. She would survive. She might not be a genius like Ed and Al, but she was more than smart enough for any game. She would survive, and she would make her way to them.

But what about Pinako? The old bag was a genius, but… she wasn’t as strong as she used to be.

Unbidden, he thought of Hohenheim.

Damn, the old bastard was probably alive and thriving in this kind of world.

Fuck him. Ed wouldn’t waste any more time thinking about the man who’d walked out on him and his family.

Sighing deeply and pushing himself to his feet, Ed made his way back to the gym. After an entire
night of fighting, Ed needed some sleep, and he took it.

He slept until eight the next morning and still managed to wake up before the middle school students. The poor kids slept until noon, but from Ed’s point of view, they deserved the rest. They haven’t felt safe in a long time, and Ed knew that feeling intimately.

Somewhere around two in the afternoon, Ed and Li Wen made their way to the school’s food hall to pick up some water and something to eat. When the students woke up, Ed offered them some food.

It was late into the afternoon when Ed and Li Wen were ready to leave.

It seemed to take many of the students by surprise - the chubby boy, Connor, most of all. “Ed, Brother Wen, you’re not staying with us?”

Violet knew the score and she stood aside, quiet and watching as several students voiced their complaints about being abandoned.

Li Wen seemed to hesitate, a clear guilt overtaking his face, but Ed remained calm. He had a mission - he needed to find his brother. Nothing else was as important as that. “You’re a group of five now. Two official players and three reserves. You’re all students. To everyone else, you’re easy targets, and if you hang around me or Ed, it will only get worse.”

The students were stunned at Li Wen’s speech.

Ed finally decided to speak. “There are two ways you can play this. All five of you don’t need to stick together, especially since all five of you will look like a herd of sheep to a hungry wolf. The two official players should separate. Connor and the two boys in one group, and Rina with Violet. Stick to the edges of whatever is left of society and keep each other safe.”

Rina was the first to protest. “I- I don’t want to be separated from everyone!”

Violet stepped up beside her, a gentle hand on her shoulder to calm her. “Big Brother has a point. All five of us together is far more conspicuous than a group of two or three. By my estimation, the largest group of players in the world at the moment are reserve players, not stowaways. But the further into this game we go, murder and killing isn’t going to be something exclusive to stowaways anymore. We’ve all killed now. It’ll be far more dangerous for five middle school students to try to stick together. We’ll rest for the day, and go our separate ways tomorrow.”

The students all listened to Violet, her wisdom having saved most of them so far, and they were still willing to trust her words. Still, the lot of them were obviously uncomfortable with the thought of separating. In the end, they all had to make their own decisions.

Before leaving, Ed crouched beside Violet. Their height difference wasn’t much, but Ed tried his best to ignore that as he spoke softly. “I’m going to find my brother in Central City. I don’t know where you’re planning to go, but in about 10 days, I’ll try to come back to the school and look around if I get the chance.” Ed didn’t have the strength to protect these kids forever. The only way for them to survive at all was if they could learn to rely on themselves.

Ed and Li Wen stood by the school gates, waving a quick goodbye to the children as they finally made their way out.

Li Wen still seemed reluctant to leave the kids by themselves, but he also wanted to go home and find out what had happened to his own family. If he started trying to protect those kids now, he would be doing it until the day he died, and Ed knew the other man was smart enough to at least
realize that.

A while after they’d left the school, Li Wen couldn’t hold his tongue anymore. “Ed, you ended up coming back late last night. Around 3 or 4 in the morning, right? What were you doing outside for so long?”

Ed’s eyebrows rose, but his voice was casual when he answered. “I wanted to keep watch. To make sure those kids got a good night’s sleep. It may be the last time they’ll be able to sleep so peacefully.” It was the best excuse he could come up with. He wasn’t about to tell anyone about the prop that connected him to Roy fucking Mustang.

His answer had the advantage of making Li Wen fall into a contemplative silence. It didn’t last as long as Ed had hoped it would. Within minutes of walking, Li Wen started to chatter happily about his family and his experiences. The excited talk seemed to be never-ending, but all too soon, it slowed, tapering off into trembling murmurs. His pace slowed, until he’d nearly stopped in his tracks.

Ed glanced at him, silent and understanding.

The other man was trying to keep calm, but it was obvious that he was worried about his family. About what he would do if he came home to an empty house.

They walked for a good two hours before arriving at a high-end neighborhood. Ed surveyed the large expensive villas with a blank face.

It wasn’t hard to tell that they were getting closer to Li Wen’s house, because the man’s back became stiffer and stiffer as they made their way through the neighborhood.

In the end, they made it to a large, three-story villa when Li Wen’s steps stopped completely - stilling as if refusing to move any closer.

The two of them stood right in front of the big iron gate blocking the large yard.

Li Wen didn’t know if he’d see his parents, or if the house would be empty. He didn’t know which one he wanted more.

Ed was heading to the University Research Center in Luza before making his way to Central City, hoping to find hints or information on any other research centers stationed in Central. Accompanying Li Wen didn’t seem like a big deal, but Ed knew that he needed to keep his instincts sharp. They needed to be on guard against stowaways, or any dangerous players. Two people traveling together was certainly better than walking alone.

Li Wen stood in front of the gate, hand held out as if to touch it, but Ed saw that hand tremble, never moving closer.

Struggling with his impatience, Ed reached out quickly and grabbed onto the iron lock on the gate. In a flash, he yanked the lock down, pushing the large gates open. “There aren’t any traps, then. If we can make it to the front door just fine, there shouldn’t be any stowaways in the house.”

Li Wen stared blankly at Ed. After a long moment, he nodded slowly. “Yeah. There shouldn’t be any danger…”

Ed didn’t wait any longer. He pushed at Li Wen’s back, getting the man moving up the long drive to the villa’s front doors. When the other man didn’t protest, Ed understood. While some things needed to be faced, it wasn’t easy to accept that stark truth.
Just from the look of the front of the villa, both Ed and Li Wen could take a guess as to the number of occupants inside.

“Be careful. Just in case there are any real enemies in there,” Ed muttered, sympathy filling his chest.

With a glance at the blank-faced Li Wen, Ed balanced on his right leg and used his automail one to kick open the thick mahogany door.

With a loud, echoing *Bang!*, the door fell inward, a light layer of dust rising up.

Emptiness and quiet surrounded them as they eased inside, and once they were sure there were no traps, Li Wen took off up the stairs, shouting for his parents.

There was no answer.

Ed watched from the door, standing by the entrance and gritting his teeth against his own sympathetic pain. Hohenheim had walked away not two years after Alphonse was born, and his mom had died nearly seven years later. The only people he had left in his life were Al and Winry.

He could empathise with people leaving you, if nothing else.

Li Wen dashed through the house, calling out again with every new door he opened, his voice growing desperate.

Ed listened, his gaze turning towards the front yard.

Suddenly, there was a shout of clear and bright excitement that nearly had Ed jumping out of his boots. “She’s alive! My mother is still alive!”

Ed quickly turned back to the foyer, watching Li Wen run down the grand staircase, taking two steps at a time. There was a note clenched in his fist, his face filled with hope and joy, his body trembling slightly with relief. “Ed, my mother is still alive. Look! My mother’s alive! Mom said that Dad suddenly disappeared, and there was no signal coming from any of the landlines or her mobile. Luza was going completely insane, so she planned to return to her hometown to avoid the worst of it. If I’m still alive, I should go find her there. Ed, my mother is still alive!”

Ed’s smile came easily, and he laughed as Li Wen suddenly hugged him. “Congratulations!”

Li Wen’s excitement was overflowing, but just as quickly as it came, it seemed to seep away. “My father disappeared…”

Ed didn’t let that thought last for long. “Go and find your mother first. Worry about that after.”

Li Wen bowed his head, accepting the advice for what it was. After a small moment of silence, the other man gripped the paper in his hand tighter and nodded.

This is where their paths would veer off from each other’s. Ed had already known and expected it. Yet, just like with Violet, he regretted them having to go their separate ways. Li Wen’s hometown was, surprisingly, in Rush Valley. Now that he knew that his mother was still alive, he’d have to make his way to South Region.

Ed was tempted to tell the man about Winry. Describe her to him, so that if there was a chance, they could help each other.
But… no.

This is where they would part ways, and Ed wasn’t sure he’d ever see Li Wen again.

Together, they looked at the detailed map of Luza that Ed had taken from the newspaper kiosk when he’d gotten into town. They each drew up a likely path, Ed continuing to Central City and Li Wen making his way down to South Region. And from there, Rush Valley.

“The university is closer to the outer edges of Central City, so it’s between Luza and Central. There’s no train running to the university anymore, so you’ll have to walk up from Vizo Bridge and pass over here…”

Ed nodded, memorizing the route with ease before passing the map to Li Wen. He took a moment to really look at this foolish, sweet, little rich boy.

Li Wen stared back. Quiet rang between them, and Li Wen was the first to break it. With a smile, he said, “I’m too weak right now. I’ll only drag you down if I try to follow you around. I’m going to go see my mother first, and I’ll get stronger. Ed… I hope we have a chance to see each other again.”

Yeah… Ed hoped so, too. “Thank you. I hope we meet again, at some point.”

Li Wen smiled. “Shouldn’t I be the one thanking you? It’s a shame I’m so stupid. If I get trapped in a game that requires intellect and wisdom, I don’t know if I’ll survive. I really need to thank you for the past few days.”

Ed didn’t argue. With a hand shake, the two finally said their goodbyes and turned away, each one headed to a separate destination.

Ed needed to find a way into the Tower Research University just outside of Central. If Al wasn’t there, then there would be information on where each researcher was. And with any luck, there would be information on the Tower Event itself.

With Ed being as short as he was, he knew he looked like an easy target, especially since he was traveling alone. With that in mind, he shouldered his backpack and kept to the edges of the streets, hiding himself in the shadows as much as he could.

It was coming on late evening, and there were significantly less people out on the streets. After the game began, the world’s most-populated cities longer thrived at night. In fact, night was the most dangerous time of the day. More places to hide, and too many people to be wary of. No one wanted to be out without shelter in the late evenings.

Ed walked for nearly an hour before he finally caught sight of the Vizo Bridge. He paused for a moment.

There was no way to know if there was anyone hiding around the corner, and at this point, it wasn’t just stowaways who posed a danger. Everyone, regardless of player status, would mostly likely only be out for themselves. It was something Ed hoped that the kids could keep in mind. To trust anyone at this point was a shot in the dark.

Ed found an unknown fast-food restaurant nearer to the bridge. Making sure to do a little recon, he found it open and unlocked. It was the best he’d find at the moment.

Not bothering to even try the lights, Ed closed the door and pushed a large table in front of it easily. The windows were unable to be opened, but he couldn’t help the fact that there were two entire
walls of them. He doubted he’d sleep through someone breaking the glass to get in, so he didn’t bother with being too worried. The fact that the windows were frosted glass was more a boon than just about anything else.

Pulling off his red hoodie, Ed laid it out on the corner of the floor across from the two walls of windows. Situating his backpack so that he can recline on it, Ed settled down.

Official players had many things going for them in this new world, and one of them was the increase in strength and stamina, but there was also the mild imperviousness. Despite it being a late autumn night, Ed didn’t feel the cold, nor did the hard ground bother him much at all.

If he were honest, he would admit that he didn’t even need to sleep. The entire reason he’d stopped to rest at the fast-food joint was to keep from venturing out at night. It was unnecessarily dangerous.

It’d been four days since the game started, and throughout those days, Ed had gotten smarter, calmer. He was starting to understand his situation, and taking chances like walking alone at night wasn’t something Ed could afford. He needed to find Al, but he trusted now that if Al was alive, he would keep himself alive long enough for Ed to get to him.

Still, Ed knew that he wasn’t the only one beginning to understand this dangerous new world. After these past four days, whatever sort of morality that used to exist for most of the civilian population of the world was now lessened, if not completely eradicated.

The likelihood of anyone and everyone in this new world having blood on their hands was undeniable.

Now that he had a bit of time on his hands, Ed peeled off his sleeveless black shirt. It would be the first time he’d actually been able to take in what had been done to his automail and his ports.

Examining the port at his shoulder, Ed was surprised to find that the synthetic silicon sleeve wouldn’t peel away from his skin. The port had truly merged with his skin, his bones and nerves. All of the cuts and scratches to the sleeve were still gaping holes showing the bright silver flash of metal underneath.

Ed paused only a moment to think about it before he pulled out a small kit from his backpack, and took out a small pair of scissors from the cloth-wrapped plastic box. Carefully, he cut away the silicon sleeve at his shoulder. When he peeled it off, he finally saw the automail underneath for the first time since all of this had begun.

He wasn’t a mechanic, but he’d learned enough from Winry to give himself a general check-up. What he found was surprising.

Below the plates of metal, Ed could see the wires making up the nerve-endings Winry had invented, but right along with them were other thin tendrils of malleable tissue. Like veins, or human nerves. Only, as Ed poked and prodded at them with one of the thin screwdrivers, he felt the touch but no pain.

He wasn’t sure what that meant, and he wasn’t sure what the consequences of this new development was, but accepting it wasn’t hard. For the first time since Ed was a child, it no longer felt like he was missing a limb. His automail, that had once felt cold and heavy and foreign, wasn’t any longer. The changes in his body have made it a part of him more intimately than even his old limbs had been.
When Ed pulled up the left cuff of his black jeans and checked his metal leg, he found the same results.

For now, he would leave it alone. Winry would know more. Biomechanics required more knowledge than just robotics.

As Ed put the plates back into place, he thought about everything he’d done since all of this had started.

Even Ed had killed. Two people so far, but that number would only increase.

Ian Banks. Victor Tanner.

How many names would be added to the list before the end of this?

Did it even matter?

“Stowaways…”

Ed pulled out the turkey egg from his backpack’s left-side pocket and examined it again. It was too dark to see anything but shadows.

“Stowaway Roy Mustang… who did he kill?”

Despite what he knew of stowaways, Ed wasn’t afraid of Roy Mustang. Even though every player in Amestris wanted his head on a platter, Ed couldn’t find it in himself to think of the man as a villain.

Ed gently tapped on the turkey egg. Once, twice… He was about to do it a third time when he stopped, his finger still raised in midair. Closing his eyes, he wrapped his flesh hand around the egg before placing it inside the pocket of his jacket underneath him.

Flame…

Was Roy Mustang the same ‘Flame’ that Ed knew? If he was, what would that mean? What would it matter?

Ed had admitted to himself a long time ago that he didn’t love Winry. He’d been sure that, other than family, he couldn’t really ‘love’ at all. And then he’d started messaging Flame.

There was something odd about the other man, something magnetic and understated. Flame had the kind of mind that not only kept up with Ed’s own, but also challenged him. Nearly two years of correspondence, and Ed had found something he’d never thought he’d have.

Leaning back a bit more onto the backpack under his upper body, Ed allowed himself to sleep.

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Early the next day, Ed left the food joint cautiously, continuing to make his way to the Tower Research University Center. It wasn’t the Central City University, but it would have the information that Ed would need.

On the way, Ed met a young man who took the initiative to strike up a conversation. It was obvious the young man thought Ed was a fellow university student, and was excited to find someone his age to talk to about the situation.
Ed had to stop himself from punching the boy. He didn’t trust this kind of excited, puppy-like person. The world had no room for people like this anymore.

And at that thought, Ed suddenly felt jaded.

He thought he’d been bitter and cautious before, but now he was inevitably worse.

Earlier, as soon as he’d gotten off Vizo Bridge, Ed had caught sight of two bodies lying on the ground.

Their throats had been slashed, and they’d been thrown under the bridge, stripped of their clothes and their bags ransacked. From the look of them, they’d died only last night.

No, Ed internally sighed, he was just fine the way he was. After all, he wasn’t one of those bodies below the bridge. With the sight of the bodies though, the kid who’d been following him finally made himself scarce. Ed couldn’t help sighing in relief.

It didn’t take Ed long to follow the route he’d drawn up with Li Wen’s help, and just as he moved to cut through one of the university’s surrounding communities, he saw an old man carrying a large, black plastic bag over his shoulder coming out from behind one of the houses. The second the old man saw Ed entering the community, he looked surprised. Then, with wide eyes and a sudden excitement in his movements, he turned on his heel and hurried back from where he’d come.

Ed frowned.

Well, that was an odd reaction.

It didn’t take long for Ed to figure it out, though. The moment he entered the community proper, he understood why the man had looked so surprised.

The community was large, and divided into east and west areas by the paved road between them. Ed kept to the west side, keeping a wary eye on his surroundings. There were six high-rise apartment complexes between smaller housing units - not unusual for a university town. The thing Ed hadn’t been expecting was the six corpses lying in the center of the community garden.

Carefully, Ed came up to the bodies, examining them solemnly. None of them were familiar, not that he’d actually expected them to be. There were two middle-aged men, a young woman, and three young men. Ed wasn’t sure why or how they’d died here, but he did notice that these people had likely been dead for a little over 24 hours.

From what he could gather, they all seemed to have died in a strange way. The middle-aged man had a large kitchen knife in his hand, and the young woman had a small puddle of water under her right hand. One of the young men had a dark, bloody hole in the middle of his chest, but there was no weapon nearby.

In Ed’s opinion, the woman had been hacked to death by the kitchen knife, while the young man had been killed by an ability of some kind.

From the injuries, there was a 70% chance that these six people had all killed each other. Of course, the possibility that there might have been more people involved in the fight apart from these six was high, but only these six had died here.

Ed observed the six bodies intently, but he never stopped keeping a keen eye on his surroundings. Ed doubted that these were the only people still in this community. It was very possible that others
were hiding nearby, waiting for their own chance to strike.

Slowly, Ed crouched, picking up the middle-aged man’s kitchen knife and taking note of the width and size. When he brought it up against the young woman’s injuries to compare them, Ed grit his teeth. The blade fit perfectly. This man had in fact killed the woman. Or, if not, taken the weapon from the person who’d done it. But Ed doubted that explanation as much as he doubted the possibility that he was alone.

Ed stood back up, tossing the knife back on the man’s body. He didn’t want to analyze the situation anymore. He had all the answers he needed. Instead, he looked around, fingering the match tattoo on his left wrist.

The match had been a gift from the students, insisting that none of them were actually strong enough to make good use of the prop. They also insisted that the match was a show of their gratitude, and Ed wasn’t about to turn away a good weapon.

Moving quickly, Ed made his way out of the community and finally found an entrance to the university. The doors were locked, but it didn’t take much effort to break in.

Despite the university in Luza being used as a Black Tower Research Base, it was a small school. Unlike the middle school campus, the university was specialized, and catered to students going into the military. It was one of five universities that focused solely on training soldiers.

Ed didn’t doubt that the one in Central City was larger and more extensive in their course selection.

Ed wasn’t sure what he’d find inside, but he had to stay on alert. There was no telling if anyone had taken up residence in the university building, and no way of knowing if any of its students had survived so far.

In the end, the university was empty.

Research papers were scattered about certain rooms, and machines that no longer beeped or shone stood like silent sentinels casting odd shadows against the pearl white floors. Ed didn’t bother searching the whole place. It was no use. He needed specific information, and it didn’t take him too long to find it.

In a cabinet in a locked room on the top floor, Ed found a set of personnel folders.

It took him four seconds to zero in on the name: Elric, Alphonse.

Ed pulled it out and began to read.

*Promising lead researcher. Young, but very bright. Alphonse seems to have ideas and theories that later prove to be correct. We’ve transferred him a total of eight times in the last six months. He seems to work well in any atmosphere, and motivates his fellow students admirably. He’s been placed in Central City next to another promising student, Russell Tringham.*

Ed didn’t bother reading any more. Confirming that Al was in Central was enough, and if nothing else, he had someone else to look for if Al wasn’t there. Russell Tringham.

He’d never heard Al mention the other student-researcher, but that wasn’t a surprise. All of Al’s calls and messages had been monitored ever since he’d entered the research team as an assistant.

Not caring about any other personnel files, Ed shut the cabinet and went in search of something else.
He didn’t find it.

Whatever information the military had on the Black Tower must have been digital-only. There wasn’t even one piece of paper that contained the words ‘Black Tower’ together anywhere in the research lab. Even the documents Ed did manage to find had thick black lines covering around two-thirds of the words, and he couldn’t make heads or tails out of any of it.

Sighing in disappointment and more-or-less annoyance, Ed made his way back out of the university.

To get back onto the main road that would take him into Central City, Ed had to cross the same community he’d gone through before, and for some reason, the thought unnerved him. More on-edge than he was the first go-around, Ed made his way back into the community of university housing buildings.

The entire area was dead still and breathlessly silent. Not even the wind blew, and that was eerie enough to have Ed’s hackles up.

Just as he caught sight of the large center garden where the bodies still lay, Ed stopped dead as he caught sight of a familiar person.

The old man who’d dashed out from behind one of the buildings like a whack-a-mole was sitting on the stairs of one of the apartment buildings, bent over his own lap and cradling his left foot.

When he heard the sound of Ed’s suddenly halting steps, he looked up. The second he caught sight of Ed, his eyes lit up like they had the first time, going wide and oddly excited. “Hey! Kid! Can you give me a hand here? I think I twisted my ankle!”

No fucking way was Ed believing that one.

Standing at a respectable 8-meter distance, Ed looked back at the old man with narrowed eyes, not saying a single word despite the fact that he’d just been called ‘kid’.

Not too far from the old man, two figures were seated on another set of stairs, a young man and woman who looked up from their conversation in sudden, obviously fabricated, worry. They were calm as they came forward to seemingly ‘help’ the old man, eyes on Ed suspiciously.

The young man knelt down by the older man’s feet, picking up his left leg and inspecting the ankle in question. Casually, and loudly enough for Ed to hear, he said, “Ah, you really did twist it. I’m not sure how to handle this. Hey, buddy, can you come give us a hand?”

The young woman hadn’t taken her eyes off Ed since he’d appeared, and it was starting to freak him out a bit. “I don’t really know what to do about a twisted ankle. Hey, cutie, do you know how to wrap it?”

Oh, fuck this.

“No,” Ed answered stiffly. Suddenly, he looked away and began walking - maybe a little faster than was called for, but at this point, his instincts were screaming at him that his best course of action was to escape.

A sudden cry from the old man nearly had Ed dropping everything and bolting into a full-out run. “Don’t let him get away!”

 Fucking hell! He knew it!
Four people suddenly emerged from behind different housing units. All of them zeroed in on Ed like heat-seeking missiles.

Fuck it! Ed would climb over a building or something. Instead of charging right into the sudden crowd of people and trying to plow his way through, Ed turned on his heel and bolted.

His speed took the entire group by surprise. No one expected him to react so quickly, but it was only the blink of an eye before all seven people were after him. Even the old man who’d ‘twisted’ his ankle.

Fucking load of crap! Ed knew it!

Ed was fast on his feet on a normal day, but he was even faster now that the Black Tower Game had begun, and he managed to put some distance between him and them, but it wasn’t enough.

“Come back to me!”

Ed was just about to turn a corner back towards the university when there was a strange gust of wind, blowing him clear off his feet from behind. Like some sort of a boomerang, Ed’s forward motion was reversed, and he was dragged back towards the crowd of rabid strangers.

Shifting his point of gravity, Ed managed to flip upside down while in the air. Reaching out desperately for something to stop his sudden flight, Ed dug his fingers into a passing flowerbed, ready to use all of his strength to push against the damn wind… However… the moment he touched the flowerbed-

“He touched it!”

“He actually touched it!”

Ed’s heart stuttered.

“Ding Dong! The large multiplayer instance ‘Mario’s Monopoly Game’ has been triggered! At 17:02 on November 22nd, 2018, players Heather Kindle, James Cole, Alex Neil, Brandon Carter, Jefferson Grady, Victory Bradley, Nolan Travis, and Edward Elric have safely entered the game!”

“Sandbox loading complete…”

“Data loading complete…”

The road, trees, and tall housing apartments were all suddenly gone.

There was the flash of a strong white light, forcing Ed to squeeze his eyes shut as he threw an arm over his face. At the very moment the light flashed, a very familiar video game soundtrack began to play around them.

Ed remembered mockingly humming that song when Al played in their shared room with the volume racked up. He remembered doing it every time Al’s game character died and he’d have to start again, either from the beginning or the place he’d managed to save.

The simple, cheerful, unmistakable electronic music seemed to echo around them now, mocking and sinister in this suddenly pure white world.

The music continued on as the light finally began to weaken, allowing Ed’s narrowed eyes to open into slits, but he caught sight of the figure anyways. A giant, 2-meter tall character dropped down
from the white sky, wearing the iconic red hat with a white circle emblazoned on the front with the red ‘M’ smack dab in the middle. It had the large, round nose, the stupid mustache, the familiar blue overalls, and the large, white-gloved hands.

At this distance, the character looked like a giant wooden doll, its fall awkwardly slow as it swept beady blue eyes over each and every person present. The last of which was Ed himself. Then, suddenly, the character performed an action Ed was incredibly familiar with.

Just like that stupid jump Al was so fond of, one fist rose in the air as if to crash through a yellow box with a white question mark on the front.

*Boom!*

The giant Mario landed on a stage with a flourish, flashing lights marking his entrance.

“It’s a me! Mario!”

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys, sorry for the late update again. I'm sick, and its slowed my writing down a bit, since I've been sleeping like a sloth for most of the day and night for the past three days?

Anyways, chapters are going to get longer from here on out. So I'm not sure I'm going to manage to update two days a week. That said, please be patient, I will try to keep updating every Wednesday. No more Sunday updates though.
Chapter 21 - It's Just A Game

Chapter Notes

Chapter Edited and Betaed by the fabulous luvsanime02!!

Chapter 21 - It’s Just A Game

The loud, cheerful music played in the background the entire time, even as the white light gradually faded, exposing the newly-changed world to the group of people dragged there.

A small, round stage stood proudly in the middle of the world. Small, multicolored lights surrounded the edges of the stage, and a giant, two-meter tall Mario stood there, white-gloved fists against his hips and a bright smile on his face.

Over Mario’s head and directly above the stage, a large LED board was suspended in mid-air. In bright multicolored characters was displayed the number ‘6,456’.

When the world’s light was finally back to manageable levels, Ed frowned, eyes narrowed as he looked around himself.

A huge, colorful board game grid surrounded Mario’s small stage in a slender rectangle, twisted and snaking gently. It started from the bottom left, where all eight players stood, before making a large rectangle around the stage, but before it could connect back to the tile the players stood on, it snaked up, making five different turns before connecting to the stage in the middle where Mario grinned.

By Ed’s count, there were 150 squares, each one about a meter long. The edges of each grid glowed a slight white, all except for the one under the players’ feet.

Ed couldn’t help but notice that the square under Ed’s feet was red, a deep and dark blood red. Despite that, Ed could read the black bold word.

START

“Welcome to Mario’s Monopoly Game!”

The loud male voice made everyone jump and look around for whoever had said that. Before they could stir themselves up into a panic, Mario decided to step in. “Hello, everybody! Welcome to Mario’s Monopoly Game! I’m the one and only Mario!”

Ed had played Super Mario as kid with Al and Winry. He was pretty sure the character was recognized worldwide, and maybe that was the reason why it was part of the game now. Even for someone who didn’t play games, everyone knew this particular figure. Despite that, neither Ed or any of the other seven players allowed themselves to relax.

Mario seemed oblivious to all of that as he continued talking. “I can tell by the looks on your faces that all of you know who I am! That’s amazing, my children! I’m so happy that I decided to celebrate with all of you. I’m sure I’m your favorite character, nobody likes Sonic anymore, so I’ve decided to cook up this amazing monopoly game for you! Kids, this is a game for everyone who
Ed didn’t bother listening to the entire speech. His eyes might have been on Mario, but his attention was narrowed onto the other seven players who’d dragged him into this damn game. None of the extra stuff mattered. All he needed to know was how to win this game.

Ed didn’t doubt that this was the most dangerous game he’d played yet.

One of the young men must have found some kind of courage, because he took a step forward and in a trembling voice asked, “What… what kind of game is this?”

“Good question, kid.” Mario’s grin turned odd, sinister and dark. “This is a reward game. All of the nice and obedient children will receive amazing prizes from Mario. Come and play a game with me, and all these riches will be yours!”

Mario moved to one side, and a small golden hill materialized behind him. Gold coins and silver jewelry piled up high on the small stage.

“So much gold?”

“And diamonds - look at all the diamonds!”

Mario’s face was soft and kind, but his voice when he spoke had a depth to it. “Children, all of these are yours.”

Ed wasn’t fooled. “What are the rules of the game?”

“Do you see these square tiles? Well, Mario wants to play a nice game of monopoly with all of you. Only the child who reaches the stage the fastest can receive all of my rewards. Children, have you ever played a game of monopoly?”

The young woman hesitated for a moment before taking her own step forward. “I’ve played before. There are many themes and types of monopoly games, but they all require rolling a dice. The number of squares you can move depends on the number you roll. Some grids might contain rewards, punishments, or they might even make you travel backwards. Isn’t that it?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ve played that before,” someone else chipped in.

Mario let out a boisterous laugh. “Very good! Look at me, my kids are so smart!”

Apparently, the familiarity of such a well-known character standing in front of them, speaking kindly and acting nice for so long, lowered the other players’ defenses. Ed could see it as each one of them seemed to unclench their fists and relax their stances. They were even beginning to speak up without fear.

Ed didn’t allow himself to believe any of that. He stared at Mario, unmoving and still just as wary.

“In Mario’s Monopoly Game, there is a magic dice.” Stretching out one hand, Mario snapped gloved fingers and a huge dice fell from the sky, landing right in front of the eight players. “This is my lucky dice. Every child will roll it in order, and the number you roll determines how many squares you will advance. The one who makes it to the stage first can get all the prizes Mario has prepared for you.”

It could not be that simple.
Ed furrowed his brows, opening his mouth to speak up when an old, raspy voice cut him off before he could. “Are any of these squares dangerous?”

Ed turned to eye the old man who’d pretended to twist his ankle not too long ago.

Mario didn’t even falter. “How can a lucky child be in danger?”

Well, that was a clear brush-off if Ed had ever heard one. He spoke up to alter the question. “What kind of surprises are in these squares?”

In a monopoly game - in any game, really - players would often encounter both rewards and punishments when landing on specific squares. In ordinary monopoly games, the rewards were often money, or the ability to buy property on the square, making whoever landed there after you have to pay you an allotted amount. That would most often be the punishment.

Ed was certain that money wasn’t the thing on the line in this game, though. He knew enough about the Black Tower by now to realize that they were playing with their lives. He could only guess at what this game’s punishments would be.

Mario was patient though, as he began to explain. “Among these 150 squares, there are many small gifts that Mario himself has prepared for you children. Only lucky children will receive these gifts. We can call them reward squares. However, there are always good children and bad children. Sometimes, the children will do things that make Mario sad. That’s why there are some squares with props to punish the bad children. These are the punishment squares.”

Everyone seemed to stiffen as they heard the word ‘punishment’. No one was fooled any longer.

The giant Mario looked them over with strangely glinting blue eyes, his lip curling slowly into a strange smile. “The more obedient the child, the better the reward from me will be. As long as you land on these squares, you can get unimaginable things. For example, the ability or opportunity to save a game. I call that the king’s square.”

Ed felt himself freeze, his breath halting nearly painfully in his chest.

Ability?

To save a game?

Was it an item like what Ed currently had? And if it was, could they actually get that type of item in this monopoly game?

The other seven players were all stunned, and by the gasps and cries, elated. They all seemed to realize what a reward like that really meant. Survival.

Ed, however, immediately clenched his teeth. With rewards like that, the corresponding punishments would be…

“There are some squares that Mario calls ‘prisoners’. Bad children who do bad things are unforgivable people. They no longer like Mario. Instead, they start liking those odd-looking angry birds or that colored candy that blows up, or that damn fucking Sonic piece of shit!” Mario’s expression went ferocious, like flipping a coin. There was still a smile on his face, but it was filled with fury and hatred. “Mario has been your loyal companion for years! How could you betray me for those useless idiots! Tell me!”

Ed nearly wasn’t ready for it, but the second he saw Mario raise his foot, Ed braced himself.
The second that foot came down, the world shook violently. Ed had felt an earthquake before, but this was worse.

“Oh, what was I saying?” Mario’s expression flipped again. The shaking hadn’t even subsided before he’d slipped on his amiable face once more. ‘Mario knows that you’re all good children, though. Good kids won’t encounter those disgusting prisoner squares. Only bad children will land on those. I’ve deliberately prepared an interesting square for the playful kids, though. I call it the ‘free jump square’.”

Finally, the trembling world began to steady. Ed could feel the cold, poisonous drag of fear pour itself down his spine.

That simple action was far more telling than anything else that had been done so far. The fact that Mario could shake the world like that meant that he was strong. Stronger than the big mole.

If they tried to fight their way out… they would all die in seconds.

“When someone lands on the ‘free jump square’, they can choose which square to jump to. There are two options, one is to jump forward 30 squares. The second is to jump backwards, returning to any square you’ve passed previously. It’s one of the fun squares!”

“Finally, there is one final square which is probably the biggest surprise I’ve prepared for you! It’s called the ‘clearance square’. Yup! That’s right! Anyone who is lucky enough to stop on this square can directly clear the game!” Mario waved his hands in the air, voice loud and excited.

After a moment of complete silence and enthusiastic jazz hands, Mario finally seemed to get the point that no one was going to cheer with him. Lowering his hands, he smiled again. “So then, children, the game is about to start. Are you ready?”

“Ding Dong! The large multiplayer instance ‘Mario’s Monopoly Game’ has officially started. The rules of the game are:"

“First, you can only advance or retreat according to the number rolled on the dice. The only exception to this rule is the ‘free jump square’.”

“Second, the ‘king’s square’ accounts for 5% of the total number of tiles. The prize has the Black Tower’s consent, and can be taken with you when leaving the game.”

“Third, the ‘prisoners squares’ account for 5% of the total number of tiles. The law of causality states that if you land on this square, you will face the death penalty.”

“Fourth, the ‘free jump squares’ account for 20% of the total number of tiles.”

“Fifth, the reward and punishment squares each account for 20% of the total number of tiles.”

“Sixth, only the player who steps on the ‘clearance square’ can clear the game directly. Only one player per game.”

“Seventh, the rest of the tiles are all blank.”

“Eighth, death in the game equals death outside the game.”

“The amazing super Mario likes obedient and sensible children the most, so don’t be bad!”

Fuck that voice. Ed fucking hated that childish sing-song voice.
Despite all of the amazing rewards, Ed knew that the danger was even greater. The Black Tower stated that prisoner squares were a death sentence due to the law of causality. In an attempt to seem fair, though, the prisoner squares and king’s squares accounted for the same 5%. With a dangling carrot like the ability to save a game… no one would want to pass it up.

Ed knew that this was what the Black Tower did. It kept to the rules. It kept every game as ‘fair’ as it could, while tilting the scales against the players.

If they landed on the king’s square… If…

Mario stood tall on the small stage, grinning like a doll and creaking like wood with every movement. “Now, my children, start the game!”

The instant Mario finished his sentence, the dice moved on its own, slamming straight into the chest of the young woman. She startled, but managed to stay on her feet, a mask of horror stealing over her expression. “J-Jeff, I-I don’t want to go first. You… you go first.”

“What?” The young man’s face instantly twisted into a scowl. “Why should I?! The dice chose you!”

The young woman didn’t seem to care. She quickly placed the dice carefully on the ground and backed away, not risking throwing it in case it counted as a roll.

A balding, middle-aged man hesitated before stepping forward. “There must be an order. With a total of eight people, there are just too many options. I propose we roll the dice in the reverse order that we triggered the game. The last person to trigger the game should go first. What do you think?”

Everyone but the old man turned to look at Ed.

Ed honestly didn’t care. He was more caught up on something else. “I don’t have a problem going first. My only question is, you don’t seem to know each other at all. So why did you work together to pull me into this game?”

They all seemed relieved to hear that Ed was willing to roll first, and for some reason, that was more annoying than just about anything that’d been done so far.

The other middle-aged man, his gut round with a beer belly, suddenly stepped up. “Buddy, it wasn’t just you. You don’t know what really happened to any of us. The moment we encountered that flowerbed, we were told by the Black Tower that a big game had been triggered. It stated that eight people would be needed for the game to start, and until we found enough people, we wouldn’t be able to move 10 meters away from that damned flowerbed. We would be stuck there forever! Not to mention that anyone who tried to play needed to touch the flowerbed during game time, which was from 6 in the morning to 5 in the afternoon. I had to wait an entire day before all eight people were gathered!”

Ed frowned, but nodded thoughtfully. “So, you were the seventh?” Ed turned to look at the old man as he asked the question.

“I was deceived by these motherfuckers!” the old man grunted coldly, arms crossed over his chest. “Why should we toss the dice in reverse order? You were the ones who tricked us into this stupid game! The first person to trigger the game should be the one to go first. They are the one who risked everyone else and plunged us into this game!”

The only other woman in the group suddenly paled. “I don’t want to. I just wanted to sit on the
edge of the flowerbed and rest. How was I supposed to know this would happen? I-I don’t want to
go first. Do it in reverse!”

All seven people began to argue.

“If you hadn’t triggered the game, we wouldn’t be in this mess! We should start with you!”

“You were the fifth person - you just don’t want to start the game in reverse. You just agreed with
us, and now you’re switching sides! Amazing!”

“You..!”

“No arguing!” Mario shouted, the sudden boom startling everyone as they turned around to look at
the biggest danger. “Obedient children should never argue. Aren’t all of you obedient children?”

No one dared to speak, all of them too scared to try. Everyone knew that this Black Tower monster
was far stronger than any they had met yet, and direct confrontation meant death.

Ed was the one to finally speak up. “It’s only the start of the game. Mr. Mario, we have eight
people playing the game, but only one dice. There must be an order. When we entered the game
just now, I heard the Black Tower announce all of our names. I think it's better if we start the game
in that order. Is that okay?”

Ed reacted too quickly. No one else was given enough time to counter him.

It didn’t take long for them to realize what had just happened, though. All of them turned to glare at
Ed. “What the hell did you just…?”

“Oh, my clever boy, you’re right. I didn’t think about that. Let’s play in the order the Black Tower
stated. Let me see… The first one was Heather Kindle? Heather, my child, where are you? Come
and give the dice a roll!”

The middle-aged woman started to shake, not daring to move much more than that.

Mario asked again. “Heather? My child, where are you?”

The woman couldn’t seem to stop trembling, but she found enough courage to take a step forward.

Mario’s eyes zeroed in on the woman, his voice going cold and his cadence slow. “My child, don’t
you want to play this fun little game of mine?”

The temperature plummeted. This time, everyone shivered. The woman nearly fell over in her
attempt to rush forward, picking up the dice. “I’m playing! I’ll roll it! I’ll roll it now!”

Mario’s stare was like daggers, forcing the woman to reflexively throw the dice. The moment it left
her hands, Mario acted as if he remembered something, deliberately stuttering out a strange laugh.
“Oh, my children, I almost forgot to tell you! The first child to play can receive a reward from me.
However, the last child obviously doesn’t seem to know how to play the game, so I will stay here
and teach them how to play!”

Ed’s eyes widened for only a moment before narrowing.

Mario’s smile was brilliant, but his shimmering blue eyes were cold.

“5… I got a 5!”
The woman whispered the number to herself and cautiously stepped forward. As soon as she took
one step out of the ‘START’ square, she dashed forward like the hounds of hell were on her heels.

Ed wasn’t so sure if they weren’t.

Once she got to the fifth square, she stopped dead. The white edges of the tile turned yellow, and
the woman stood there with her arms wrapped around herself in terror as she waited for some kind
of a result.

When nothing happened, Mario laughed. “A blank square! Congratulations, my lovely child!”

Ed watched as the woman’s legs seemed to give out right from under her. She crumbled to the
ground in pure relief.

The second one to roll was the balding, middle-aged man. His face was pinched and pale as he
picked the dice up, turning it until the number ‘5’ was facing up. He murmured to himself, “5…
5… 5!”

He rolled a 6.

The bald man gulped audibly, nervously walking slowly to the sixth square. The moment he
stepped onto the square, the white glowing edges turned red. Ed carefully watched the change in
colors, listening as the familiar ‘Super Mario’ game music began to play.

The sudden change nearly made the bald man stagger, almost stepping back into the middle-aged
woman’s fifth square.

“Ding Dong! The reward square has been triggered! One of Mario’s red magic mushrooms has
been obtained. The edible red magic mushroom increases strength and only works within the game.
It cannot be brought out of the game.”

A round, bright red mushroom suddenly appeared in the air, falling into the bald man’s arms.

The man was clearly taken off-guard. Adrenaline still coursed through his veins, yet he could
neither flee nor fight. To suddenly be rewarded clearly froze him completely. That lasted for a full
minute before the man began to smile. Without hesitating further, the man bowed his head and bit
into the mushroom. It looked like a normal, if slightly off-colored, raw mushroom, but the second
the man took a bite, the most delicious smell began to spread through the area. Most people had to
swallow back their sudden hunger.

After 10 minutes, seven people had rolled the dice.

The old man and the young woman were lucky enough to roll a 6. Just like the bald man, they
were rewarded with a magic mushroom.

The man with the round beer belly managed a 5 like the first woman.

The young man and the bald middle-aged one threw a 4, and while they were afraid to step
forward, they were soon relieved when it turned out to be a blank square.

The last one to roll during the first round was Ed.

Ed already knew that his luck sucked. Since the Earth came online, he’d participated in three
games so far. The first was to find Mosaic’s book, the next was the first floor of the Tower Attack
Game, and now, Mario’s Monopoly Game. In every single case, he was dragged into the game by
someone else.

For the vast majority of Amestrian players, they might’ve only participated in the Tower Attack Game that Roy Mustang pulled them into.

Fuck, even his life before the Black Towers had never been a walk in the park.

No, Ed had likely never personally known what ‘luck’ was.

Knowing this intimately, he looked down at the dice in his hands and sighed.

The dice fell on ‘3’, and Ed bit back a groan.

No one had landed on the third square yet, so all of them were looking back at him in curiosity. The two people standing on the fourth square smiled wide, seemingly happy at the fact that Ed might be facing something unknown and dangerous. Thanks to Ed, they weren’t dead-last anymore.

Ed moved to the third square blank-faced. Once he stood in the middle of the tile, the white light turned red and the game music started again. Ed frowned, tensing his body and quietly pressing a finger against the match tattoo on his left wrist.

“Ding Dong! The first level punishment has been triggered. The punishment: within three minutes, admit to something bad you’ve done out loud.”

What the fuck?

What kind of punishment was that? An attempt to humiliate him?

Ed could feel annoyance poking at his forced calm, but he managed to stop himself from snarling. His mind raced quickly.

If there was a first level punishment square, then Ed was certain there would be a second and third one too. If this punishment was so easy, what would the other punishment squares be?

Ed wasn’t a genius for nothing, though. He had an idea of how he could turn the situation around.

Calmly, Ed spoke. “In middle school, I punched a boy in the face and broke his jaw. He liked to bully people, and me and my younger brother were his favorite targets. He had to eat through a straw for a good 4 months, and the teacher wasn’t happy with me, but I have always, and will always, protect my brother.” Ed paused for a moment, trying to emphasize his point. “After all, I am a good boy.”

Mario’s booming voice instantly agreed. “Yes, punishing evil! You are a good boy!”

The seven other players looked back at him in shock. They were suddenly coming to realize that Ed wasn’t as simple as he portrayed himself to be.

If only they knew how true that actually was.

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At the same time, outside a university housing community in Luza’s farthest district, two young men and a young woman entered the housing community. It didn’t take them long to find the six strange corpses in the garden at the center of the community. The young woman had her hair up in a high ponytail, the edges of her long hair coming down to her mid-back. As she looked down and
examined the wounds on each body, she frowned. When she’d examined all six, she returned to the first body, pulling off her glove and placing her hand against the fatal wound on the middle-aged man’s chest.

As her hand touched the wound, it emitted a sudden white light. The young woman closed her eyes, her brows knitted as if she was focusing hard on something.

It took a couple of minutes for the woman to come back to herself, but when she did, she looked up and said, “He was killed by this person.” She pointed over at the body lying next to the man’s. Then she got up and walked over to the other five bodies, pressing her hand to their wounds and analysing them. Finally, she came to a conclusion. “All six of these people killed each other…”

The young man in a black down jacket frowned, standing at the woman’s shoulder. “It meets the same characteristics as the second instance. There have been three similar dump sites, all near this place. There should be an entrance to the second instance around here. It’s not game time right now, so the second instance should be safe. We need to seize this time to find any possible entrances to the second instance. Explore 500 meters around this community. Separate to find any potential hidden areas for the entrance, and meet back here at 12.”

All three people nodded before turning away to split up.

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Back on the Mario’s Monopoly Game board, the third round of the game has passed, and as the fourth began, everyone had moved forward at least 10 steps.

During the second round, Ed’s luck seemed to get a little better. In the second to fourth rounds, he progressed 17 squares, and stood resolutely on the 20th tile. He landed on one reward square and two blank squares, putting him smack dab in the middle of the group of eight people.

From the reward square, he’d received an ‘invincible police flower’. The strange mushrooms and flowers were just like the props from the Super Mario games, and after eating the flower, Ed received five minutes of invincibility. Unfortunately, the flower could only be eaten when it was first obtained. There was no way to take it past the reward square it came from.

Ed ate the flower and watched as his figure glowed under a dim golden light. He smirked a bit, knowing exactly what he looked like. Golden blond hair, shining golden eyes, slightly tanned skin, and now glowing like a flashlight. Ed was pretty sure he looked like some kind of god.

Ed couldn’t ignore the fact that he was horribly out of place among the other players. He’d been the last one to trigger the game, and as such, he was much less familiar with any of the other players. They’d all had at least a day or two to get to know each other. Before Ed had started the game, they had all fought over who would actually go first.

In the beginning, the order in which they rolled the dice didn’t seem all that important. The dice was random, and it didn’t matter who rolled first or last, but in the first round, the order was actually the most important thing as far as Ed was concerned.

In this type of game, winning didn’t entirely depend on luck.

The angle and strength with which they throw the dice could greatly influence the outcome of the roll. When people played a game of chance, some often rolled a 6 and could take more steps forward. It wasn’t necessarily good luck. Sometimes, it was just because they’d mastered the technique of throwing the dice without noticing.
In addition, the person to go last had options to choose from if they stepped onto a free jump square. They could head for the squares previously used by the other players, already knowing whether they would be reward, blank, or punishment squares.

That was the reason Ed had wanted to be the last to roll. He’d have seven people before him to explore the board on their own, determining the contents of each of their squares for him.

Unfortunately, Ed had failed to realize that any Black Tower game wouldn’t rely on something as simple as ‘skill’. The dice was big and heavy, and no human could control what number was rolled. Once someone rolled it, the dice would spin freely on the ground. No matter how many times Ed had tried in the four previous rounds, he never succeeded in getting the number he was aiming for.

The game itself controlled the number each player rolled.

Due to that situation, the players up in front were on the 22nd square, followed by Ed on the 20th, while the last player was standing on the 14th.

In four rounds, three players had stepped on the free jump squares. They weren’t stupid about it, not mindlessly moving forward. Instead, they stepped on known reward or blank squares, or even choose not to jump at all, staying right where they were.

The 20th square was the one that gave him the invincibility reward, and Ed had a moment to ponder its uses as the middle-aged woman prepared to roll the dice as the start of their 5th round.

A flower that granted invincibility. A mushroom that increases one’s strength (red), or rewarded someone with a sharp weapon (purple), or even gave someone a boost in healing speed (green).

The flower was the only prize that needed to be eaten upon acquiring it, not at any time afterwards, and at first, it seemed like a better prize than the magic mushrooms. So, why was it a prize at all? Why would any of the players need invincibility for a couple of minutes? If each round took at least 10 or so minutes, and Ed had counted them, what would 5 minutes of invincibility really be worth if the next time you moved it would have already worn off?

Ed had an idea, but he was afraid that it might just be the right idea.

There had been two more punishments that had been superficial and easily passed, just like Ed’s when he’d landed on the third square, but when the young woman had stepped onto a punishment square, something completely different had happened that time. As soon as the light surrounding the square had turned red, a huge, black mushroom had suddenly emerged right in front of her. The woman had screamed and pulled out some kind of knife. Ed had gritted his teeth as he watched the woman struggle with the black mushroom for around three minutes before finally managing to stab it properly, killing it. Despite the small victory, everyone could see that the woman was hurt. She’d been bitten to the point where Ed could see the shine of bloodied white bone.

A level three punishment square.

Just like Ed had thought, the punishment squares were graded. The higher the level, the greater the difficulty or danger of the punishment.

Knowing that, though… How high did the penalties go?

Looking down at the stem of what was left of his reward, Ed found himself snarling.

The invincible flower shouldn’t be so useless. Five minutes of invincibility meant nothing if he
wasn’t going to be met with a black mushroom or some other terrible monster while still in that state of invincibility.

So, what was the point of this reward…?

Ed’s brain worked quickly, and a sinking sense of dread bubbled in his stomach like acid. For a moment, he remembered the scene where those bodies had been lying in the center of the community garden before they’d all entered the game.

Fuck…

Oh fuck…

Before Ed got the chance to say anything out loud, Mario’s voice suddenly interrupted his thoughts. Looking up quickly, he noticed the middle-aged woman holding the dice in her arms, about to throw it once again. “Oh yes, children, I forgot to tell you all something. It seems my memory just isn’t what it used to be. Mario is 27 years old this year. I’m an old man in the game world. But still, something so important and I actually forgot to tell all of you good children.”

Ed knew what was coming. He’d been poking at the idea in his mind ever since he’d gotten that flower, but now, he was sure of it. Closing his eyes, Ed prayed to whatever god that existed that he was wrong.

He wasn’t.

“From the beginning of the 5th round, all players landing on the same square will trigger the ‘Prove Your Worth’ effect. For example, the 19th square…” Mario pointed at the middle-aged woman. “If you roll a 2, you’ll move from the 17th to the 19th square, and that will become your square. After that, whoever else steps onto the 19th square with you will trigger the ‘Prove Your Worth’ effect.”

Mario’s smile was gloating, excitement and ridicule both in his expression.

“Once the effect is triggered, no matter what the original square was, it will immediately become a level seven penalty square. It’ll only go back to the original square when there is only one player remaining on it. No matter what kind of method used, as long as there is only one player left, it will change back.”

Mario paused for a moment, taking in the horror and surprise on the faces of the players before waving a white-gloved hand as if swatting away a fly. “By the way, it doesn’t matter if you land on the 19th square now. There is already a child there, but he arrived there on the fourth round, so it won’t count. The ‘Prove Your Worth’ effect only works on players after the fifth round.”

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck! Ed knew it!

Some people understood what Mario meant right off the bat. Like Ed, they had probably been thinking about it. After all, they’d been given more than enough hints. But, for some, it only started dawning after a few more minutes of thought.

The middle-aged woman fell to her knees, the dice still in her hands as she shuddered, her face twisted and tears in her eyes. “No... No, you can’t… You’re asking us to kill each other!”

And here was where the invincible flower really became a reward.
With the power of invincibility for 5 minutes, whoever stepped onto the square second wouldn’t obtain a flower. Instead, the moment the second person stepped onto the same square as the first, the square would change into a level seven penalty.

If a third level penalty had been the dangerous black mushroom…

What the hell would a level seven be?

Everyone else seemed to be overwhelmed with panic, but Ed dragged in a fortifying breath. Ruthlessly, he pushed down all of the uneasiness in his heart. Killing wouldn’t be new to him. He’d killed before in the midst of this fucked-up game, but… This would be the first time he’d kill someone innocent.

Unbidden, Ed’s eyes rose up to the LED board still suspended above Mario’s head. Trying to focus on anything other than his sinking heart, Ed opened his mouth. “What do the numbers on that sign mean?”

Mario’s head fell back as he looked up at the sign, the number 6,456 still lit up and prominent.

Mario grinned, showing all of his teeth as he replied. “Ah, of course you would want to know! My dear child, I like your sense of curiosity. That is the total number of children who’ve played the Mario’s Monopoly Game with me! It was a pity that they were all unlucky and disobedient, bad children. They couldn’t manage to reach the stage and win my prize! How about you, Number 6,464? Will you be the lucky boy?”

Ed’s brain sputtered, and then ground quickly to a halt.

This was... unreal.

And the game had only just begun.
Chapter 22 - Another One Bites The Dust

The middle-aged woman trembled as she clenched the big dice between her hands, eyes red and filled with tears. She sat heavily on her heels and stared at Mario, mouth open, reluctant to let go of the dice.

Mario turned to her with concern. Ed wanted to snort. “My lovely child, what’s wrong? Why aren’t you taking your turn?”

The woman’s jaw clicked closed, her teeth clanging together audibly in pure horror.

Mario’s voice suddenly turned cold, his blue eyes going dark. “Don’t you want to play Mario’s game?”

There was a sharp, yipping cry, as if a full sob had gotten stuck in her throat, but she tossed the dice all the same. The big dice rolled three times before finally falling on the number 3.

The woman was crying, and her legs couldn’t hold her as she crawled her way to the 20th square, where Ed stood, watching. Mario was getting some kind of kick out of the show, because his laughter seemed to echo in the pure white world.

It was the bald man’s turn next.

When he picked up the dice, he eyed the middle-aged woman warily. There was fear there.

The bald man was standing on the 19th square, and he’d just seen the woman crawl by him as she made her way to the 20th tile. She was the only player in the fifth round who was ahead of him, and that made her dangerous, no matter the act she put on.

The man had obviously seen some shit, that was obvious.

If the man managed to throw a 1, everyone would get to see what the ‘Prove Your Worth’ effect really meant.

Ed was sure that whatever the level seven penalty was, it would be stronger than anything any of them could actively fight against. The easiest choice would be to kill the player on the square with you. As long as there was only one player left, the square would turn back to whatever it had been before.

The bald man had obviously come to the same conclusion Ed had.

He was starting to sweat, his shirt quickly staining under his arms and down his back. He was shaking too, but at least he stayed on his feet. With the dice in hand, he threw it up and let it go.

The middle-aged woman was still on the ground, keeping to the edges and away from Ed, her eyes
pleading and hopeful as she watched the dice.

“Not a 1… Not a 1!” the bald man roared, closing his eyes as the dice hit the ground and rolled.

When he opened his eyes, he let out a yell.

3. It landed on 3.

The man relaxed and made his way quickly to the 22nd tile, grinning as he passed by the woman and Ed, and then coming to stand beside the young woman, the player who’d been in first place at the end of the fourth round.

While the two first players had been afraid, the third man wasn’t. He had a confident smile, his big beer belly making it a tad hard for him to hold onto the dice, but he didn’t hold it for long. “I don’t believe my luck is that bad. There is no way I can roll a 1 or a 3.” He wasn’t nervous about having to fight either the woman or the bald man, and that put Ed right on edge.

What the hell would make the man so confident?

‘Or maybe not’, Ed thought as he looked at the man’s hands holding the dice. They were stiff, barely hanging onto the prop as he took a deep breath and finally rolled the dice, his eyes wide as he stared. Once it hit the ground, his entire body seemed to go lax, finally releasing the tension his fear had created.

His roll was right between the woman and the bald man, and he moved to the 21st tile with a palpable sense of relief.

The fourth and fifth players to roll the dice were a bit more relaxed than the rest. One stood on the 15th tile, while the other stood on the 14th. They were both behind and a good deal away from the rest of the other players.

The fourth man, Ed remembered his name was Brandon, seemed to be the quietest person in the group. He had no real presence, and he was a forgettable man in his early fifties. When he rolled the dice, he sighed in relief, his solemn features calming slightly as he moved forward one space, standing on the 16th square stiffly.

The fifth player to roll was a young man, and by what Ed could grasp, he and the young woman, the sixth player, seemed to be a couple. Ed remembered their names too, Jefferson Grady and Victory Bradley. Jefferson was in last place, standing on the 14th tile, while Victory was up at the front on the 22nd.

There wasn’t much pressure on the young man. He wouldn’t be in any danger unless he rolled a 2, but he didn’t have much to worry about. By the end of his turn, he stood on the 18th square, and then it was the young woman’s turn.

Among every other player, it was Victory who was the most relaxed. She was first, and that made her complacent. She was two spaces in front of Ed, and as she held the dice, Ed heard her muttering to herself, “6… It has to be a 6.”

Ed’s eyebrow rose in interest.

The dice landed on 5.

The second the young woman saw the number, she beamed with excitement. Even if it wasn’t a 6, it pushed her farther away from the other players, and that seemed to be enough for her.
she’d just taken a step onto the 27th tile when the white light turned red.

“The Ding Dong! You have triggered a level 4 punishment square.”

**Boom!**

A huge black turtle fell from the sky and right into the square with the young woman. Small, beady green eyes peered at the woman for only a moment before it suddenly attacked. It moved so quickly that the young woman didn’t even have a chance to react. The black turtle bit deeply into her thigh and tore off a bloody chunk of her flesh.

The woman screamed, pulling out her knife once again. Victory was the same woman that had been attacked by the black mushroom, and now it seemed that she’d have to face something even tougher.

She lunged, trying to stab the knife into the ferocious turtle. However, the turtle shell was too hard. All the knife did was cause sparks to fly, angering the turtle even more.

“Vicky! Vicky!” the young man, Jefferson, cried out anxiously, but he didn’t dare move forward.

The turtle used his large head to beat at the woman’s waist, throwing her up against an invisible wall that surrounded the meter-long square. No matter how the turtle moved, the young woman couldn’t move past the square.

She was bleeding profusely, a large chunk of her thigh bitten off, and her eyes red with tears and fear.

“No, please… please don’t kill me.” The young woman waved her knife around wildly, dealing only superficial damage to the turtle.

The remaining seven players watched in pure terror, the young man crying and screaming for his girlfriend, but he had no power here. The middle-aged woman, Heather, whispered to herself, “I can’t land there. The 27th square is a level 4 punishment square…”

Ed was done with just watching. “Don’t hack at the shell! Aim for the head!” he yelled.

The young woman seemed to have heard him, but it didn’t process beyond the surface level. Ed was about to call out again when he heard the woman hurriedly say, “Cut off its head. I have to cut off its head…” She tried to chop off the turtle’s head, but it was much too fast. Her knife hadn’t even come down fully before the turtle’s head had retracted into the shell. The woman desperately tried several times, but she never managed to even knick the big turtle’s head.

“I can’t cut it! I can’t cut it!” she repeated in all-out despair.

Ed growled under his breath. Then he saw the turtle’s head emerge from the shell again, biting quickly into the woman’s left hand and tearing off a bloody piece of meat just before shrinking back into its shell.

Ed tried again. “The next time it prepares to bite you, take that chance to cut off its head!”

The woman clearly tried, but it wasn’t that easy. She was bitten twice more before she finally got lucky and got a hit in. While the turtle shell was as hard as metal, the head was soft and malleable. Once the head was cut off, the turtle shook slightly on its four remaining limbs before it fell to the ground and disappeared completely.
Victory’s body was a mess of wounds, and the ground was puddled with blood.

While the players couldn’t move past their one-meter-wide squares, their blood apparently could. The woman’s slithered its way straight back, reaching all the way to the other players nearly 6 squares behind her. There was a scramble as the people farther back tried to keep from stepping on the woman’s blood.

The woman was panting, her body giving out on her as she sank down into the pool of her own blood. She looked like she had been attacked by zombies - chunks of her were missing, and the blood was everywhere. Nobody knew what to say.

The young man hesitated for a moment, before he seemed to come to himself. “Vicky… just…. just rest now.”

The young woman nodded, not even bothering to look up.

She was fortunate that everyone’s physical abilities had greatly improved after the Earth went online. Even reserve players had their own strengths. Within a few minutes, she’d finally stopped bleeding, her wounds visibly scarring over despite how badly injured she was. She still didn’t even attempt to move, though.

The old man rolled the dice next, moving from the 18th to the 24th square.

When he finally stood on the blank tile, all eyes fell on Ed.

Ed took the dice expressionlessly, bowing his head over it and looking calmly at the numbers.

He had a 50/50 chance of landing on someone else’s square. The 21st, 22nd, and 24th squares were all occupied, and Ed wasn’t so sure about his luck at the moment.

The players standing in front of Ed all held their breath as they watched him.

Ed squeezed the dice tightly once. Balancing it on his right hand, Ed held it up and then tossed it.

When the dice landed, Ed closed his eyes in relief.

It was a 5.

Ed didn’t hesitate. He strode over to the 25th square and waited, letting his shoulders sag in relief when it turned from white to yellow, indicating a blank square.

Everyone else seemed relieved as well.

No one wanted to watch another show like the woman and the turtle’s.

However, no one had even a second to think before the big dice floated up from the ground and flew straight into the hands of the middle-aged woman. They had made it through the fifth round, but the game wasn’t over yet.

The woman standing on the 20th square was pale, not daring to even breathe too hard as she looked helplessly at the path in front of her.

The bald man, the man with the beer belly, the old man, and Ed.

They were standing on the 22nd, 21st, 24th, and 25th squares, respectively.
The woman only had two options left.

Up on the stage, Mario smiled wickedly, watching the eight humans sweat like it was all some fun kind of game. Shit, to him it probably was.

From the very beginning, one thing was plainly obvious - the Black Tower revelled in the suffering of humans.

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Meanwhile, in the community outside the game...

A man in a pure white trench coat walked over to the flowerbed and stopped.

The warm glow of the sun shone from the west, lighting up the trees blocking off the flowerbed with a golden shine. Several large backpacks and two suitcases were scattered around the roots of some of the surrounding trees.

The young man leaned over the flowerbed and examined the bags. He opened every bag, looking through every item inside carefully. He opened the suitcases and removed all the contents, looking for something odd or unusual. Finally, he looked at the outside of each bag and suitcase, searching for signs of blood or injury. The last bag he grabbed was Ed’s, but there was little inside: a flashlight, a knife, a few boxes of instant noodles, two boxes of cookies, and a few bottled waters.

After examining all of the stray luggage, he frowned deeply, pulling out a whistle from his pocket before blowing on it loud and long.

It only took about five minutes for the other man and woman who’d previously examined the six dead bodies in the community garden to come up behind him. As they approached, they saw the suitcases and backpacks lying scattered around the flowerbed. Their faces sank as they carefully took in the abandoned belongings, just as the other young man had. After their inspection, the three people glanced at each other.

“Based on the situation, this should be the second instance as well.”

“Yes, it is the second instance.” The woman with the ponytail looked around one more time before she spoke again. “I don’t know how many people entered the instance this time. There is no way to know how many bodies are going to appear.” She toed at one of the bags, regret in her expression, as if the owner of the thing was destined to die.

“Designate a 50-meter radius around this flowerbed as the 31st entrance to the second instance.”

“Okay!”

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Back in Mario’s Monopoly Game.

The middle-aged woman rolled the dice and prayed for a lucky roll. A 3 or a 6 would get her through this situation alive, but she knew in her sinking stomach that it was too much to hope for.

The huge dice rolled, and the woman watched, body as tense as a guitar string.

When the dice stopped, she barked out a quick and high sob.

The number 4 faced up.
The old man standing on the 24th square looked grim, his eyes glued to the woman.

She trembled viciously as she looked back at him.

Their eyes met, and everyone else felt the sudden pressure surrounding the two.

Mario’s malicious laughter broke the moment. “Congratulations, you’ve triggered the ‘Prove Your Worth’ effect. My lovely child, you must enjoy this interesting new rule as much as I do. Aren’t you going to hurry and accept your reward?”

The woman moved slowly, her gaze never straying from the old man who looked at her coldly.

Mario began to whistle his own theme song, but didn’t press them. He looked as if he were enjoying the building tension, waiting anxiously but patiently for his favorite show.

It took a full five minutes, but he finally seemed to get tired of the delay. “My child, why aren’t you where you are supposed to be? Do you not like Mario’s game? Do you not want to play with me anymore? Huh?”

The woman raised her head, looking first to the giant, menacing Mario before her gaze strayed up to the sign of numbers above his head.

There was a bright smile on the red-clad character’s face. He prepared to speak again, but the woman had already walked into the 24th square. The men standing on the 21st and 22nd made way for her, their eyes bleeding sympathy but also steeped in curiosity.

When she’d finally made it to the 24th square, the remaining six people, Ed included, stared at the pair intently, waiting…

Then they heard-

“Ding Dong! The ‘Prove Your Worth’ effect has been triggered, opening the level seven punishment square. The unparalleled hero Mario shoots down turtles, steps on mushrooms, kills evil dragons, and rescues beautiful princesses. Mario’s world doesn’t need companions, because he is his own companion. Now it’s time to prove your own worth!”

Mario bellowed out a loud laugh. “You see that! The Black Tower praises me every time the effect is triggered! You see how the Black Tower loves me? And all of the children respect me!”

No one paid him any mind, their attention narrowed to the 24th square and the pair facing off in the confined space.

The white glow around the tile turned black the instant the middle-aged woman had stepped inside, and the odd change was enough to have everyone interested.

A tile would glow yellow when it was a blank square, while both reward and punishment squares would turn red.

Triggering this effect resulted in a black glow, and that was frightening in itself.

The pair within the invisible barriers of the 24th square stood face-to-face, neither daring to make the first move. Yet, at that moment, the ground shook violently, causing everyone to stumble and sway. Ed caught sight of something black above his head, and flicked his attention skyward. What he saw made his eyes widen in horror.
Bang!

A huge, pitch-black Mario fell from the sky in front of everyone. Whatever color existed in the original Mario was gone, covered entirely, and eerily black - like a silhouette or a shadow.

It hadn’t landed on the 24th square at all. It had landed on the white ground below the tiles, but that wasn’t the most surprising thing.

The young lady who had activated the level four penalty had been trapped within the square. Everyone had witnessed the transparent barrier that had kept her caged with the dangerous black turtle, but it seemed that the same wasn’t true for a level seven punishment. The black Mario zeroed in on the two players quickly, huge black eyes staring nearly sightlessly as one hand rose and slapped both of them away like flies.

Everyone flinched at the sound of breaking bones that seemed to reverberate around the pure white world. The two players had been thrown nearly 10 meters away, scaring the other players and scattering most of them as they moved aside so as to not get hit by the oncoming bodies.

Most frightening of all, everyone had recognized the little run the black Mario had performed in order to reach the targeted pair.

When the man and woman landed, they both coughed up blood, gasping and scrambling to push themselves to their feet.

Mario’s voice was oddly kind despite the horror everyone was witnessing. “Oh, you other children don’t have to be so afraid. You aren’t the ones who triggered the effect. You won’t be harmed.”

On the 150-square Monopoly map, Black Mario chased after the old man and the middle-aged woman, his eyes going between the two of them before he grinned widely, like an animal baring its teeth, before suddenly reaching out and grabbing for both of their throats.

The middle-aged woman wouldn’t allow herself to be grabbed by those huge black hands. Quickly pulling out a small kitchen knife, she closed her eyes and turned to the old man. “I-I’m sorry. I don’t- I don’t want to die!”

Bang!

The loud echo of gunfire suddenly stopped everything in its tracks.

From Ed’s perspective, Black Mario had been blocking his view of both the man and the middle-aged woman with his large body, not allowing Ed to witness what had happened, but at the sound of the gunshot, Black Mario halted instantly. His hands had just grazed over both of the player’s heads before he chuckled deep and disappeared as if he never was.

The two targeted players were now near the red ‘START’ square they had all begun on.

The woman held a knife in her right hand, her posture that of someone ready to pounce, her expression a twisted mix of despair and anger. Tears slowly slipped down her face as a line of blood crawled its way from her mouth. There was a fist-sized hole in the middle of her chest, and as everyone else watched, she slowly fell to the ground. Before she died, she looked up at the old man, lips trembling as she asked, “Why... why?”

The man held a pistol in his hand, eyes hard and sharp as he looked down at the woman bleeding almost on his feet. “I’m sorry. I don’t want to die.”
They were the exact same words, but the result had been completely different than what the middle-aged woman had been expecting. What Heather Kindle had been expecting.

No one was able to look away as the old man turned and made his way back to the 24th square, the body of Heather Kindle lying in a puddle of her own blood behind him.

He held onto his side as he walked. Black Mario’s slap had broken three of his ribs, and Ed was sure it wouldn’t heal for a while. Even with their advanced healing.

The players between the man and his destination all parted for him, watching him with a mix of trepidation and fear.

A gun was still one of the most terrifying weapons for most players. Ed wasn’t sure how many official players or stowaways were present in this Monopoly game, but he was certain that the reserve players were in the majority. Unless Ed was prepared for it, even he couldn’t escape a bullet. If he’d been the one up against the old man just now, he surely would have been shot. It wouldn’t have necessarily killed him, but he’d be in pretty bad condition, all things considered.

Ed glanced quickly at the corpse of Heather Kindle before turning to the other six players.

Out of all these people, at least one of them should be an official player.

Ed remembered vividly the fact that he’d been pulled into this fucking game by someone’s wind ability. He wasn’t sure of the limits of the ability, or if it was also offensive, but one thing was certain - he couldn’t let his guard down with any of them.

By the appearance of the six other people remaining, the possibilities of any of them being stowaways wasn’t high, and reserve players were less likely to have an ability, but it wasn’t impossible.

He was flying blind, and he only had his guesses to save his life. Ed wondered for a second if that would be enough. Genius or not, he had been wrong before.

Ed carefully eyed the six other players before his gaze stopped on the bald man and the man with the round beer belly.

The bald man was staring at the corpse of the middle-aged woman with a complicated look on his face. James Cole, Ed remembered. The man with the beer gut kept his expression neutral, arms crossed over his chest. Alex Neil. Together, the two of them turned in unison to look over at the old man. There wasn’t much worry or fear on their faces.

Ed was sure that the player with the wind ability had to be one of these two.

The bald man started up the game again, rolling the dice in silence.

In the next few rounds of the game, no one triggered the dangerous effect. It also seemed to be a coincidence that the bald man rolled a 6 on multiple occasions, suddenly stepping out in front to lead the pack, coming to stand on the 59th square by himself. Along with him, Ed had also been ‘lucky’ and stood on the 53rd tile.

The young couple had managed to come as close together as they had in the beginning of the game, standing on the 42nd (the woman) and 45th (the man) squares.

Alex Neil, the man with the large gut, was planted on the 36th square, dead last, while the other man, Brandon Carter, was on the 47th, with the old man, Nolan Travis, on the 39th square.
As soon as it was the old man’s turn to roll again, the young couple standing in front of him were visibly nervous. The young woman’s injuries had nearly recovered completely, but she was still wounded and only wielding a knife. She knew that if the old man landed on her square, she couldn’t hesitate. She had to be fast if she wanted to kill the man before he fired on her. Her boyfriend was no exception. He watched the old man’s every move carefully, stance ready for a fight.

The dice spun twice in the air before finally landing.

It was a 1.

The young couple sagged in relief, while the old man gulped as he stepped forward onto the 40th tile.

“Ding Dong! The free jump square has been triggered. You can choose to advance forward to any square (up to 30 squares) or backwards to any square (it cannot be a square you’ve stood on once before).”

Before Nolan, it had been the bald man, James, who’d stepped on a free jump square, which had been the 29th tile. Originally, he’d been behind Ed, with Ed himself in first place, but he’d jumped to the square Ed had stood on previously and managed a row of sixes, placing him in the front of the herd.

Now, it was Nolan’s turn to choose.

The man’s voice didn’t even waver as he spoke, though he took a long time to ponder his next move. “I choose to go back to the 29th square.”

“Ding Dong! You have chosen to jump to the 29th square. The 29th square is a free jump square. Consecutive jumps are not allowed, and therefore won’t be activated.”

The man nodded, but didn’t bother with complaints.

On the stage, Mario gave the old man an odd look, smiling thoughtfully.

The bald man standing in front of Ed frowned, speaking out loud before he could stop himself. “That old man is crazy. He’s dead last, and we’re all going to leave him behind. Sure, he’s far away from us and won’t trigger the effect, but Mario will kill him.”

Ed spared the bald man a look before shaking his head quietly.

No, the old man’s plan wasn’t that simple.

He chose to retreat instead of moving forward. The first and most obvious purpose was to avoid a big gathering of people. The old man’s most powerful weapon was his gun, but he’d already revealed that trump card. If the effect was triggered again, there was no guarantee that he’d come out of it alive. It was safer to stay far away from others.

Secondly, the old man had chosen a very good position. The 29th square was already determined to be a free jump square. Regardless if he could jump again or not, the square was a certain safety. In addition, this square was only 7 spaces away from the player previously in last place, Alex Neil.

The number 7 was very subtle. First off, it ensured that the old man had a very low chance of catching up to Alex. He’d be safer for far longer than the other players. In addition, the gap wasn’t large enough that he couldn’t catch up. As long as a few greater numbers were rolled, Nolan could
catch up with Alex and save himself from being last.

Ed assessed the old man calmly. As if he’d felt Ed’s consideration, the old man gazed up and met Ed’s eyes.

The big dice floated leisurely into the air, and Ed caught it. He randomly, nearly carelessly, tossed it into the air and waited.

When it landed on 1, Ed moved forward one square and stood on the 54th.

Eight rounds had now passed without anyone else triggering the ‘Prove Your Worth’ effect. Everyone seemed to be relaxing, falling into a false sense of security. Another round went by relatively peacefully, right up until it was Ed’s turn once again.

The bald man was standing on the 60th square, and once Ed moved to roll the dice, the bald man glanced back for a moment and said, “Is it going to be a 6? It can’t be. Too unlikely.”

Ed nearly cursed out loud. Fucking asshole couldn’t keep his fool mouth shut!

The dice rolled on the ground.

Ed didn’t even bother looking. He already knew the outcome.

The bald man’s easy smile froze, and Ed glared.

The two men eyed each other across six squares, no one making the first move as the dice landed 6-side up.

The bald man slipped his hand into his jacket, acting as if he were planning to pull out a weapon of some kind, but he didn’t yet. He left his hand in his jacket, eyeing Ed like a hawk. Ed stared right back, his right hand touching the match tattoo etched into his left wrist.

Lifting his left leg first, he walked steadily towards the 60th square.

The rest of the five players behind them watched in silence.

“Ding Dong! The ‘Prove Your Worth’ effect has been triggered…”

Ed didn’t allow the voice to finish its little speech. As soon as he stepped into the square, the bald man sprung. Pulling a sharp knife from his jacket, he jabbed it straight at Ed, but Ed was already prepared for it.

Swiftly sidestepping the stab, he lifted his left leg up and let his heel drop like an axe, connecting solidly with the man’s elbow. The man cried out, the knife slipping from his hand.

Ed didn’t let up. As soon as his left leg planted on the ground, he used the forward momentum to strengthen his next kick. His right leg swung up in a graceful half-circle, kicking the man away from him.

Ed’s movements had been fluid and quick, leaving the people behind him and the old man a fair distance away, shocked. They eyed Ed like they’d seen a supernatural creature, but Ed paid them no mind.

He knew this wasn’t the end of it.

The bald man had rolled a long way away from Ed before finally coming to a stop, pushing
himself up to his knees and gasping out, coughing up blood as he tried to get his breath back.

Ed couldn’t let him recover.

He rushed forward, but he was too slow.

Right in that moment, the Black Tower finally finished its last sentence. And just as it did, Black Mario came falling from the sky, shaking the ground violently under him.

Fuck, Ed was too late.

Narrowing his eyes, he didn’t hesitate to take out the big match.

Ed could hear the voice of the man with the beer gut exclaiming in the distance, “An ability!”

The bald man had been kicked away by Ed, so the first one Black Mario saw was him.

Those black eyes looked at the big match in Ed’s hand, and his eyes seemed to light up. He trotted over and kicked out at Ed’s right leg. Ed’s reaction speed was fast, and he managed to jump over the blow, but he wasn’t fast enough to avoid Mario’s right hand as it aimed straight for Ed’s head at a nearly terrifying speed.

The speed nearly surpassed Ed’s vision.

What the fuck?! Ed could now track the trajectory of an ordinary bullet and avoid the shot, yet he almost didn’t have time to swing the big match up to block a direct hit to the face. His response time was amazing. He’d been reeling back when he’d returned the big match to his wrist, and then quickly took it out again at an angle just to the right of his face.

**Bang!**

As soon as Mario’s fist connected with the big match, the hit was mostly blocked. What Ed couldn’t help was the way the match rebounded, scraping against Ed’s right cheek and tearing away a piece of his skin with it. The fist had slammed down, but the match wasn’t broken. However, the same could not be said for Ed’s jaw.

Ed was tossed aside by the hit, and Black Mario didn’t pause before looking for his other target.

The bald man had finally managed to stand, only to see the large Black Mario bearing down on him. As fast as he could, he turned and ran. He didn’t dare run in Ed’s direction. The viciousness and strength of Ed’s attack had frightened him, and he knew he couldn’t beat the young man. Still, turning his back on an enemy might mean his death. Not to mention… Black Mario was much faster than him.

Mario punched out at the bald man, scoring a direct hit to his back. The bald man didn’t have Ed’s strength or luck. The hit caused more than just blood to spew out of the man’s mouth. He flew, landing not too far from Ed himself.

Black Mario saw the two of them in proximity to each other and smiled. He no longer toyed with the bald man, heading straight for Ed instead. Ed fought hard to avoid the attacks, occasionally using the large match to block Mario’s attacks. Despite his speed, despite his strength, despite his skill, he knew he was outmatched here. There was no opportunity to counterattack. No way to completely avoid the hits coming at him. Ed hadn’t felt this helpless, this weak, since he was 12. It didn’t take long for him to be covered in wounds.
The intensity and frequency of the hits gave Ed no breathing room. He hadn’t faced this kind of speed since Izumi had first started teaching both him and Al. She’d beaten them both nearly to death, but she’d always stopped. She’d always yelled and encouraged, always directed them on how they could better themselves, even as she knocked them down. This was not the same.

Ed wanted to use the only offensive ability he had, but there was no pause, no chance to even hesitate, let alone place his hands on his hips and shout ‘Fire Fist Ace’.

Just then, Mario kicked out again. Ed didn’t have time to take out the match. He brought up his right arm and took the blow on his automail. The pain nearly blinded him. Suddenly, he couldn’t feel his right arm anymore, and Ed knew that it wouldn’t be recovering anytime soon.

On the stage, the original Mario smiled with glee, kindly reminding, “Poor child, did you forget? As long as there is only one player remaining on the square, the effect will stop.”

As if in an echo of the original Mario’s words, the Black Mario mirrored the smile and slammed his palm into Ed’s abdomen.

Fuck!

Ed was blown back hard, blood erupting from his mouth as he lost all the air he’d managed to gather during the fight. He knew he’d suffered some internal damage now. If he was attacked one more time, his physical recovery speed wouldn’t be able to keep up. He would die here.

Al…

Mario’s voice came unbidden again. “Lovely child, there are still two players on the square.”

Black Mario slowed down, walking slowly over to Ed. Enjoying the chase.

Al…

Flame…

Winry…

Ed couldn’t quite see straight, but he knew that he needed to survive. He had to find his brother. Winry. He needed to survive this.

The thought passed by quick and sudden.

Without second-guessing himself, Ed pulled out the big match and turned on his heel, dashing full-out towards the bald man who’d lost consciousness not too far away. The big match arched up as Ed raised it to strike down.

The match head was only about half a meter away from the man’s chest when, suddenly, the heavy footsteps behind him halted.

Ed stopped himself just in time, turning back to see what was happening.

Black Mario seemed to be frozen mid-run.

On the stage, the original Mario sighed. “Poor child, why couldn’t you hold out for just a few more seconds? It is such a pity,” he said regretfully.

Ed’s attention turned to the unconscious man at his feet. Crouching down, he checked for a pulse.
There was none. The man was dead.

Fucking hell… Ed was alive.

Using the big match as a crutch, Ed limped his way back to the 60th square. His legs nearly couldn’t hold him up. The only thing keeping him upright was the grip of his left hand on the match that supported him. His right arm hung limply, and black liquid like oil seeped through his red hoodie and dripped down the once-white glove still clinging wetly to his automail hand. He was worried about the damage to the prosthetic. While he knew his flesh arm would have healed, he had no idea what his new healing rate would do to his automail. He could only hope that he’d have use of his right arm when this was over.

Behind him, the other five players held their breaths, gazing at his back in astonishment. They all looked as if they’d seen a monster.

Ed’s narrowed eyes fell blankly on the Mario on the stage, and seeming to suddenly remember something, he squatted down. Using his right hand, still covered in the slick, black oil, he drew a neat, shiny circle on the ground. He couldn’t feel his fingers, but he knew the ability would make the circle just perfect.

Mario watched him curiously, before asking, “My cute child, congratulations on surviving. What are you doing?”

Ed looked up, voice cold and hard when he replied. “I’m drawing a circle to wish you a long and healthy life.”

“Oh, you are such a lovely child.”

Ed didn’t answer.

The game continued, and Ed stood at the forefront of the remaining players. His whole body was leaning heavily against the match. He looked very weak, but nobody dared underestimate him. The five people standing behind him watched him in clear horror, each one praying that they wouldn’t be the ones to enter the same square as that man.

Ed closed his eyes, feeling his wounds beginning to heal. He nearly choked on his relief when he realized that the feeling in his right arm was slowly coming back. He’d need to check the automail later, but it seemed that he hadn’t lost the limb once again. He just had to hope that whatever damage was present was something he could handle without Winry.

He’d lived for now, but this wasn’t where Mario’s malice ended.

Ed seemed to fall into his own thoughts. As the others rolled the dice and moved to their squares, he stood there, in his own tile, eyes closed and deep in thought.

The rounds went on, Ed playing along almost on autopilot.

The old man was fortunate enough to avoid triggering the ‘Prove Your Worth’ effect or any penalty squares. The other four, however, weren’t so lucky.

The mostly unknown middle-aged man, Brandon Carter, was met with a level five punishment square. The second he stepped onto the tile, countless winged flying fish emerged from the ground and flew at him.

The man had enough time to cry out, but not much else. His entire body was devoured by the fish,
not even his bones left behind.

Ed made his way to the 80th square. Behind him were the young man on the 70th and the young woman on the 64th.

It was the woman’s turn to roll the dice. At first, she kept whispering quietly to her boyfriend, obvious fear in her voice. However, once the dice landed 6-side up, both of them fell silent at the same time.

The young woman looked up at the man, and the man looked back at her.

“Je- Jeff?”

The young man gulped. “Don’t be afraid, Vicky. Come over here. We’ll fight Black Mario off together.”

“That man couldn’t even beat Mario! How could we possibly manage it?” the woman cried, her finger pointing shakily towards Ed.

The man gritted his teeth and said, “If we can’t live together, then we can die together! I’ll die with you, Vicky!”

“Yes!” The young woman seemed moved to tears. She nodded furiously before taking off, quickly running to her boyfriend.

“Ding Dong! The ‘Prove-”

The Black Tower’s game cue abruptly stopped.

Ed closed his eyes, turning his face away from the pair of lovers.

The woman’s knife was sunk to the hilt in the man’s chest. Yet, that wasn’t the only betrayal. The man also held a kitchen knife, most of the long blade buried in the woman’s stomach. They stared into each other’s eyes, blood leaking from bitterly curved lips.

“So… this is who you are. Fucking bitch…”

The woman didn’t seem to have enough left in her to be mad. Instead, she cried as she smiled. “Men… all liars and cheats.”

Their voices trailed off as the two fell into each other. They’d actually fulfilled their promise to die together. How cliche.

It seemed that only three players were left on the game board. Ed, Alex Neil, and Nolan Travis.

Ed stood on the 80th square, Alex on the 62nd, and the old man on the 55th.

Finally, it was Ed’s turn. He looked down at the dice balanced in his left hand for a moment. His right still wasn’t reacting when he tried to move more than his fingertips. With thin lips and a determined glint in his eyes, Ed tossed the dice.

It landed 3-side up.

Ed walked forward three steps, moving onto the 83rd square, only to allow a small smirk to grace his lips once he heard the Black Tower’s announcement.
“Ding Dong! A free jump square has been triggered. You can select…”

Mario had already taken a seat on the ground of the stage in a bored manner, his right hand holding up his chin as he watched the three remaining players.

Ed leaned on the big match, smirk still in place as he spoke up. “Dear Mario, I have a few questions that I’m pretty curious about. Can you answer them for me? They’re all simple questions. I don’t believe you’ll actually refuse to answer any of them.”

Mario’s eyebrows rose in a show of interest. Instantly, he stood back up. “Lovely child, what’s the problem? Whatever it is, the kind-hearted Mario would never refuse to answer questions. Go ahead and ask.”

Ed pointed up above Mario’s head. “Those 6,456 people, they all died here, right?”

Mario laughed. “They didn’t die. They wanted to stay here and play Mario’s game forever.”

Ed nodded, having already guessed that one. “If there is only one player left in the game, assuming he reaches the finish line, is he the last one?”

“Of course not. If there is only one person left, there will be a very lonely child left behind. He’ll be as lonely as Mario himself. How could I let him be the last one?”

Ed’s eyes narrowed in a glare. He was silent for a long moment after hearing that non-answer, but he didn’t try asking again. It was a while before he continued his list of questions. “The Black Tower announced the rules, but I’d like to confirm it again. Dear Mario, do you really have king’s squares and prisoner squares?”

So far, the farthest the eight players had reached was the 80th square. 80 spaces had passed with no one triggering either the king’s squares or the prisoner squares. There had been only blank, reward, penalty, and free jump squares. That in itself was telling.

Mario threw a thumbs-up at Ed, smiling wide and bright. “Of course there is! The great Mario would never tell a lie.”

“Is that so?” Ed raised his head a fraction more, golden eyes meeting Mario’s large blue ones. “My last question… Dear Mario, is there really a clearance square?”

It was Mario’s turn to glare at Ed’s words, but whatever he was looking for, he didn’t find. After a long while, he laughed again. “The great Mario never lies. Child, of course there is a clearance square. Now, enough of this nonsense. Choose what square you would like to jump to.”

Ed hummed in reply, but he didn’t speak again as he pulled out a white egg from his pocket.

Mario looked at the turkey egg and touched his chin thoughtfully. “What is that? It looks a bit familiar.”

Ed struggled to control his right arm enough to manage it, but he was grateful when it moved with enough fluidity to draw an ‘S’ on the white shell of the turkey egg.

The next moment, the sound of running water filled Ed’s ears. He frowned for a second, listening to the sound before asking in his mind, “Mr. Mustang?”

--
A thousand miles away in East City, in a deserted residential building.

Roy Mustang suddenly stopped dead, soapy hand against his chest. Quickly, he moved to turn off the tap.

Ed’s voice rang in his head again. “Mr. Mustang?”

The soap-covered Roy Mustang wasn’t sure if he should answer.

A white fluorescent light shone from the ceiling of the bathroom, illuminating the strong, lean form of the man’s body. He had smooth, beautiful skin and long legs. Small droplets of water trailed down the muscles of his six pack, slipping down into short, curly black hairs.

After a moment of indecisive silence, Roy finally answered. “...Yes, I’m here.”

If Ed noticed the strangeness, he didn’t let on. Softly, he whispered, “I would like to trouble you to help me open the archiver.”
Chapter 23 - Taking Chances

Ed praised whatever god had given him Roy Mustang on the other end of this useful prop. Talking to someone with the same intelligence as yourself made things so much easier, Ed had to admit. Ed asked Mustang to open the archiver, and three seconds later, the ‘S’ symbol he’d drawn on the white turkey egg started to flash.

In his head, the intoxicating male voice murmured, “It will last for one hour. Once that time is up, the contents of the archiver will automatically disappear. There is only one chance to load the file.”

“Yes, thank you.”

Mustang’s words were concise, and clearly explained the functions of the turkey egg one more time, in case Ed didn’t really remember. Ed didn’t mind - it wasn’t like Mustang knew about Ed’s eidetic memory.

While the man’s soothing voice could only be heard by Ed, to everyone else including Mario himself, it merely looked as if Ed had suddenly fallen silent. Mario was quickly running out of patience. Irritated, he ground out, “Child, do you hate this game? Don’t you want to continue playing with the great Mario? Why aren’t you choosing the square you want to jump to?”
Unconcerned, Ed placed the turkey egg back into his pocket, calmly looking up at the giant figure not too far away. “I was thinking from the very beginning of the game that, with 6,456 players having participated and there only being 150 squares, how come no one’s cleared it? This type of probability is more than a little abnormal.”

Mario blinked slowly back at him. “Lovely child, I don’t understand what you’re saying. Just make your choice.”

Behind Ed, the man with the beer gut was also getting annoyed. He yelled out, “Stop playing around! Choose where you’re going to jump and stop angering that guy. If you get him angry, you stay away from us. You’ll bring hell down on our heads!”

However, an older voice was heard over his tantrum. “Yes. The probability of that is odd.”

Ed looked over his shoulder at the old man standing on the 55th square.

From the very beginning, there had been eight people standing on the ‘START’ square. Ed had casually asked about the number on the LED board hanging above the stage, and ever since hearing the answer, Ed had had a great deal of doubt about this game.

If there were 6,456 players in groups of 8 each, there would have been 807 groups. With this many groups of people participating in this Monopoly game, not one of them had managed to leave alive?

That was why Ed has posed the question about only one player remaining.

Without another player to trigger the ‘Prove Your Worth’ effect, and thus not having to face the terrible Black Mario, the only harm remaining would be the penalty squares and the prisoner squares.

Ed hadn’t witnessed a level six penalty, but he could make an educated guess. If not even Roy Mustang could match Black Mario, would someone just as strong be able to face off against a level six penalty? And if so, then there had to be a catch. There was something about this game that almost required death. Even if someone survived to be the last player alive, Mario confirmed that whoever survived wouldn’t be seen as the winner just for living. They would have to reach the end… but no one had.

With 30 punishment squares, and no more than 8 prisoner squares, the fact that none of the 6,000 plus people had reached the end illustrated more than just a problem.

Ed quietly looked at the squares between the 120th to the 150th.

“In those 30 squares, there are six consecutive prisoner squares,” Ed announced, voice low and calm, almost indifferent. However, his statement had a profound effect on the two men standing behind him. Ed didn’t bother turning to look, his attention remaining on Mario. “A guilty person will die. Since the Black Tower said so, any players who land on the prisoner squares are met with nothing less than death. Six consecutive prisoner squares would eliminate the players, keeping them from advancing past that section of the board, regardless of the number they rolled. They wouldn’t be able to avoid landing on a prisoner square.”

Mario’s entire body seemed to freeze solid for a moment, like pressing pause on a movie, but just as quickly, the classic game character placed his hands on his hips and threw back his head in a loud, booming laugh. “Lovely child, how could you say that? This game is a reward from the great Mario to all of the children. Mario will share many treasures and precious items with you.”
spread his arms wide open, presenting all of the gold on stage as an example. “Isn’t Mario giving you the opportunity to receive so many rewards?”

Ed smirked back. “There’s a way to win. Whether you want to reveal it or not is another matter.”

Mario’s grin disappeared. “Child, you are making me angry.”

The man with the beer belly roared at this. “Don’t provoke him! Are you stupid?! None of us can beat him. If you piss him off and he comes down here... I don’t care what you do, you can die if you want, but I sure as hell won’t!”

Ed tipped his head back, looking over his shoulder to eye the man. “If he could come down here, do you think he would have stayed there for so long?”

The man instantly tensed.

Mario couldn’t even say a word. There was no way to refute Ed’s claim.

Ed believed that the Black Tower would provide a way to win. It was just like when he’d participated in the ‘Who Stole My Book?’ game. Finding one book among 23 large bookshelves and more than a thousand books should have been impossible, but there was a strategy to succeed in the game.

When playing Mario’s Monopoly Game, he only really needed to focus on two key points.

First, the flexibility of the free jump grid.

There were two ways to use the free jump square. The first was to move forward a maximum of 30 squares. The second was to jump back any number of squares, apart from a square the person had already landed on before.

This jump mode proved something. After the 120th square, there could be no more free jump squares. Otherwise, the players could just jump directly to the 150th square, winning the game completely. But that wasn’t in line with Mario’s bad character, and it had already been established that more than 6,000 people have already died in this game. There was no way probability could be that bad.

Secondly, one needed to remember the contents of each square the other players had already stepped on.

With his eidetic memory, Ed didn’t even need to work very hard on that one. Starting from the third square to the 83rd, eight players had stepped on 61 of them. Among them, there were 16 free jump, 13 punishments, 8 rewards, and 24 blank squares.

To back up his original theory of the lack of free jump squares past the 120th tile, they had encountered 16 free jump squares among 61 spaces. The probability of free jump squares accounted for 20% of the total number of squares, meaning a total of 30 scattered throughout the whole board.

If Ed had to take a guess, he’d bet his life on the fact that there was a line of free jump squares between the 80th to 90th tiles. And that is where the game would truly capture a thoughtless person.

Suddenly so close to the end, suddenly within reach of their prize, no one would think of going back. They would believe that to go forward would be more beneficial, and in doing so, they would
seal their fate.

With that thought, Ed suddenly decided to express it. “The king’s squares are directly connected with the prisoner squares, aren’t they. After continuous king’s squares, there will be continuous prisoner squares.”

Ed nearly whispered the words, meaning that the two men behind him didn’t hear him. Mario, however, smiled sinisterly, as if to acknowledge his guess.

Treasures of silver and gold were useless to the population of today. The players of this little Monopoly game didn’t really think about getting gold or diamonds. Apart from already being forced into playing the game, their only thoughts were of the temptation of the 5% king’s squares.

However, after the king’s squares ended, the consecutive prisoner squares would be waiting for them, but by then, it would be too late to turn back. The only thing they would face would be death, one way or another.

In other words, after a certain point on the board, there was no way to win.

Ed stretched his right hand over his head, supporting it with his left on his automail elbow. He could feel the pull of metal… but that was the point. He could feel it. Whatever healing ability he’d gained apparently worked on his automail, at least on an internal level.

Putting his hands into his hoodie pockets, Ed yawned as he raised his head again. In a calm voice, he stated, “I’ve thought long and hard, and decided which square I want to jump to.”

Mario was obviously taken by surprise. After hesitating for so long, it was clear that he hadn’t expected Ed to suddenly commit to jumping. The grin was back. “What’s this now, child? No more words to say? You plan to jump now?” With a single nod of his head, Mario showed his approval, as if all of Ed’s words before that moment hadn’t been spoken at all. Fixing his skewed red cap on his head, he said, “Mario likes smart children like you the most. Let’s not talk about the many surprises Mario has prepared for you.”

Ed wanted to snort, but he refrained.

Instead, he made a choice. “I want to jump back.”

Mario waved a big gloved hand, unbothered. “Sure, what square do you want to jump back to?”

“Oh, the… the first…” Mario’s entire body stilled again, someone else pushing the pause button. His words had stuttered out, nearly murmured, which shocked the two men left behind Ed. Two seconds later, Mario whipped his attention back to Ed and stared at him with suddenly dark, angry eyes.

The man with the beer belly seemed freaked out. “The first square? Why the hell would you want to go back to the beginning?”

The old man frowned, but he didn’t speak. Instead, his face twisted up in thought, trying to grasp Ed’s train of thought.

Mario stroked the corners of his mustache, a forced, twisted imitation of a grin on his face. “Child, did I just hear you wrong? You want to jump all the way back to the first square?”
Ed ignored him. Looking up at the sky and whatever disembodied voice represented the Black Tower, he called out loudly, “I want to jump to the first square.”

“Ding Dong! You have chosen to jump back to the first square.”

With his move acknowledged, Ed turned on his heel and began his march back to the first square.

Mario’s voice suddenly rose, the twisted little grin finally gone completely. “If you go back to the first square, you will be in last place. You will have to play the game from the beginning! Even if the two players in front of you fall, you will have to continue alone! Child, next time you might not be so lucky. What if you trigger the level six punishment square?”

Ed didn’t even bother turning back. “I’d like to start from scratch and challenge myself.”

Mario began to panic. “You’re being a very bad child! You will run into terrible punishments next time!”

“I think I’m a lovely person.”

Mario’s jaw hit the floor. He’d never seen such a brazen person. “You…!”

The sound of low, deep laughter was heard from inside his mind, making Ed pause for only a moment.

Roy Mustang asked, “Am I disturbing you?”

Ed had known that Mustang would be able to hear the entire dialogue, but he’d had no real way to keep that from happening. In order to use the save mode, he had no choice but to let this person listen in.

“No.”

--

In the distant fringes of East City, the tall man had long washed the soap from his body, not finishing his shower but managing to rinse off the worst of it before pulling a towel around his hips. Roy sat back on a large sofa, one of the psychology books from the many shelves casually held in his hands.

Once the archiver was activated, neither side could help but endure the connection.

There were few opportunities for Roy and Ed to actually contact each other, but he’d known from the beginning that Ed wasn’t a stupid person. If the game he was playing was dangerous enough to need the safety net of the save mode, then it must be a very difficult game indeed.

Knowing that, Roy couldn’t help his mild curiosity. He wasn’t about to interrupt the other person’s important game just so he could finish his shower. The first time around, when it had been Roy’s turn, Ed had remained as quiet as possible. Not speaking a word until the very end, when it seemed like Roy would not survive the battle.

There had been clear concern in the youthful voice, and for some reason, it had moved Roy like nothing ever had before.

Now, as he listened to a little of what was going on with the other owner of such a precious prop, Roy couldn’t help but smile a bit.
Wit, intelligence, sarcasm…

Familiarity pulled at Roy’s mind, even as interest and curiosity drowned it out.

Back in the Monopoly Game, Ed didn’t pay much mind to the man in the towel listening carefully to his end of the two-way connection. Instead, Ed came up to the 70th square and met the man with the beer gut.

Alex moved to the side, allowing Ed the room to walk. Once the short blond had reached the 69th tile, he said, “Hey, do you really want to do this? Do you actually want to go back to square one?”

The comment gave Ed a moment’s pause. Looking back at the man, Ed arched a brow in interest. “You. You’re the one with the wind-related ability, aren’t you?”

Alex seemed to sputter. “H- How did you know?”

Ed sneered at him. “Once we leave this game, I’ll kill you.”

He didn’t bother to say anything more as he continued forth on his walk. From behind him, he heard a loud shout, “You- You’re insane!”

Ed reached the old man’s square, but Nolan said nothing. He moved aside without hesitation, watching Ed pass by with cautious eyes.

Ed strode forward one step after another. In the white expanse of the game world, Alex, Nolan, and Mario eyed him with pure astonishment, no one saying a word or expressing their thoughts on the very insane idea. Once Ed took a step onto the third square, Mario suddenly shouted, “The 100th square is the king’s square! It’s the only king’s square before the 120th! You can jump to the 100th square from the 83rd! It isn’t too late to return! If you go back to the first square, you won’t be lucky enough to land on the 83rd square again!”

Ed didn’t stop, but he did look over at the giant Mario. “You saying that actually makes me feel more relieved.”

“You wicked boy! You aren’t human! You’re the devil!”

“I’m not the devil, and you certainly aren’t human.”

“You-!”

Mario struggled to jump off the stage. He bounced around wildly, shaking the entire world as he furiously glared at Ed. The two remaining players had no doubt that Mario was actively trying to kill Ed, but just as Ed had claimed, Mario was stuck on the stage.

Mario’s fierce, forceful movements caused the cheap neon lights surrounding the stage to fall to the ground, but nothing he did seemed to get him past the edge of his prison. He just stared at Ed with hateful blue eyes.

Ed rolled his own eyes before stopping just at the edge of the third square. His eyes narrowed, his shoulders tightening as he looked between the second and the first tiles. Finally, he stepped past the second square and stood dead center on the first. The moment his foot landed on the tile, all of his tension evaporated. His lips slightly curved up as he sighed. “Looks like you weren’t as insane as I thought you were. I wasted a save…”
Then, the crisp, clear voice of a child was heard around the pure white world.

“Ding Dong! The Clearance Square had been triggered. At 22:49 on November 22nd, 2018, the player Edward Elric has successfully cleared the large multiplayer instance ‘Mario’s Monopoly Game’ and won the reward, ‘Great Mario’s Treasure’.”

Alex’s back straightened as if he’d been shocked, his gaze turning to Ed in pure and boundless disbelief.

Nolan watched him with astonishment, eyes filled with doubt and confusion.

Mario angrily pounded on the clear barrier wall that confined him to the stage, stomping his feet and screaming, “You are the devil! The Devil! That was my baby! Mario worked hard for 26 years for that! You lazy fucking human, stealing my treasure when you did nothing to earn it! I won’t give it to you! Never!”

However, even as Mario protested, a huge golden hill emerged just to the right of the stage.

It floated in front of everyone’s eyes. Mario jumped in horror, trying to reach out and grab onto the flying golden hill, but never managed to reach past the barrier. The huge golden hill rose into the air a little higher before flying straight to Ed, falling onto the second tile behind him.

Countless gold coins and diamonds piled up on the hill behind Ed. A few gold coins rolling down to fall at Ed’s heels. Turning around, he leaned over to pick up one of them.

“Why the first square?” the old man asked suddenly, catching Ed’s attention.

Ed shifted his gaze away from the coin. “This is a game. So, there needs to be a way to win.”

The old man frowned and whispered, “The first square… the first square…” He kept muttering the words, trying to figure out what clue must be hidden there.

Ed didn’t let him ponder for long. “None of the other 6,000 plus people managed to pass the game. This proves two points. First, there is definitely no free jump square after the 120th space. Secondly, there are six consecutive prisoner squares after the 120th. From what I’ve gathered about this guy…” Ed gestured at Mario with his head, who was crying on the stage, “he would’ve set the very last six squares as prisoner squares. Before that, it would be continuous king’s squares.”

When a person finally came to the end, they would be faced with a king’s square… only for a prisoner square to take away that victory.

To come so close… It would be the greatest show for something as sadistic as the Black Tower. Hell, as Mario himself.

From beginning to end, the whole point of the game was for players to find the clearance square.

“From the very start, I thought the number of free jump squares were far too many. They are 20% of the free squares, meaning a total of 30 spaces. At least 19 adults could land on a free jump square, but normal people wouldn’t even think of jumping back to the first square. The spaces in front of a player were unknown. Generally, players would choose to jump to a square that had already been stepped on, or to move back to avoid triggering the ‘Prove Your Worth’ effect.”

The old man had been a prime example of that last fact. The first time he landed on a free jump square, he chose to retreat to the rear of the group.
The man with the beer belly couldn’t seem to grasp the point, though. “Then, why the first square?”

“If there were no free jump squares among the 150 total, which tile is a player least likely to land on?”

The man thought for a while before finally coming to a realization. “The first square! Yes, it’s the first one.”

At least he wasn’t stupid enough to be hopeless.

Originally, Ed had been planning to leave the game and beat up the person who had pulled him in. As pissed as he actually was about that, he was sure that even breaking bones wouldn’t have satisfied him enough. Right now, though, the man’s brain seemed to finally be in working order. Maybe Ed would break only one limb. Whatever the case, Ed knew he didn’t have the heart to kill someone in cold blood… Not yet...

If Alex could understand the truth, then naturally, Nolan understood too.

Mario’s Monopoly Game had a total of 150 squares. In most people’s minds, the most unlikely square for them to reach would be the 149th, or even the 150th… but in fact, it was even more difficult to land on the first square.

There were numerous ways to get to the 150th square.

On the other hand, if there were no free jump squares, there was only one way to land on the first square, and that was by rolling a 1 right off the bat.

There were two ways to get to the second square, and that was by rolling a pair of 1s on the first two rounds. While there were four different ways to get to the third square: throw a 3 directly, or roll a 2 and then a 1, or roll a 1 and then a 2, or roll a 1 three times in a row.

As a player went on, the ways to reach each cell would multiply.

If there was only one player, the probability that they would manage to reach the 150th square was extremely low. Even making it to the 100th square would have been a stretch, especially with the increasing levels of punishments.

Before Ed’s group, a total of 6,456 players had participated in the game. At least one of those 6,000 plus people must’ve reached the 150th square, or maybe even the 149th, but none of them had landed on the clearance square.

With that, there were two possibilities.

First, Mario deliberately set up six consecutive prisoner squares, and placed the clearance square after them. Meaning any player would die before reaching the clearance square.

But that situation seemed even more unlikely.

The clearance square couldn’t be set after the prisoner squares. Otherwise, the game would be completely impossible to win.

If the Black Tower really wanted to kill all the players that entered the instance, there would be no need to set up such a complicated game. Mario alone could kill everyone who was pulled into the instance.
From all that he knew of the Tower, there must have been a way to win.

When Ed realized that, he knew that the second possibility was the most probable.

With a one in six chance to roll a 1 on the first round, that was the most unlikely outcome out of every other one.

Especially with the Black Tower controlling the dice.

The only way to land on the first square at all would be through a free jump square. Ed had wondered why there were so many of them set up, since their usefulness wasn’t all that great. Now, after confirming that the first tile was the clearance square, the existence of so many free jump squares not only made sense, it was obvious. It guaranteed that all eight players had a chance to clear the game.

The Black Tower played by crooked rules, but if one used their mind and their luck, they possessed a chance, however slim, of surviving.

Why?

Mario lay on the stage, sobbing loudly into his arms.

Ed took out the turkey egg and huffed. “You can close the archive, Mr. Mustang. I’m sorry for wasting your time.”

Roy had already closed his book, devoting himself to listening attentively to the happenings through the turkey egg. He gave a low, sexy chuckle. “The archiver didn’t seem useful this time.”

Ed laughed helplessly. “Yes, I seem to have wasted the save function too. I thought Mario would have refused to follow logic. The prisoner squares being 5% of the total number of tiles was very subtle. I wasn’t sure if it was 7 or 8 squares. Like the king’s square, I thought that Mario would put a prisoner square before the 120th. It was most likely between the 100th and 120th, and he himself said that the 100th was a king’s square. The prisoner square should be within 6 spaces of that. He would find it entertaining to see if the person who’d gotten the king’s square would also land on the prisoner square.”

Roy smiled, “He does sound rather mean.”

“If he was even more insane, he could have set the possible eighth prisoner square on the first tile. As a result, there would be only one way to actually reach the second square, making it the same as the probability of reaching the first square, but I was more inclined towards the first. But if the first had been a prisoner square, I could have loaded the final round again and chosen the second square instead. It’s a pity - it seems he was still a bit too fair.”

“You seem as if you were hoping that the game boss would be more brutal.”

“He’s brutal enough,” Ed murmured. “I’m sorry, I’m talking your ear off. I forgot that you likely don’t even understand the game.”

Roy leaned forward, his elbows balanced on his knees and his hands hanging between his legs, one of them wrapped around the shiny white turkey egg. “No, it’s fine. It sounded like a very interesting game from what I heard.”

Ed bit his bottom lip, looking down at the egg in his hand with an odd expression on his face. For some reason, hearing that had pulled at something in Ed’s chest.
‘Interesting game…’

More and more, this man sounded like the same type of person as…

Flame.

Perhaps that was the reason he’d been compelled to vocalize his train of thought. After all, there was no point in voicing his ideas to other people. Mario would just want to kill him, Alex wouldn’t have been smart enough to keep up, and Nolan would have questioned his intelligence if Ed had said that he believed the first square had the possibility of being a prisoner square. And Ed wouldn’t have told the old man about the archiver, no matter what.

To feel so comfortable talking to another person, to have them keep up, to have them understand… No one had been that person for Ed before. Even with Al, Ed had to hold himself back. Al was his younger brother, and Ed would always feel the need to shelter and protect him. Especially from his thoughts.

Yet, not this time.

He’d spoken. Honestly and thoughtlessly.

How strange.

Without another word and the game safely at an end, Ed closed down the archiver, cutting off the connection to Roy Mustang.

Mario sat on the stage and cried, large, soppy tears streaming from his face like rain, flooding the Monopoly tiles until they seemed to soak the last three men’s shoes.

Ed had stepped onto the clearance square, his success had even been announced, yet the three players still hadn’t left the strange white world. The old man quickly made his way over. “Is it true that you can take this mountain of gold if you’ve cleared the game?”

Ed looked up at the huge mountain of wealth.

“I don’t think I want to take all of this gold with me.”

“W- what? Wait, what’s that?” the old man asked, pointing into the pile of gold as he spoke.

Ed frowned, looking directly where the man’s finger pointed. In the middle of the giant gold hill, a small red gem seemed to be embedded inside the depths of the coins and jewelry. Ed moved forward, having to climb over quite a bit of the pile before he managed to reach out and take the ruby.

Behind him, he heard a whisper, “It’s the same color as your hair…” but he ignored it.

In a flash, all the gold disappeared, and Mario’s sobs became even louder. “My baby! My baby!”

So, this was the real reward? Mario’s Treasure?

After taking hold of the ruby, Ed’s body began to gradually fade away, leaving the washed, white world behind.

Before he was fully gone, Mario managed to stop crying. Pushing himself to his feet, he shouted, “You devil! You are the devil named Edward Elric! I’ll remember you! I will definitely- ah!”
In a flash, Mario’s head was covered by a mist of black smoke. Just as he took a step forward, his foot slid on a puddle of his own tears, sliding right out from under him. His arms pinwheeled as he fell backwards. Ed caught a glimpse of a shiny, gold coin stuck in a small crack of the stage.

It seemed like pure poetic justice as the only three players left in the game watched Mario fall back, his ass hitting the stage first before the back of his head slammed right into that small, protruding golden coin.

Ed was taken by surprise by his own sudden bubble of laughter, but it didn’t last very long as a stream of blood began to pool under Mario’s head.

Ed’s eyes widened as he looked down at the ruby in his hand. Suddenly, he didn’t want the damn jewel - he wanted the fucking gold coins! To be an item strong enough to cause *Mario* harm?! Those damn coins had to be even tougher than Mosaic’s match! All he needed to do was find a way to weaponize the coins, and he’d be as unbeatable as Roy Mustang. Maybe even more so, if he found a way to make the attack a long-distance one. Stronger than bullets.

However, the golden hill had vanished, and it was unlikely to return on his demand.

Ed looked down at the ruby in his hand again.

He hoped this treasure didn’t disappoint. Somehow, though, he wasn’t betting on it.

In the blink of an eye, the trio was suddenly returned to the flowerbed.

It had been evening when they’d entered the instance. Now, as they found themselves returned, the moon was their only source of light.

Ed took a moment to look around before something flashed above his head, making him dive forward and out of the way of four falling bodies. First was the middle-aged woman, Heather Kindle, followed by the bald man, James Cole, and then the young pair of lovers, Jefferson Grady and Victory Bradley. They were thrown from such a height and with such force that they bounced and rolled like rag dolls, landing haphazardly around the flowerbed and the gravel sidewalk.

Ed guessed that the only reason Brandon Carter’s body hadn’t been returned as well was because there was no body left to return. He’d been completely eaten by the flying fish.

All of them had entered the same game, but they hadn’t known each other.

Ed stretched up out of his crouch and moved from one body to the other, taking off their coats or jackets and laying them softly over each body’s face.

The other two players seemed indifferent to anything but their relief. The man with the beer belly smiled wide, a huge laugh booming from his gut. “I was fortunate to survive until the end of that godforsaken game!”

The old man nodded once. “All thanks to this lad. Sorry for being forced to pull you into… What are you doing?”

The old man’s eyes that had just turned to face Ed widened in astonishment and fear.

Ed stood facing both of them, the big match in his right hand, face calm but intent.

Both men took an instinctive step backwards. They had seen the power of that item. The man with the beer belly began to sputter. “You- What are you doing?! Are you going to kill us?!” He
sounded incredulous, and Ed had to stop himself from rolling his eyes.

Indifferently, he replied, “I told you in the instance. After we left, I would kill you.”

The old man gasped, but the bigger man only seemed to get redder, his hands coming up in a show of surrender. “You weren’t joking?!”

“Why would I joke?” Ed twirled the match. “I won’t go after the old man for the moment. If I take him on first, he’ll likely die quickly. As for you? Sorry, but your ability dug your grave for you.”

In a flash of a red/gold blur, the big match swung through the air and slammed into Alex Neil’s soft, round stomach.

Ed knew that his speed and strength far surpassed his opponent’s, and he used that to his advantage. He wouldn’t allow the man the chance to counterattack. As soon as Alex was on the ground, Ed swung again, the match connecting solidly with the man’s right leg. The sound of the bone breaking came first, and then the scream followed.

“Fuck! Who the hell do you think you are!? You think winning that stupid game makes you so great?! We could have won without you! I’ll fucking kill you!”

The man opened his mouth and inhaled so deeply that Ed saw his chest inflate beyond the point of a normal human’s. Ed wasn’t stupid - he knew that the man’s ability had something to do with wind. Stabbing the end of the match into the ground, Ed braced his feet and held on.

In the next moment, the man leaned forward and exhaled. A strong, sharp wind blew the trees on the side of the road, bending them back. Ed brought a hand up to cover his eyes, but held onto the match, managing to keep himself stable. The old man wasn’t as lucky. He went flying, and Ed didn’t look back to see where he’d landed.

Alex’s wind blew for a good three minutes before it finally stopped.

When the wind was finally gone, Ed looked back up, meeting the fat man’s surprised eyes with a fierce glare. Ed was unhurt, but he couldn’t say the same for the old man.

The fat man’s face filled with a mix of horror and fear. He’d used his ability, but Ed was not only still alive, he was standing. It was obviously the first time something like this had happened since all of this started, and that frightened the man. “I- I’m sorry! Spare me! You- You’re alive, right? You won the game, please… spare me…”

Ed curled his lip in a snarl. “It was you. No one else matters. You were the one who pulled me into that game. That means, you die.”

The fat man’s pleading stopped dead, and Ed saw the dark, wet patch that grew at the man’s crotch.

With a snort of derision, Ed tapped the match head on his left wrist and the match vanished. Leaning over the man, he grabbed the collar of the man’s brown coat and tore it off him. The fat man didn’t even resist anymore, his expression confused and frightened. He was clearly fucking lost as shit, but Ed wasn’t about to explain.

“This is mine now. I’m taking it.”

The fat man gave jerky little nods, as if not fully in control of his own body.
Ed kicked out at the man’s broken leg, earning himself a sharp, very high scream of pain before he turned around with the coat’s collar clenched in his left fist and strode away. He needed to find a remote area to open his leather-bound ability book and see what the fat man’s ability was. While he didn’t have the heart to actually kill the man, this would hopefully teach the bastard a lesson, as well as give Ed a new ability.

So far, Ed knew he had very few offensive abilities. While the fat man’s ability didn’t seem very useful, it could be made offensive if used properly. The more surprises Ed could pull out during a fight, the higher the chances of his survival.

Ed only managed a few steps before a sudden sound had him turning back around, falling into the fighting stance he was the most comfortable in.

At the end of the road, a tall, thin man stood, staring at them in clear amazement. Then his gaze snapped down to the four corpses still scattered on the road.

The young man and woman’s cause of death was fairly evident. Knives stuck out from one’s chest and the other’s stomach, and they had actually managed to land rather close to each other. Ed wasn’t sure what the man would make of the other two, though.

Remaining vigilant and on the balls of his feet, Ed watched the stranger approach. He seemed to examine the bodies for a long while, before his head came back up and narrowed eyes settled first on the fat man still sitting on the ground with a broken leg, and then to Ed. It seemed as if he were staring at ghosts or apparitions. When he spoke, his voice was quiet, hesitant. “I just want to make sure… Did you people just come out of the second instance… alive?”
Here you go, the first appearance of someone from the FMA universe that isn't Roy or Ed. I hope you guys enjoy getting a glimpse of him, he'll be featured more as we go, and he's only the first in a long list of FMA appearances we'll be getting :)

Chapter Notes

Chapter Edited and Betaed by the fabulous luvsanime02!! and Nick Oak!
The young man was smart enough to keep his distance from Ed. His face was open and sincere, seemingly afraid that Ed would misunderstand something as he hastily attempted to explain. “I mean, not that you-” He gestured helplessly at the bodies on the ground. “Not that you killed them. It’s kind of obvious that at least half of them killed each other, but they seem to match the characteristics of the second instance, and there is supposed to be an entrance nearby. So, I figured, you guys just came back from that instance, right?”

Ed noticed that the man seemed wary and careful. Likely unsure if the three people still alive were human or Black Tower creatures.

The fat man Ed had scared sat silently at the edge of the flowerbed, but the old man pushed himself to his feet across the street. From what it looked like, he’d been knocked back into a tree, but it was still up in the air whether he was injured or not. “Yes, we just came out of an instance. I’m not sure what you mean by ‘second instance’, though.”

Ed had lowered his stance, but he remained tense and ready for attack. Trust was in short supply these days, and Ed had only ever had any for five people in his life.

The tall man took a small step forward, but instantly stopped when he noticed Ed’s right foot shift forward slightly. He clearly recognized the danger here. “Then... these four people died in that instance, and... you came out alive?”

The old man answered again. “Yes. Only the three of us made it back.”

The young man’s eyes slowly began to grow wide. It took a few seconds, but when the man moved, he reached for a silver whistle hanging from a cord around his neck and blew it.

Ed tensed even more, his stance rising again.

What seemed like a full minute later, a man and a woman approached from a distance. The first thing their eyes landed on was Ed. Like prey recognizing a predator, they struggled to approach as close as the first man, but as soon as they caught sight of the bodies, they didn’t seem to care about any danger.

“They can’t be...” the young woman started, only to cut herself off before she could say more.

“Yes. They’ve just come out of the second instance. They cleared it.” The man sounded so awestruck that it confused Ed a bit.

Relaxing his fighting stance for the second time, Ed tilted his head to the right, his hands going into his hoodie’s pockets.

One group of three eyed the other group of three.

When someone finally moved, it was the first young man. “My name is Eric. These are my companions, Danny and Evelyn. The three of us heard about the bodies that suddenly appeared in nearby areas. We came here to see if there was an entrance to the second instance.”

“What’s the second instance?” the fat man couldn’t help asking.

As if he were the leader of the new party, the young man, Eric, stepped forward to explain. “It’s the code we gave to the instance you just played. The three of us belong to an organization. The organization doesn’t have too many people who can take the elite route. There are only 17 of us, and we only recruit those with a certain level of ability. After the Black Tower game officially began, we discovered seven instances. The one you guys just came from was number two.”
The young woman nodded behind him. “The Black Tower game officially started four days ago. I’m not sure if you are aware, but it seems like the Black Tower isn’t just the Tower Attack games. There are instances similar to the second instance. They have different triggers. The seventh entrance to the second instance is an unobtrusive little shop by the roadside. Taking anything from the store would trigger the instance.”

Ed wanted to scoff the moment the woman said the words ‘I’m not sure if you are aware’. Clearly, if they weren’t before, they are now, but there were some key pieces of information in her speech.

He didn’t doubt the origins of the three strangers. There was no particular reason for them to lie or make up some kind of organization. In fact, there was a bit more danger in giving out that kind of information to another group. Factions fight - it was a natural rule.

These people seemed to be completely overlooking the rules of self-preservation. They didn’t seem to realize that information was this world’s top currency, and they were handing it out like water.

Assuming that the second instance was ‘Mario’s Monopoly Game’, it wasn’t too surprising that the entrance would be a small store. Ed had entered the same instance because he’d touched a flowerbed by the damn main road.

It seemed as if the old man was just as suspicious as Ed, though. “Why are you telling us all of this?”

The three people shared a look before Eric once again spoke for the group. “We’d like to ask you to come to our base and give a detailed account of the second instance. The biggest feature of the entrance of the second instance is that there are always dead bodies left behind. The number of bodies are usually between five and seven, but there are obvious signs that they killed each other. After discovering the second instance, we have found a total of 391 bodies and no survivors. You… you guys are the only players to beat the second instance.”

The old man frowned. “And why should we tell you anything?”

Ed flicked his eyes to the old man momentarily, just slightly impressed. Ed had no interest in joining any organization, much less sharing information. In this new world, joining a small team with a tactical understanding could improve one’s survival rate, but from the moment Ed spotted these people, he saw the weaknesses. Such a large group, and with such careless members... It would be too easy to become a target or fall prey to traitors.

It was Eric’s turn to frown. “Since you passed through the second instance, you three must be something extraordinary. If there are no surprises, we would invite you to join the organization.”

And there it was. Just as Ed thought.

Turning, Ed started walking away. He balled up the tattered coat he’d taken from the fat man and tossed it into one of the community trash cans.

Eric watched Ed’s back with narrowed eyes but didn’t try to stop him. There were three survivors - as long as one of them was willing to return to the base, Eric’s team would get the answers they were after. It didn’t matter if one refused.

The old man sighed. “I’m not a powerful individual. I won’t join your organization.” Like Ed, Nolan saw no attraction in joining a large group. He wouldn’t become anyone’s pawn.

Eric thought for a moment before crossing his arms over his chest. “It doesn’t matter if you don’t join the organization. We have certain requirements for members - not just anyone can join. We
can, however, exchange information. You tell us about the second instance, and we’ll provide you information of equal value.”

Instantly, Ed’s steps paused. Turning on his heel once more, he slowly walked back, coming to a stop just beside the fat man.

Alex panicked the second he noticed Ed standing beside him. “You- you were leaving. Why the hell did you come back?”

Ed spared him a glance. “I can’t change my mind?”

The man’s mouth snapped shut, his eyes narrowing into a furious glare, but he knew enough to keep quiet.

The exchange didn’t go unnoticed by Eric’s group, and instantly, they understood that the person with the most power here was Ed. They had each guessed this, but there was no longer any doubt.

The organization’s base was located in Luza’s shopping district. They walked for nearly half an hour before they saw a mall. Alex’s leg had been broken by Ed earlier, and he limped along behind the group, but Ed kept an eye on him just in case.

While they walked, the old man figured the trio would give them an introduction to the organization. However, no one spoke on the way to the base.

Luza’s shopping district consisted mainly of the Villa Mall, a large two-story affair with six connected wings that met in the middle like the spokes of a wheel. The mall had two parking levels at each entrance, and to the west, east, and south were a string of residential buildings.

To Ed’s surprise, there were many people around the mall, wearily making their way in or out. It seemed that in the last four days, a sort of community had formed around the mall because as soon as the people caught sight of new faces, they began to crowd around. When they saw Eric’s group, their eyes widened.

Ed could understand the allure of the shopping mall. There were supermarkets, clothing stores, your average Walmart; it was the ideal area to carve out a stable living. Especially since the manufacturing of man-made goods had completely halted with the loss of a large percentage of the human population. But as much as it attracted the innocent, it also attracted the wicked. Ed would have to watch his back here.

Eric’s little organization had their HQ in the fifth wing, in the innermost part of the second floor. Ed caught sight of fewer players as they made their way there. When they carved a path through a supermarket, a tall, very buff white man suddenly made a beeline for their party, sharp blue eyes like needles as they narrowed.

As the man bore down on them, Ed stopped walking. He allowed the others to come between him and the big man. And fuck, did he mean big man. The guy was jacked, his blue military uniform straining over what Ed could tell were very large, very defined muscles. The man was practically bald, the only patches of hair being his blond mustache and an odd little curl that seemed to fall right over his forehead.

Ed had never really been intimidated before - he was much too headstrong for that - but this guy gave him more than a little pause. Ed wasn’t sure if he wanted to get any closer.

“Eric, who are they? Why did you bring them into HQ?” His voice was booming, low and commanding. Ed nearly fucking jumped at the sound.
Eric was quick with his reply, a strange grin on his face. “Armstrong, these are the winners of the second instance.”

Like a switch being turned, sharp, penetrating eyes suddenly become curious and excited. He eyed all three of them carefully before his gaze stopped on Ed.

The man dwarfed Ed like no one else ever had, and fuck if that wasn’t some scary shit. Ed could feel the sweat drip down his back, and he almost shivered.

“You are a child! Don’t tell me it was you who cleared the second instance!?”

And just like that, trepidation was completely replaced with fury.

“Who the fuck are you calling a kid so short he couldn’t ride the Teacups at Disney World?! You wanna try me, you bald fucking bastard?! Come at me, I dare you!”

The shouting echoed around the supermarket twice, and suddenly, Ed was the center of attention.

Alex and Nolan were more than just shocked. While everybody else seemed to be bouncing between confusion and surprise, the two men who’d known Ed the longest were flabbergasted.

They had been with this boy through a game of life-or-death, and they hadn’t actually seen him lose his cool _once_. He went up against Black Mario like an emotionless superhuman. And yet…

He completely lost his shit over a comment about his height.

The big man named Armstrong quickly took a step back, large, pale hands coming up as if in surrender, and small, narrow eyes suddenly going wide as his mouth fell open.

Then…

The man let out a great big booming laugh.

Ed was fucking furious - hands clenched at his sides, his face so red he could feel it burn, and eyes narrowed in a glare so vicious it could kill in moments if that was a power Ed actually had.

His fucking height. Everybody always harped on his fucking height.

So far, no one he’d met had said anything. Ed wasn’t sure if they were just being polite, or if they didn’t want to piss him off, and that had been just fine. Now, along came this goddamned mountain, and he poked at one of Ed’s oldest sore spots.

All the calm and indifference he’d managed to gather over the years had disappeared like dust in the damn wind.

Completely ignoring Ed, the big man turned to Eric and smiled wide. “He certainly is spirited and strong! He’ll make a great addition to the team!”

Oh, fuck no.

“Who the hell says I want to join your anything!?” Ed yelled back, catching the man’s attention again.

Armstrong seemed to assess Ed carefully for a moment, all of his jovial nature seeming to leave as fast as it had come. “It’s not a safe world anymore, my friend. You’ll want back-up when the time comes.”
And just like that, the man turned and walked away.

All of Ed’s anger faded instantly when the man turned his back. The man’s words had been measured, a warning if Ed had ever heard one. It made Ed stop for a moment to think about it.

He’d originally believed that joining an organization was a bad move. He still believed that but… the man was strong. And if that little warning had been any indication, he was smart, too. There could be benefits to working with an organization.

As soon as Ed found Al.

Suddenly seeming to shake himself out of his shocked state, Eric turned a strained smile on the group of three behind him. “Come on. We have to introduce you guys to Dr. Marks.”

Ed fell quiet as they continued on their way. Nolan and Alex kept taking glances back at him, and so did the woman, Evelyn. Ed ignored them as best he could. Instead, he thought about that name.

They entered the large back room of a tech store. Ed wasn’t even paying enough attention to catch the name. The moment Eric opened the door to the employee’s only section, though, Ed’s eyebrows rose.

“Dr. Marks, I brought the three players who passed the second instance. Maybe you can get some information about the Black Tower from them.”

Under the bright lights of what looked like a conference room, a young man in a white lab coat took off his glasses and smiled at Ed.

“Lloyd Marks,” Ed said, his surprise quickly fading as he nodded a greeting to the man.

Eric rounded on Ed with a strange look on his face. “Do you know Dr. Marks?”

Lloyd got up from his chair and made his way over to the group. Glancing at Eric, he gave the man a raised eyebrow. “It seems you haven’t asked this man for his name. Eric, this is Edward Elric. He was the official player who survived the first floor of the Black Tower with me.”

Eric’s eyes brightened in an instant as he seemed to understand. “You’re Edward Elric!”

Ed didn’t bother answering.

Lloyd’s expression was warm as he extended his hand to Ed, who grabbed it for a shake. Looking down at the metal peeking out of the off-white gloves, he gave Ed a bright smile. “There’s no mistake. You were the one who cleared the second instance.” He released Ed’s hand as he came to his conclusions. “If it’s you, it is possible to pass an instance of that difficulty. Eric, you can show our two guests out first. That man’s leg seems to be injured from the instance. Take him to the pharmacy and find something to help with his wound.”

Eric nodded and moved to obey.

Alex gritted his teeth as he looked between Ed and Lloyd. Finally, with a weak glare, he dragged his broken leg out of the room, following behind Eric and the old man.

With only Ed and Lloyd left in the room, Ed found himself eyeing the other man carefully.

“You don’t have to look at me like that.” Lloyd moved to sit back in his chair, gesturing for Ed to take a seat as well. “You may not consider me a friend, but we were teammates. I won’t try to trick
you, don’t worry.”

Ed pulled out a chair and sat down, placing his backpack on the ground beside him as he watched Lloyd. “I thought only those with an ability could join the organization. Are they also national researchers?”

“You mean Eric and Evelyn? No. After the game officially started, I was the only Black Tower researcher in West City left alive. Almost all of the leaders have disappeared. Eric was a senior at the university before the Earth came online, and Evelyn was a dancer. As for the other members, they don’t necessarily need to have an ability. As long as they are strong and have gained the approval of all the other members, they are welcome to join. By the way, do you know how to log in to the Black Tower?”

Ed didn’t trip on the sudden change in discussion topics, and he didn’t see the point in hiding what he knew. “During the three-day elimination period, the official players have to participate in a Black Tower game and win. Stowaways needed to have killed at least one person within those three days. As for reserve players, they needed to win some other type of game.”

“Almost.” Lloyd grinned as he poured a glass of water for Ed, sliding it over before pouring one for himself. “We called those three days the ‘Candidate Selection’ period. In those three days of candidate selection, the reserve players needed to eliminate one player. This isn’t limited to a game. The first way happens as long as one person says that they have been eliminated. That counts as a success.”

Ed didn’t react. He was catching on quick, and he wanted to keep that as close to the vest as possible.

“The second way is to participate in a reserve game recognized by the Black Tower or show some type of special behavior during the game that is approved of by the Black Tower. Then they will become a reserve player.” Lloyd was purposefully being vague, Ed knew. “There are 52 official players and 823 reserve players in this mall. It was easy for me to collect data.”

Ed tried not to be impressed. “If I join you, you’ll give me that information?”

Lloyd nodded.

Neither man spoke as they stared each other down.

Lloyd knew that Ed was looking for his brother, and the more information he had about the Black Tower, the better. Ed knew that Lloyd wanted intel on the instance Ed managed to clear. They were at an impasse.

It was a while before Ed finally opened his mouth. “We’ll exchange information. You tell me what an instance is and how they’re classified, and I will tell you what I know about the second instance.”

“Deal.”

Lloyd had already handed Ed some information about reserve players. Some of it was information Ed already knew, but it showed the man’s sincerity. Ed didn’t see any harm in sharing. “What you guys called the second instance was a game called Mario’s Monopoly Game. The game boss was Mario, and he was far stronger than the big mole we saw in the underground cave.”

Lloyd paid close attention to every word, his gaze never wavering.
Ed explained the rules of the game, laying out every detail as carefully as he could. He wondered if Lloyd would manage to figure out the answer for himself, or if Ed would have to tell him.

When he talked about the ‘Prove Your Worth’ effect that triggered on the fifth round, Lloyd frowned. “That’s why those people died that way.”

It had been obvious, both inside and outside the game, that the vast majority of players had killed each other. If not, they had died at the hands of the game’s punishments, but Ed spoke of his belief that most of the people who had been killed by Black Tower creatures had no bodies left to return. It was why the number of players usually found dead at a known entrance would vary with every location. And if someone managed to be the last player standing, they’d be caught by the six consecutive prisoner squares.

Ed fell silent then, allowing Lloyd time to think about it. Like a puzzle, it was a problem to be solved, not a game to be won. When the researcher shook his head, face twisted in frustration, Ed explained how he’d cleared the game.

It was like the clouds parting for the sun. Lloyd’s gloomy expression turned to admiration and surprise. “Your luck was really good.”

The probability of the first square being a prisoner square had been a fifty-fifty shot. If the game had been just a bit more devious… Well, Ed would have used the egg, but he wasn’t sure what anyone else could have done, other than die.

“Luck is also a type of strength,” Ed said lightly.

Lloyd raised an eyebrow but didn’t contradict his statement.

“That’s all I know. Your turn.”

Lloyd nodded, leaning back in his chair and crossing one leg over the other, his hands linked together over his knee. “Our organization is called Attack. When I left the Black Tower on the 19th, I stumbled onto the organization and joined as a researcher. The organization itself was founded by chance. Attack has 11 original members, and all of them entered Black Tower games within the first two days of the selection process. Once they unwittingly became official players, they found that they couldn’t speak of their experiences or write them down. However, some of them found ways to allude to the situation, posting on the forums and looking for anyone who’d gone through the same experiences. In three days, they found 11 companions, and once the Earth came online, the ‘Attack’ organization was formed.”

Ed wasn’t going to let that one slide. “Attack. As in, attacking the tower?”

Lloyd nodded, expression solemn. “After the formal start on the 18th, Attack found the first instance and numbered it S1. At present, we have found a total of six S games and three other instances. The Mario’s Monopoly Game you experienced is part of that other instance, and it is the second one we found.”

“What is the difference between an S game and the other instances?”

“S stands for safe. The six S games are safe for average official players. Even if you don’t clear it, there is a way to safely leave the instance.” Rolling his chair away to one of the filing cabinets, Lloyd pulled it open and fished inside, bringing out a thin manila folder and passing it to Ed. “The other three instances are ranked in order of difficulty. So far, no one has survived any of them. Except for you. Oh, yeah, the second instance is closed now. It will automatically close when
someone passes it.”

Ed’s eyebrow went up, but he didn’t question that. Taking the folder, he read through the first page.

[Instance Type: Other
Number: 1
Number of Deaths Found: 623
Number of Entrances Found: 42
Instance Features: Cause of death has been found to be an animal or beast attack. Victims’ hearts are gone, and wounds consist of tearing skin, likely from teeth or claws. A total of 6 to 10 bodies around the entrance.
Conclusion: Number of people drawn into each instance is estimated to be around 10. No more information is known.
Difficulty Level: SS - Extremely Dangerous. Do Not Engage.]

Moving to the second page, he was able to get an idea of how much information he’d actually given compared to what the Attack organization had.

[Instance Type: Other
Number: 2
Number of Deaths Found: 391
Number of Entrances Found: 30
Instance Features: Players show clear signs of killing or injuring each other. Approximately 5 to 7 bodies appear around the entrances.
Conclusion: Number of players in the second instance is potentially less than 10 people. It is most likely that the game involves arena fights or player vs player battles.
Difficulty Level: SS - Extremely Dangerous. Do Not Engage.]

The second Ed read the number of deaths found, his jaw clenched in an attempt to mask his reaction. The difference was… staggering. If the difference between what the organization had found and the actual number was this extreme for only the second instance, then what about for the first or third? How many people had actually died so far?

Pushing the thought away, Ed continued on to the third page:

[Instance Type: Other
Number: 3
Number of Deaths Found: 156
Number of Entrances Found: 19
Instance Features: Players are suffocated to death. Approximately 3 to 5 bodies appear around the entrances.
Conclusion: Most likely some type of survival game under extreme conditions. No number for potential players in each round.
Difficulty Level: S - Dangerous. Engage At Own Risk.]

The fourth page consisted of a map of the town of Luza as a whole, smaller in scale than the map Ed had taken from the little kiosk when he’d first stepped into Luza proper. Black and blue pen lines marked and numbered each entrance known so far. The moment he laid eyes on the map, he had it memorized, so he didn’t bother assessing it past the first glimpse as he closed the file and passed it back.

“You said that the second instance is closed now. Since it’s closed, the information I gave you isn’t worth what you’ve given me.”
Lloyd put the folder away without looking through it himself. “Since you managed to clear the second instance, the first and third shouldn’t be a threat to you.”

Ed could read between those lines. He’d seen the entrances of the most dangerous instances, and such information was precious now. He knew that whatever information he had given of the second instance would be used as a baseline to clear the first and third. He could choose to attempt them first and gain whatever reward was offered, or he could let it go and leave everything to the Attack organization.

Ed wasn’t about to comment on that any further, so he changed the subject. “This organization… its main objective is to attack the Black Tower. Isn’t it?”

“The strongest defense is a good offense.” Lloyd smiled, a painful look in his eyes. “Originally, this organization was named ‘Exist’. All they wanted to do was continue to live. To survive. Then, three days ago, Roy Mustang opened the Black Tower, and all of the Amestrian players were dragged into the Tower Attack game. Two of the original eleven members died. If they had just been stronger, then they might have survived.”

There was some merit to that. To become strong enough to protect yourself and those you cared about… Isn’t that why Ed had approached Izumi to begin with?

To learn how to attack, the best-known defense.

Likely, if the old man, Nolan, had gone into the Monopoly game with a little bit of knowledge, he would have been able to puzzle out the clearance method. The only bonus Ed really had in the game had been his memory. Applying logic to a puzzle is easier when you can remember the rules and limits of the problem.

Knowing that this was what it took to clear the second instance, anyone in this organization attempting to challenge the other two will have a leg-up on someone coming in completely blind.

Getting stronger, collecting props, gaining the experience of playing a game... There were obvious rewards to clearing instances, and Ed had no doubt that it was one of the fastest ways to improve one’s strength, and therefore one’s potential to survive.

From an outside point of view, the Attack organization seemed like a group of radicals. They might gain more experience, but they were also in more danger - danger they brought upon themselves.

What most people couldn’t see was that there was no avoiding the danger anymore. No one had the option of hiding or burying their heads in the sand now.

Getting lost in his thoughts for a moment, Ed took a while to speak, but when he did, he was sure that it wasn’t what Lloyd wanted to hear. “I will give joining the organization some thought.”

Lloyd couldn’t hide the flash of disappointment, but he did mask it rather quickly, nodding as he agreed. “Good.”

Ed didn’t bother with goodbyes as he left the room in search of an abandoned place to rest.

He ended up on the basement level, in a locked clothing store. Taking some of the bigger coats, he laid them out on the floor behind the cash registers and skimmed what had been left on the racks.

When he found a red zip-up hoodie similar to his own and a pair of form-fitting black jeans, he took them to his little nest and laid it all beside him as he sat down cross-legged.
Pulling off the worn and tattered hoodie his brother had given him as a present, Ed sighed as he surveyed the damage done to it. Cuts and tears Ed was sure he couldn’t fix littered the cotton material, and just as Ed had guessed, the jacket was a lost cause. Pulling everything out of the front and inner pockets, he tossed the ragged thing to the side.

On his lap were the egg, the ruby, a small box of tools, and the suit of armor keychain. He might not be able to keep the hoodie, but at least he still had one gift from Al.

Ed ignored the new hoodie he’d picked out in favor of examining his automail.

The metal plate was dented on his upper arm and his forearm, but when Ed pulled it off, he found that not much else was even scratched.

The red tendrils of what Ed had assumed was muscle and sinew were jet black now, wrapped around wires and the metal frame of the prosthetic limb like a fucking horror show, and instead of blood, it was blackened like oil. When Ed tentatively touched the mushy muscle, he found that while he could feel the touch, it wasn’t to the extent of an exposed nerve.

Tinkering with his automail and checking to make sure it wouldn’t give out on him took nearly two hours. Slipping off his jeans as well, Ed even went so far as to examine his leg, but all he found was much of the same.

He visibly winced at the mere thought of switching out his automail for whatever improved ones Winry had made. The reconnection process had always been painful, but with whatever new shit was biologically bonding him to his prosthetics, he had no fucking doubt that it would be ten times worse now.

Slipping on the black jeans he’d found, Ed made sure the prosthetic wasn’t too noticeable. He’d never used a silicone flesh sleeve for his leg - pants had worked just fine for years - but he knew that the one for his arm had been fucked a while ago. There was no doubt in his mind that he was going to keep hiding the automail. If nothing else, it was an advantage in a fight, but for that to be the case, he needed another pair of gloves.

While he was at it, he’d pick up new underwear, socks, and an undershirt. Right now, Ed had no time, nor any kind of safe location, to take a shower, and he wasn’t comfortable being that exposed in an unknown area. He’d just have to continue his damn journey smelling like stale sweat, oil, metal, blood, and fear.

Fuck, that wasn’t a pleasant scent, but at least he got to put on new clothes.

Picking out a few more things to slip into his backpack to take with him, Ed spotted a shiny flash from the corner of his eye. Looking up, he saw a camera and frowned.

He wasn’t sure if the camera was working or not, but he wasn’t about to take the chance that it was. Walking over to the registers again, he opened one and pulled out a coin. With a flick of his wrist, the camera lens shattered the dim red light on top finally going black.

Satisfied, Ed found a pair of black leather gloves that fit well enough and a pack of hair ties.

He finally released his braid, smoothing down the length of long, blond hair. He’d probably be able to find a comb in the damn store if he tried, but he was too worn out at the moment. Instead, he tore at the tangles with one hand while he reached into open-air with the other.

The little black book appeared.
[Ability: Willow Storm
Type: Atomic
Function: An intense windstorm is released from the mouth. Lasts for three minutes. Wind speeds up to level 10
Level: 2
Restriction: Can only be used by exhaling a long breath of air. Cooldown time: 1 minute.
Note: Strive to be the willow in the wind. Bend, but do not break.
Edward version usage instructions: Violent storm only lasts for 1 minute. Maximum wind speed is 8 and is limited to twice a day. Been getting a lot of abilities regarding your mouth, haven’t you? Wonder what other abilities your mouth will master.]

Ed snorted out a derisive little laugh, both amused and a little offended. Fuck this book and its snark. It was worse than Al.

Laying back on his nest of thick coats, Ed turned to the first page and read through all of his abilities again from the beginning.

In addition to his own ‘Equivalent Exchange’, he’d managed to collect a total of six abilities. The first, a storage type that Ed used on the large match. The second was Leon Bin’s circle curse. Those had been the two abilities Ed had used the most so far. The curse didn’t necessarily play a key role every time, but Ed was sure it had saved his ass at least once. Going up against the man with the one arm and the flower ability, Ed wasn’t sure if he or the kids would be alive if it hadn’t been for that stupid curse. There was no denying its usefulness.

The third ability was to identify what type of player someone was, and it was the one least likely to be used. Then, there was Violet Allen’s ability. It was subtle and fairly passive, given that Ed had never actually felt it activate or knew when it was active, but it was reflected in everything he did, every choice he made.

The only offensive abilities Ed had were ‘Fire Fist Ace’ and ‘Willow Storm’.

If Al was still alive, then what’s to say he wouldn’t be headed to West City, just like Ed was headed to Central? Would they be fortunate enough to encounter each other, if that was the case, or were they destined to nearly come together only to slip away from each other’s grasp?

Part of Ed wanted to charge on to Central on a single-minded quest, but the rest of him knew that there was no way Al would stand still and just allow Ed to come find him. Al was as much of a fighter as Ed was - the scars all over his body bore enough testament to that fact.

Knowing all of that… what was the most likely place Alphonse would go, at this point?

He knew Ed wouldn’t have remained in West City, so he’d make a plan to meet somewhere more or less in the middle. That idea was already pretty much shot, though. Ed was only one short train ride away from Central City.

That was the whole reason he couldn’t quite bring himself to leave Luza just yet.
Ed knew his brother well. Al would know that Ed was coming to find him, and if they missed each other, then Al would have left clues. Some kind of evidence of his existence, or even his passing.

Ed had two choices now: go to Central, or search through Luza for any signs.

Sighing rather heavily, Ed pushed these thoughts out of his head for the moment. He would come back to the problem later. Right now, though…

Picking up the red ruby he’d set beside him, Ed held it up just above his face, automail arm outstretched to see if he could spot anything on or through the jem.

The faint moonlight shining through the huge glass ceiling of the mall allowed in just enough light to make things visible, if not slightly blanketed by darkness. In the meager light, the ruby had a darker, deeper color, looking like rich red wine.

Shaking the jem gently, Ed found a sheen of something liquid swaying inside. It looked like… blood.

An idea flashed quickly through Ed’s mind, and he blanched, his entire face going white as his eyes widened. Instantly, he pushed himself back into a sitting position and stared at the ruby held in the palm of his hand.

There was no way…

Was this a Philosopher's Stone?

No. There’s no way. That kind of alchemy wasn’t… It didn’t exist. Did it?

Ever since the Earth came online, Ed had seen many unbelievable things. Powers and abilities, monsters and more than enough horror to drive anyone else right off the edge of sanity. But this? A Philosopher’s Stone?

Ed tried tapping on the jem first, gritting his teeth when nothing happened. He tried closing his fist around the stone, tried breaking it, even tried bringing it to his nose to see if he could smell anything on it.

Nothing worked. Groaning, Ed threw himself back onto his nest of coats and let the hand holding the ruby fall onto his chest. That’s when something happened.

A flash of sudden light had Ed pulling his hand back up, looking down at what had once been a solid red ruby. Clenched between metal fingers was no longer a jem, but a pair of gloves. They were pure white, with the only color being a symbol on the back of them that Ed recognized instantly: a circle inside a square, inside a triangle, inside another bigger circle.

Holy fuck…

Subconsciously, his hand closed over both of the gloves, and with another flash of red light, what had been the gloves went back to being a ruby. As Ed stared at it, dumbfounded, he saw small lines of text appearing on the jem’s surface.

[Prop: Philosopher’s Gloves
Owner: Edward Elric
Quality: Excellent
Level: 3
Attack: None]
Function: When wearing these magical gloves, there is a chance to gain magical treasures with your own hands.
Restrictions: Bring the treasure to your heart to trigger it. The trigger probability is 10%. Wearing the gloves means you have no control over what you make with them! Good luck!
Note: Return the gloves to its ruby shape by squeezing the pair together. It’s really easy, just force them together! They’re made for each other, after all! Seriously. Force them together, dammit!

What the fucking hell?

Confusion and a healthy dose of trepidation didn’t allow Ed to try whatever it was he’d just did again. Instead, he stashed the jem deep inside his jeans’ front pocket and then laid back down, thoughts racing.

Philosopher’s Gloves?

Ed wasn’t an idiot. He’d spent a lot of his career studying theoretical alchemy, and one of the biggest projects had been directed at learning how to craft a Philosopher’s Stone.

It had taken him and Al nearly 3 years, but they’d learned what was required. They’d learned why making a Philosopher’s Stone was labeled as a failed experiment, and they knew why all of the theories and myths were nearly legendary... nearly magical. The main ingredient for a Philosopher's Stone was human lives. Their souls, their bodies, their consciousness… Everything was used in a sort of satanic ritual, and suddenly, it was no longer science.

It had been discovering this that had caused Ed to turn his back on the majority of the scientific community. Not because they believed in magic, but because they were willing to sacrifice hundreds, thousands, of people in an attempt to gain something Ed wasn’t even sure existed.

And now, here he lay, something called the Philosopher’s Gloves in his hand, in a world that had lost far too much and witnessed far too much for ‘magic’ to be the weird thing out.

With his train of thought making figure eights, Ed closed his eyes and tried to rest for an hour. Questions, questions. So many questions, but never any solid answers. Wasn’t that always the way it had been as a scientist? Even on the cusp of a breakthrough, there were always questions.

It didn’t take Ed too long to get anxious just lying around. Taking advantage of the deep night, he pushed himself to his feet and quietly collected his things.

The extra clothes gave his backpack some bulk, but the weight was nearly non-existent to Ed, at this point. He was almost certain that he could carry a full-grown adult on his back for a day and not grow dangerously tired.

When he had everything ready, Ed made his way out of the mall on silent cat feet.

Despite the fact that Ed knew that a multitude of people currently resided inside the mall, the entire space was oddly silent, oddly empty. Everyone had found holes to scurry into like rats, fear returning an old instinct to what was left of the human population. However, as he walked out the northernmost entrance, Ed knew he was being watched. That was an old instinct as well.

Deeper inside the mall, a dark shadow quickly made its way up to the third floor, stopping just inside the employee’s only door in the tech store closest to the center of the mall. The man knocked and waited.

“Come in.”
"Dr. Marks, he’s gone. Should we go after him?"

Lloyd stood in the middle of the room, holding a pen in one hand and kneeling on the ground studying something. The large conference table had been pushed against the far wall, and on the ground under his feet were 150 sheets of computer paper, while in the center of all of them laid a small, bright red cardboard stage. Lloyd looked over his shoulder, a dice held in his left hand.

He spared the man a raised eyebrow, only replying when he’d returned to whatever he was doing. “Attack isn’t the mafia.” Or, god forbid, the damn military.

The man took a moment to register these words before he nodded and moved back, closing the door softly as he left.

Lloyd stood before walking over to the table he’d pushed against the far wall earlier that day. Going for the filing cabinet next to it, he opened the drawer and pulled out one of the folders. Turning to the second page, he looked down at the column labeled ‘Number Of Deaths Found’. Someone had used a pen to scratch out the previous number and wrote a new one just to the side of the crossed-out 391.

“6,461. When you wrote this… you weren’t planning on staying, were you?”

--

Ed spent the rest of the night in a little roadside convenience store.

When dawn finally broke, Ed made his way along the outer edges of Luza, keeping a close eye on anything that brought his brother to mind. He still wasn’t sure what he should do - search Luza for clues, or head to Central.

At least if he made it to the Central Research Institute, he had a higher chance of finding proof of his brother’s survival. Then again, if he did go all the way to Central City proper, who’s to say he wouldn’t just miss his brother?

It was like being stuck between a rock and a hard place, and Ed wasn’t sure which one would do less harm.

On a whim, he passed by the military middle school one more time.

As he’d expected, the kids were all gone. He spent a little while looking around the place and found a note etched into the gym’s far wall. The slight red tint of the words and the little matchbox lying on the ground by the wall made it obvious what they’d used.

[Big Brother Edward, we’ll be going first. Let’s meet again soon. Be sure to take care of yourself. Violet Allen
Connor!]

The last name was a bit twisted - a messy attempt compared to the rest of the message. However, it made Ed smile.

With a roll of his eyes, he used his hoodie sleeve to scrub out the words before he picked up his bag again and left the school.

Walking out of the school gates, he nearly jumped when a loud child’s voice echoed suddenly through Luza.
“Ding Dong! Europe’s Zone 3 Stowaway, Jackson Rois, has successfully cleared the first floor of the Black Tower!”

Ed paused.

Someone in Europe had cleared the Black Tower’s first floor? When did they even begin the Tower Attack game?

From what Ed remembered, Roy Mustang spent around three hours on the first floor of the Black Tower. Maisie Williams of the United States had taken five hours. With that pattern, Ed could deduce that the attacker in Europe was weaker than the ones from Amestris or the United States. It was likely that they’d spent more than five hours in the game.

It was more than likely that Ed had been in the Mario Monopoly Game when Europe had been dragged into the Tower Attack game.

He wondered how many countries were left to clear the Tower Attack game.

Continuing on his way, Ed walked as the sun rose. More and more people began to scutter out of their hiding places, but Ed wasn’t about to make himself a target. He had nothing else to do in Luza, and he’d decided that going to Central would be his best bet. If nothing else, Al would have left a note or something to tell Ed where he’d be going next.

Passing through a residential street, Ed watched his surroundings carefully, keeping alert and inconspicuous.

For a moment, everything almost felt normal. There was an edge to the atmosphere, but it was muted now that enough time had passed for people to stop completely freaking out. But from one second to the next, everything in Ed’s body locked up. He stiffened and tensed.

Nobody seemed to have noticed the strangeness, and if they did, they didn’t stick around long enough to ask questions. It took a good few heartbeats for whatever was happening to pass, and by the time it did, Ed’s face was dark and vicious, his fingers white-knuckled on the strap of his backpack.

Inside his mind, he’d been given the unpleasant opportunity to hear something he’d honestly been hoping not to for a long while yet.

The message echoed three times in his head, joyful and cheery - both things that Ed currently wasn’t feeling.

“Ding Dong! Amestris Zone 2’s official player, Edward Elric, has reached the first level of the Black Tower! In 10 days, be prepared to attack the Tower!”

In the bright morning sun, the Black Tower suspended over the center of Luza shone menacingly.
Chapter 25 - The First Strike

Four days later, Central Region, Luza, Bellindo Park.

A chubby youth walked at a fast clip into the nearest convenience store. Most of the food and drinking water had been taken a while ago, but the chubby youth wasn’t inclined to give up so easily. Running into the back storeroom, he managed to find three boxes of cookies and a case of bottled water.

Few people had survived, but perishable food had a shelf life, and whatever was left was taken quickly. It wouldn’t be much longer before people began to turn on each other for whatever resources remained. But none of that was his problem at the moment… Right now, he had to worry about Tony.

Making his way back to the hiding spot they had found a few days ago, Connor dropped everything he’d found at the other boy’s side.

The tall, thin boy reached for a bottle of water first, unscrewing the cap before downing half of it in seconds. “I’m all right, Connor. You said things like food and water are getting harder to find. We should leave Luza quickly. There are too many people here. If we keep eating like this, it won’t be long before there’s no food left.”

Connor shoved two cookies into his mouth, munching fast before swallowing dry. “I can run on less. You need more than I do.” He pushed what was left of the box towards the taller boy.

Tony’s face went red, his expression chagrined. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I know,” Connor tried to reassure. “I’m not hungry as often. You’re a reserve player, and your physical stats aren’t as good as mine. I’m eating less and less every day, and I don’t feel like I need to eat all that much anymore. Even you’re eating less. Maybe it’s like Violet said before - our bodies are adapting to some other form of gaining energy. What was it she said?”

Tony frowned. “How am I supposed to know? We’ve been separated for several days now.”

Connor thought about that and let his head drop. “Once we get stronger, we’ll be able to stick together. I doubt anyone would pick on us if we had the power to stand up to them.”

The two boys stashed what was left of their food and water into two separate backpacks before they left their hiding place and headed back out onto the streets.

Connor struggled for a moment before he found a topic to chat about. “You said you heard something about a guy attacking people with a big match in the middle of the night. Do you think it could be Brother Ed?”
“Probably not. Why would Brother Ed need to sneak up on anyone? He’s a good guy and he’s strong, so there’s really no need.”

“Yeah, you’re right. There’s no way it’s Brother Ed.”

The two boys left Bellindo Park and headed west.

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Four days earlier, the person who would be known as ‘The Match Guy’ hid on the second floor of a jewelry store on the south road of Luza’s Market District.

The store faced north, keeping the sun behind it and unable to illuminate the inside of the store. The match man shrank back against the wall, moving slowly and silently to keep an eye on the people downstairs.

If anyone had been watching the scene closely, they’d notice the reconstructed binoculars held tightly in leather-clad hands. Like a child’s arts and crafts project, the binoculars were a large, slanted ‘Z’ shape, two sets of mirrors creating a simple but effective reflective telescope.

The match man aimed one end of the Z-shaped telescope at the street full of pedestrians just out front, while the other end was held securely against his face. Intently, he observed every person passing down on the road from morning until the afternoon.

Late in the evening, a rough-looking middle-aged man in a form-fitting black leather jacket with a cigarette hanging from his lips, strut his way down the road.

Spotting his victim for the night, the match man put down the makeshift telescope before picking up his bag and double-timing it down the stairs, following after the middle-aged man.

Ed used every little drop of stealth he had, keeping just behind the man as he watched the large asshole go. Closing his eyes for a moment, Ed took a deep breath and focused. Ed’s lids flashed slightly before his eyes opened again, and in his line of vision, a word floated above the rough man’s head.

[Stowaway]

Ed sneered before quietly following behind the man.

When night had fully set in, the man in the leather jacket placed his hands in his pockets and kicked open a door, strolling almost menacingly into a specialty store. A middle-aged woman was lying on a pile of scattered clothes, but when the door burst open, she shrank back, slamming into the cabinet behind her.

“What the fuck are you looking at? Get the hell out!”

The woman opened her mouth to protest, but before she even managed a sound, the man’s foot came up and swiftly knocked into the woman’s stomach. The wind rushed out of her, and before she could get her breath back, another kick was aimed at her side, sending her sprawling. Grunting in pain and fear, the woman scrambled to ignore the hurt and stand, and rushed out of the store, not even grabbing her bag as she went.

The big man huffed out a laugh of cruel amusement before lying down on the makeshift bed the woman had made.
The clock on the wall ticked away the seconds, the man in the leather jacket growing sleepy as he closed his eyes. When he started to snore, Ed finally sighed.

Moving fast and staying low, Ed pushed his way into the store. In the next second, a huge match appeared and fell decisively down on the man’s right leg.

**Snap.**

There was a sharp, cracking sound of breaking bone, and the man came awake with a howl.

Ed didn’t even give the man a chance to think. He kept attacking, aiming his hits at the man’s softest parts. His aim wasn’t to kill, just bruise and disorient. And intimidate.

“I’ll kill you!”

**Crash!**

A large table suddenly appeared right in front of Ed.

Taken by surprise, but having expected some kind of resistance, Ed didn’t hesitate to smash the table with the big match, breaking it apart almost too easily.

Apparently, that show of strength had been enough for the big man, because the moment he saw Ed’s demonstration, he began crying for mercy. Curling in on himself, the man begged and whimpered.

Ed leaned down and grabbed the collar of the leather jacket. Pulling and forcing it off the man’s arms, Ed spoke for the first time. “This is mine now, understood?”

The strong man shook, crowding away from Ed as he hugged his chest and nodded like a bobblehead. “I understand, I understand! It’s yours! Yours!”

With that done, Ed turned away, leather jacket clenched in his automail hand.

When he left, the middle-aged woman was quick to come back, using the big man’s sudden weakness to get the upper hand and driving him away harshly. When the man was gone, she scooped down, picked up her bag, and left as well.

Ed didn’t go far, walking into a side alley. Throwing away the leather jacket, he took out his little leather-bound book.

[Ability: Replace, Protect!
Owner: Gray Sydney
Type: Four-Dimensional
Function: Use any nearby object as a shield. Interval time: 0 seconds.
Level: 1
Restrictions: The object itself must be able to be moved. The object can’t be more than 10 meters away. Cool down time is five minutes.
Note: Looks like someone has a penchant for self-preservation, good on you.
Edward version usage instructions: The shield area is only medium. The object can’t be more than three meters away. Cool down time is ten minutes. There’s hope for your self-preservation instincts, after all!]

Ed ignored the snarky little note as he assessed his situation.
From the moment the tower had told him he’d be forced into attacking the Black Tower in 10 days, all of Ed’s plans had changed.

For the moment, Al could wait. Ed needed to ensure his own survival, and he was much too low on abilities to go into such a game with any level of confidence. Especially with only two offensive ones.

While other people’s abilities might not be useful, at least they didn’t have restrictions on their usage. Ed’s gathered abilities could only be used once a day.

Lucky for him, he’d been able to pick up Rina’s power to identify the player status of one person per day.

Without such a power, he would never have been able to get this far. There was almost nothing to distinguish official players from reserves. Ed had met multiple players with different abilities, and apart from Armstrong, no one in the Attack organization seemed obviously strong enough to have an ability.

It was much easier to find a stowaway.

While you wouldn’t always be able to spot the darker people of society, there were a few obvious monsters in the mix, and knowing that stowaways were all murderers helped Ed spot them.

Evil, cruelty, blood-lust... They all had a way of lingering in the air around certain people, and once Ed was 90% sure that the person he was watching was a stowaway, he used Rina’s ability to know for certain.

Since every stowaway possessed an ability of some kind, he never took them lightly. He watched, planned, and attacked from behind.

Unfortunately, word of danger seemed to spread far faster than it once had. Four days of consecutive sneak attacks made people vigilant, and the rumors of the ‘strange match man’ had gotten around quick. Players now avoided the commercial district, or if they had to pass by, they walked fast. If Ed wasn’t the ‘strange match man’, he’d actually find some humor in the situation.

Now, he stretched out on the bed of one of the abandoned homes in the residential district. A lock on the door had given him enough security to take a lightning-quick shower, and as he lay fully-clothed on the guestroom’s fully-made bed, Ed went through his options in his head.

His long, blond hair was still damp and plastered slightly against his neck and cheeks, but he was used to that enough to let it dry a bit more before he braided it back.

“There’s a supermarket not too far away. I can set up an ambush there,” he mused out loud.

Changing locations worked only marginally, and Ed had to call it quits on the fifth day. Instead, he waited outside the Luza City Shopping Mall for a familiar figure. When the strong stature of Alex Louis Armstrong stepped out of the underground garage, Ed tailed him.

The man was huge and maintained a serious expression on his face as he cut his way through the crowd of other players, everyone moving out of his way like they’d get mowed down if they didn’t. Which was actually very likely, since Ed wasn’t even sure if Armstrong noticed any of the ants that scurried around him in fear and trepidation.

In all honesty, following the big man wasn’t hard. With each step he took, the ground shook under him, and with everyone focusing entirely on the large, determined man, Ed went pretty much
unnoticed. With Ed’s long, golden hair tied back and covered by the hood of his red hoodie, no one even seemed to give Ed a second look.

After 20 minutes of stalking, Ed finally accomplished what he’d been aiming for. Bypassing an old factory and ducking through an iron fence, the large man stopped in front of an old manhole beside the gate. Armstrong looked around for a moment, and Ed ducked back, keeping an eye on him from just around the corner. When Armstrong took a step onto the manhole cover, he disappeared completely from view.

Ed waited only a moment before coming out of his hiding place and walking up to the rusted manhole cover. With no hesitation, he didn’t even stop as he stepped onto the cover.

A loud announcement immediately rang in his mind.

“Ding Dong! The single player instance ‘Kill Bill’ has been triggered. At 11:26 on November 30th, 2018, player Edward Elric has safely entered the game.”

“Sandbox loading…”

“Data loading complete…”

Ed experienced a very familiar feeling, and before his mind caught up with his body, he’d braced his arms and legs against the walls of the long tunnel and stopped his fall. When Ed looked around, he didn’t see anything but pure darkness. Sighing to himself, Ed eased up his grip on the tunnel walls and allowed himself to slide down safely.

It was a long fall, but the landing was soft enough.

In the darkness, Ed took off his backpack and reached inside to find the flashlight he’d taken from Leon Bin what seemed like months ago. Once he had it in his hand, Ed shouldered his bag again and started walking.

It seemed to be an exact replica of the giant mole’s cave, the only difference being the extra humidity making the soil under his feet wet and pliable. It sunk under his weight, leaving behind clear footprints, but Ed wasn’t too worried. The cave’s only opening gave way to a long, dark tunnel, stretching out beyond the reach of the flashlight.

Ed strained to see if he could catch some kind of sound or movement, but the only thing he could hear was his own heartbeat pounding in his ears. Deciding to just bite the bullet, Ed walked out of the cave and into the tunnel. He snarled slightly when he noticed the height of the opening. He hadn’t even needed to duck to avoid the wet dirt.

Ed had already decided he hated this place, but he wasn’t about to turn back now.

As he moved deeper into the tunnel, the humidity only seemed to increase, but Ed didn’t allow it to get to him, keeping vigilant and ready for an ambush.

Suddenly, Ed heard the hurried, even rhythm of pounding feet from deeper in. Narrowing his eyes, Ed turned off the flashlight and plastered himself against the tunnel wall.

Fuck, he’d need another shower the second he was out of this shit.

Giving it no further thought than that derisive little observation, Ed grabbed a handful of mud and covered himself in it. His hair was too light to even attempt to hide it in the mud, so he pulled up the hood of his jacket and pulled the dangling strings tight, until only his face remained visible. Ed
covered that in mud, too.

Strangely enough, while the dirt was damp, it held nothing but an earthy smell. Ed had been covered in far worse in his life.

As the footsteps came closer, Ed took a deep breath and held it, narrowing his eyes enough to hide their golden color. Not that it seemed to matter.

The footsteps ran right past Ed, before pausing and running back.

Ed’s muscles tightened, preparing for a fight. He had his right hand against his left wrist, ready to pull out the big match when a surprised, weak voice cut through the tunnel’s ringing silence.

“Oh my god, are you the man they sent to replace me?”

A faint light flashed in Ed’s face, making him blink rapidly to expel the black blobs in his vision.

A kerosene lamp hung from the hand of a young man with reddish-brown messy hair. Ed had various questions, just off the top of his head, but he put all of that aside to take in the man before him.

The young man was in a red and white uniform, the body a solid, faded red while the short sleeves and collar alternated red and white vertical stripes. It looked very much like an old-fashioned McDonald’s uniform, only without the sewn ‘M’ on the breast.

That wasn’t the only odd thing about him, though. Ed could see blood down the man’s arm and smeared on his tan-colored pants. Not to mention the bastard had pulled the kerosene lamp out of thin air, because when he’d first passed by, Ed was sure the entire tunnel had been pitch-dark.

Ed chalked this up to being part of the instance and let it go, allowing his hand to fall away from his wrist as he nodded in silent answer.

“Oh, thank god, I don’t know what to do! Bill just went crazy! Do you see this! Bill did this!” The young man brought his arm up, a jagged wound catching the dim light for only a moment.

“You…” Ed opened his mouth to speak, but barely got out the first word before there was a strange hissing sound from deeper in the tunnel. The sound brought a snake to mind, but it was distinctly different. Ed just couldn’t figure out why.

A clear, erratic banging shook up the whole tunnel like an earthquake, making both Ed and the red-haired guy sway on their feet. They each used opposite walls to keep their balance.

The red-haired guy had gone incredibly pale, terror all over his face. “That- that’s the monster! It’s out - it’s crazy!” Staggering slightly, the man nearly tripped over his own feet, only managing to catch himself on the tunnel wall behind him. As he swayed, the light played over Ed’s mud-covered face. Like he’d been struck by a bolt of lightning, the man surged forward and shoved the kerosene lamp into Ed’s hand. “Dude, it- it’s your shift now. You go check on the situation, I’ll go try to find someone.”

Before Ed could even inhale a breath to speak, the man’s back was already fading into the darkness beyond the light of the old-fashioned lamp.

“Check what’s going on! Don’t let the monster out! I’ll come back! I’ll be right back!”

Fucking liar. The man’s body was more honest than his mouth, because he was running pretty
fucking fast.

Already feeling off-balance, Ed didn’t get the chance to process any of what had just happened before that damn childish voice rang out in his mind.

“Ding Dong! Main mission has been triggered. Kill Bill within 20 minutes.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys, here's a question for you guys,
What FMA character do you guys think should be introduced next?
I'm on the fence between Maria Ross, Hawkeye, or May Chang. It has to be a badass female, so give me what you want to see.
Alright guys, so Riza Hawkeye won the little poll I put up last chapter. That said, here she is! She makes a little appearance near the end of the chapter, I hope you enjoy it!!

Chapter Edited and Betamed by the fabulous luvsanime02!!
It had been research that had led to his father abandoning all of them. Obsessed with his theories, his great discovery that could change the world as they knew it. For Hohenheim, that had been worth more than his family.

Ed was determined not to follow in their old man’s footsteps.

And maybe that had somehow led to him falling right into the same pattern, walking away from university, and away from Al and Winry. He’d given up nearly everything he’d worked for all his life because the good he’d always wanted to do was muddied by the discovery that science wasn’t as clear-cut as he’d always believed.

Unbidden, the thought of Shou Tucker flashed through his mind, and Ed couldn’t stop his shiver. The man had used his own wife as a breakthrough experiment to establish himself in the field of bioengineering and genetic manipulation post-birth.

He’d succeeded, creating the world’s very first chimera. And when it spoke, everyone praised the man. No one had known what it cost.

And then Ed came to study under the man, in an attempt to engineer a substance strong enough to perfect the rate of human healing. Immortality, Tucker had called it, but for Ed, the only thing that mattered was that Al would be able to live without the scars of past mistakes.

Ed had worked with the man in Tucker’s own house, and Ed had met the man’s daughter.

At the thought of Nina, Ed’s gag reflex nearly crippled him.

While Ed had been working on a healing agent, Tucker had fallen deeper into his research on chimeras, attempting nearly everything to recreate the glory he’d once been known for. A smart animal. A beast capable of human thought, human emotion. With the stranglehold the military had on Amestris, it was no wonder Tucker had such freedom to conduct his research. With sentient chimeras, the military would only strengthen.

And in the end, Tucker had succeeded a second time.

Only Ed had ever found out what the cost really was, and it had been too high a price for ‘research’, for ‘progress’, for ‘advancement’. And the military had just… covered it up.

Meshing together parts of both his daughter, Nina, and their dog, Alexander, Tucker had managed a more coherent chimera.


Ed hadn’t realized he’d stopped walking until he’d nearly doubled over as the dry-heaving almost knocked him on his ass. Tears filled his eyes, the image stuck in his brain, always there… always waiting.

He hadn’t known. Hadn’t known the price until it was too late. Tucker had already taken the first steps, but… it had been Nina and Alexander who’d paid the price.

Fuck, he needed to push those thoughts away. Compartmentalize. Push it back, it’s not important right now.

This game, it wasn’t life or death, and maybe that was part of the problem. Without clearly focusing on his own survival, Ed’s thoughts fell into that dark place he’d managed to keep hidden
away for so very long.

He’d seen far more gruesome deaths at this point, but Ed would never be able to forget the chimera’s voice as it spoke to him. Sometimes, he cursed his eidetic memory, because if he hadn’t learned to compartmentalize years ago, he’d have likely gone insane by now.

Focus.

He needed to focus. This instance might not be life or death, but it would go a long way in helping him survive in the end.

He needed to finish this and then face the next problem.

No space to think. No time to think about anything else.

Survive, Ed.

Quickening his steps, Ed had already lost count of how much time he’d wasted. His mind moved fast, so Ed doubted it was more than a minute or two, but every second counted when he didn’t know what he was up against.

Farther into the tunnel, Ed began to hear a distinct human whining that tapered off into deep groans every once in a while. Quickening his pace, It didn’t take Ed even a full minute to stumble upon a blood-stained blond-haired man sitting on the floor, his back against the muddy tunnel wall.

The man was wearing the same type of uniform as the red-head Ed had seen earlier, and by the look of him, he was far more injured than his coworker. There was a distinct, very large hole on the left side of his forehead, blood pouring down like a waterfall, painting the entire left side of the man’s face a deep, liquid red. His right leg was twisted in an odd angle, and Ed could tell it was broken.

Once Ed was close enough for the man to see the light of the kerosene lamp, the blond-haired man looked up with some difficulty, and upon spotting Ed, he began calling out, “Go! Run! The monster is still in there! You have to go!”

“Ding Dong! Tip: You can currently choose to exit the instance. Do you want to exit the instance?”

Ed pondered it for a moment. He knew he’d wasted time when he lost himself in his thoughts, but he was sure he still had a little under 20 minutes left. If nothing else, it was enough to figure out what he was fighting. “I won’t quit.”

He took in the blond-haired man’s entire frame. The uniform fit correctly, so the clothes were his own. From what Ed could guess, it was the job of these two workers to keep whatever was down there caged. Obviously, they’d failed.

Looking at the name tag attached to the blond-haired man’s chest, Ed spoke, “Keys, what kind of monster is down there?”

Keys raised his head in a daze, obviously not expecting Ed to know his name. “Do I know you?”

Ed almost couldn’t stop himself from rolling his eyes, but he soldiered on. “I’m the new worker who came to take over your shift.”

“Oh, no. You’re the new employee…” Keys struggled to push himself up a bit, straightening
against the wall behind him so that he could look up easier. Ed reached out and helped, moving the man carefully into a more comfortable slouch. Keys smiled wryly. “I won’t live very long. Half an hour at most. I won’t be able to hold on until other people come.”

Ed looked at the hole carved right through Keys’ head and grimaced. Fuck, a normal person would’ve died from a wound like that already.

“There’s a demon in there. You don’t want to go in farther. It’s terrible - it’s crazy!” Keys’ voice was falling into a murmur, his eyes going distant as he muttered to himself. “I can’t escape, but you can. Leave me behind! Save yourself!”

Dammit to hell, Ed didn’t have time for this. Before Keys could fall into another fit of delirious muttering, Ed tried to get his attention again. “Keys. Keys, you aren’t going to die. What the hell is the monster?”

The hissing noises were getting closer and closer, and with a sudden, sharp howl, the tunnel began to shake violently. Keys’ head reared back and knocked against the wall, causing the man to let out a loud cry of pain. Ed himself almost fell back on his ass, going down on one knee and laying a hand on the tunnel wall to stabilize himself. “What the hell was that?”

The pain seemed to have started Keys into some sort of awareness, because he answered quickly. “It’s the big earthworm! Oh god, no one’s ever seen such a big earthworm. It’s a monster! The boss said that crowds from far and wide would come to see the monster. Everyone comes to the circus for its oddities - always so curious, always so amazed.”

Earthworm, circus.

Ed whispered the two keywords under his breath.

“The boss wants to use that damn monster to make money. Now it’s gone crazy and wants to kill me and escape!” The hissing sound grew closer, and Keys seemed to shiver. “Man, you should go first. It must have gotten free from the cage. Go. Go, and don’t worry about me.”

“If it’s just an earthworm, then I can kill it,” Ed reassured. He didn’t have many offensive abilities, but he should be able to kill an earthworm.

Apparently, Keys saw that reassurance as an unwillingness to give up on him. Wide, dark eyes looked at Ed with so much gratitude, Ed wanted to cringe. “If you really want to kill it, then I have a weapon here. Quick, take it. I just used it to hit the earthworm on the head and escape from the cave. It hasn’t caught up yet, so I must have hurt it.”

With an unsteady hand, Keys brought up a large, wooden stick, pushing it towards Ed.

Ed intended to refuse, but he thought better of it and grabbed the stick from the blond-haired man.

Keys began to try and warn Ed again, but Ed didn’t even stay to listen. Carrying a kerosene lamp in his left hand and the stick in his right, Ed took off down the tunnel like he’d been shot from a cannon.

Ed wanted to start swearing out loud, but he doubted he had time for even that much. Unbeknownst to Keys, Ed had gotten a high-pitched message as soon as the man had brought out the stick.

“Ding Dong! The single player instance ‘Kill Bill’ has officially begun. During the game--”

“First, the use of all abilities is prohibited.”
“Second, players can only use the kerosene lamp for light.”

“Third, only the large stick can damage the earthworm.”

“The circus leader has prepared three types of odd treasures, and intends to surprise the audience of the Underground City tomorrow night. However, he is destined for bankruptcy. Even the rats in the dungeon know Bill can’t see the light.”

With only a little over five minutes left to complete the mission, Ed had no time to chat with Keys. He ran straight down the tunnel, not even bothering to attempt any type of stealth.

Keen golden eyes kept watch as the shadows in the tunnel shifted under the dim light of the kerosene lamp, but Ed didn’t slow down. By this time, he doubted that he’d manage to clear the instance during this round, but he needed as much information as possible.

Before Ed could slow himself down, he saw the silhouette of a large object in front of him and reacted on instinct. He was too close to avoid it, but he used it as a springboard. Using the momentum he’d picked up while running, he planted one foot on the strange thing and took two more steps up it before springing into a backflip and landing about a meter away from whatever the hell it was.

The kerosene lamp in his hand swung, spilling a bit of oil as it finally illuminated the monster in front of Ed.

The tunnel itself was about two meters high, and the monster, who bore a striking resemblance to normal earthworms, only in a much… grander scale, took up half the tunnel’s height. Farther down, blocked from the light by the worm’s head, the tail end battered and slammed against the tunnel walls, shaking the entire area around them. Once it seemed to notice Ed’s existence, it made a shrill screech before raising its very large head. Then it rushed directly towards the light source in Ed’s hand.

Like hell Ed was going to allow that, though.

Dodging the first lunge, Ed pivoted and rushed back up the tunnel, stopping about three meters away before putting the kerosene lamp down on the muddy ground and turning to face the oncoming monster. That was just far enough to give Ed a shady view of his enemy, while also keeping the earthworm from destroying the lamp.

Finding its attempt to destroy the hateful light stopped, the earthworm screamed an inhuman garble before opening what Ed guessed was its mouth and moving to bite Ed’s right shoulder.

Ed evaded the move, pivoting on his left leg and bringing his right arm up. Switching the large stick from his left hand to his right, he struck down hard, using about 10% of his strength. Unexpectedly, the blow sent back a shockwave that pushed at Ed, lifting him off his feet until his back connected against the tunnel wall.

The earthworm writhed, but only a small bruise appeared on its back.

Ed growled under his breath and moved in for another attack.

The earthworm’s shell was like fucking armour, and no matter how hard Ed tried, only small injuries and brusies were left behind.

Now Ed realized why Armstrong hadn’t managed to defeat the S3 instance, despite Ed being sure that his ability had something to do with enhanced physical strength.
In an attempt to feel better prepared for the solo Tower Attack game, Ed had planned out the allotted 10 days with the greatest chance of increasing his probability of survival.

For the first seven days, he’d found as many stowaways as possible and gathered their abilities. The final three days had been set aside to help the Attack Organization finish off S type instances. If nothing else, Ed would be able to gain props that could possibly save his life.

Lloyd Marks was an intelligent man, and he’d proved it pretty well by only showing Ed a map with the entrances for the three most dangerous instances, keeping the seven S type instances a secret. Doubtless, if Ed had joined the organization, it would have been the first thing Lloyd would have shown him. Seeing as he walked away, though, the only thing Ed could do was stay near the mall and track Attack’s members to find the location of S type instance entrances.

No member of Attack would deliberately step foot near the three major instances. They were too dangerous, and no player in their right mind would take such a risk with their own life. Even Ed wanted nothing to do with another game like Mario’s Monopoly bullshit.

Spending all day and night near the mall allowed him to spot some members of Attack. It was way too easy to find them when every normal reserve player scattered around them like rats, wanting to avoid but also watch. Deciding to follow Armstrong was more of a shot in the dark than anything. Armstrong was one of the most powerful people in the Attack organization, but with as much strength as the man had, Ed doubted his intelligence.

The fact that Armstrong had failed to clear the S3 instance in the last four days made Ed think that the game was an intellectual puzzle. Armstrong likely missed some key piece of information, and couldn’t clear the instance. Now, though, Ed understood. Abilities weren’t allowed to be used, and only the big stick could harm the earthworm. This was why Armstrong kept coming back in an attempt to finish off the game by himself. Physically, he was the strongest player in Attack. If Armstrong couldn’t clear this, there was no way anyone else would.

Ed knew that his own physical strength was a far cry from Armstrong’s, but Ed honestly didn’t think that pure physical power was what the Black Tower games tested.

Every game he’d played so far, while some had been dangerous and required enough power to protect yourself, had required intelligence to solve and clear them. S type instances couldn’t be all that different. There had to be something he was missing, a strategy he’d be able to implement.

As he ran possibilities through his mind, Ed used the narrow terrain of the tunnel to control the earthworm’s attacks, but the steel shell of the monster didn’t present him with any chances of actually causing damage. It was a stalemate, and Ed was sure he didn’t have much time left.

Ed flipped backwards to avoid a headbutt, but as he landed, his foot slipped in the mud. With him off-balance, the earthworm took the opportunity and smashed its head into Ed’s stomach. Ed flew back, the air momentarily knocked out of his lungs - both from the sudden hit and the squelchy landing. By the light coming very close to his head, Ed knew that he’d landed near the kerosene lamp.

The big earthworm raised its head high, taking up the two-meter-tall tunnel like a snake ready to strike, before it hissed a warning at Ed. And just like a striking snake, it lunged at the kerosene lamp with its head.

“Fuck,” Ed cursed lowly, grabbing the lamp and rolling away from the blow. During the single moment of confusion the monster had from not colliding with anything, Ed pushed himself to his feet and took off running back up the tunnel.
The confusion didn’t last long, though, and Ed heard the moment the monster screeched and rushed to follow on Ed’s heels.

The light of the lamp was just beginning to catch the edges of Keys’ body when a chime sounded inside Ed’s head.

“Ding Dong! Time’s up! The main task of ‘Kill Bill’ has failed.”

Ed felt his chest tighten as the world around him flashed with a sudden white light, making his eyelids slam shut to protect his sight.

When the white light began to fade, Ed finally chanced a glance. A very familiar darkness surrounded him, the scent of humid earth still present, but not overwhelmingly so. There was a moment of tension and fear before Ed scrambled into his backpack for the flashlight and finally got a good look at where he was.

It was the wide underground cave, the only opening being the two-meter-tall tunnel.

He’d returned to the starting point.

Bowing his head, Ed looked down at his hands, still covered by the soft, black leather gloves he’d picked up at the mall. Clenching and unclenching his fists, he marveled for a moment.

“I’m still alive. The mission failed, but the punishment wasn’t death…” Ed whispered to himself. “This is an S type instance.”

Ed checked himself over for the bruises and injuries he’d sustained during the struggle with the earthworm, only to not find any evidence of the fight at all. He almost allowed a full smile to tilt his lips up. There was no mud on him anywhere anymore.

Looking at his gloves again, Ed noticed that all of the scuffs and tears that had come from holding and attacking with the wooden stick were completely gone too.

Everything on him, including himself, was restored to the state it had been in when he’d entered the instance. Like a save point.

Biting his lower lip and furrowing his brows, Ed shook himself out of his thoughts and rushed into the tunnel again. He moved fast, not using the careful steps he’d taken during the first round.

It didn’t take very long to hear the footsteps of the red-haired man.

When the steps were as close as they could be without colliding with him, Ed stopped and waited. In seconds, he heard the prompt.

“Oh my god, are you the man they sent to replace me?”

Ed knew there was something missing. He needed to understand exactly what was going on, because he was fairly sure it wasn’t a test of physical strength.

The red-haired employee looked at him oddly before the prompt changed. “What happened to your partner? You can’t work the shift alone! Bill is crazy! Look at this! Look at what Bill did to me!”

“Yeah, I got it. What happened to Bill?” Ed waved away his words before asking his own question. He looked down at the wounds on the man’s chest and arm. Blood dripped from the two shocking wounds, but they didn’t seem to go deep enough to hit bone. Fuck it, though. If Keys could talk
with a damn hole in his head, this bastard would be fine.

Horror flashed over the red-haired man’s expression before he began to mutter. “Bill… Bill… How should I know what happened to Bill? He suddenly attacked me! You’re here to take over my shift, though, right? Wait right here, I’ll go and find someone who can help. I’ll be back!”

Ed took the kerosene lamp from the redhead before the man took off running up the tunnel like his ass was on fire. Ed didn’t care.

A minute later, he caught sight of Keys.

Lying on the ground, blond hair damp with blood and sweat, once he caught sight of Ed, he began speaking. “Go! Run! The monster is still in there! You have-!”

Ed didn’t have time for this. “I won’t quit.”

Keys gasped, wide, glassy eyes full of confusion.

Ed completely ignored him. Taking the stick from the ground beside Keys, Ed rounded on his heel and started heading down the tunnel. However, he only took about three steps before he stopped and moved back towards the man still lying on the ground.

Keys gulped. “Dude… why did you come back?”

Ed’s expression twisted for a moment, his head tilting to the left for just a second. The next moment, Ed leaned down and began to rip off the man’s clothes.

Keys instantly started to panic!

“Dude! Wait! What are you doing?! S-stop! I’m not- I’m not gay!”

Ed snorted in amusement, but didn’t even hesitate, using his strength to rip at the clothes and overpower the already injured man. Once he had the uniform shirt and the tan-colored pants, he stood back up and looked down at the man left in nothing but socks and a pair of pure white boxers. Ed snorted again before turning and taking off down the tunnel at a sprint.

“You! You!” Keys spluttered, angry, semi-naked, and so fucking confused as he watched the strange new coworker who’d taken his clothes dash off towards danger.

Ed moved fast and kept an ear tuned into his surroundings. He needed to catch the damn monster before it managed to get out of its cage.

Finally, Ed came to the end of the tunnel and to a large opening that led to what looked like a big, broad cavern. Off to one side of the cavern was a cupboard, a table, and two chairs. Ed caught the shine of the lamp light reflecting off of what looked like beer bottles, the ground littered with peanut shells.

Directly opposite the table and chairs was the large, iron cage that contained the monster Ed had fought not even fifteen minutes ago. Except, Ed could see that the cage door was already broken. As soon as the worm saw Ed, it screamed, pushing itself out of the cage and towards Ed.

Ed pivoted and ran back into the tunnel.

The monster earthworm instantly followed.

Opening the front lid of the kerosene lamp, Ed held out the end of Keys’ uniform shirt over the fire
and waited a beat. The weak flame hit the cotton cloth and ignited fast. Ed didn’t waste one article of cloth. Burning the shit, he tossed it to one side before setting the pants and vest aflame and tossing them to the other side. Even the thin, red cotton tie was burned and thrown into the center of the tunnel.

The monster had charged right after Ed into the tunnel, but the moment it saw so many flames igniting at once, it shrunk back, wanting to return to the cavern but having no real way to turn around.

Ed scowled as he pulled off his red hoodie and the black shirt just under it. Setting his own clothes on fire too, he tossed them at the remaining exits, blocking off every escape route the big earthworm could take.

Expression cold and automail glinting in the light of the multiple fires, Ed twirled the stick once before smirking.

“Now. There are 15 minutes left. Let’s play.”

The big earthworm screamed in anger, but Ed ignored it as he rushed in, wooden stick held aloft.

There were clues in the games’ rules. Ed had realized that during his very first game, when he and Zane Allen had opposed each other in finding Mosaic’s book. From the very beginning, the rules had given him very important clues as to who the enemy really was.

The third rule of this game stated that only the stick could cause the big earthworm any damage, but the second rule had implied that the earthworm was scared of light. From the reactions Ed got during his first run in the instance, Ed knew that tidbit was fact.

Ordinary earthworms were afraid of the sun because they were invertebrates that used their skin to breathe. They liked to live in dark, damp areas because, if they dried out, they would die. Ed could even hazard a guess that the only reason the kerosene lamp was available in the game was because of the fire. If used correctly, even the lamp could become a weapon.

And just like he had guessed, the fire was having a big influence on the earthworm, but that alone wouldn’t be enough to kill it. The Black Tower had clearly stated that only the stick would hurt the earthworm.

This was the best he could come up with to narrow the playing field on such a short notice.

With so many minor bonfires surrounding the worm, it had begun to panic. While it scurried to block Ed’s attacks with its hastily brought-up tail, the head continuously struck out in an attempt to extinguish the flames. Not that it was having much success in that area, though, seeing as these flames weren’t the dim little light from the kerosene lamp. While the worm did manage to weaken the flames with its first hit, that wasn’t enough to put them out.

With the most bone-chilling hiss Ed had ever heard, the worm turned its attention from extinguishing the fires to the culprit of them.

“Come on!” Ed sneered back, the fear of dying no longer dogging his movements. “There’s still 10 minutes left.”

Blow after blow was causing damage. Ed could see a bit more than bruises begin to bloom on the monster’s shell-like skin, but with a sudden rush of anger, Ed realized he wouldn’t have the upperhand for long.
While the flames flared bright for a few moments, the extremely high humidity of the tunnels and the moisture in the soil didn’t give the flames very much to feed on. It took a while, and Ed moved as fast as he could to cause some kind of fatal damage, but he wasn’t going to manage it.

When Ed’s red hoodie was finished burning, the big earthworm took the chance and surged forward in its own attack at Ed’s exposed left side.

Growling under his breath, Ed jumped into the air to avoid the direct blow, but he couldn’t dodge the tail that came lashing at him when he was suspended at the apex of his jump. The hit blew him back into one of the tunnel walls, and Ed had to grit his teeth to keep from biting his own tongue as the air rushed out of his lungs.

Fucking hell!

Ed dug metal fingers into the leg of his jeans and ripped the fabric apart. He would have taken the entire thing off if he’d had the time, but the earthworm was bearing down on him and he didn’t have many options anymore. Setting the fabric on fire, Ed prepared to put up a fight with the roughly eight minutes he had left.

He didn’t succeed.

Eight minutes later found Ed standing blankly at the starting point, touching his clothes in mild surprise and a little relief.

Ed hadn’t been sure if the instance restart was just a full-fledged reset of how one began the instance, but this at least answered some questions. Like video game instances themselves, a copy of the game would be produced for each player or group entering, and just like at an RPG’s savepoint, a direct copy would be created at the beginning of each safe instance. With each attempt, the instance would reset to the point just after entry.

Ed took a single moment to wonder if that reset worked the same in case of death…

Whatever, that wasn’t important now. Ed didn’t plan on dying here. Instead, he made his third foray into the damned humid tunnel.

As he walked, he thought more carefully about the events that had transpired since he’d begun this game. From meeting the red-haired man, triggering the main mission, meeting Keys, acquiring the weapon, learning the rules of the game, and finally, fighting the boss at the end.

If he’d been able to use the big match, Ed didn’t doubt that he’d have already been able to kill the large earthworm by now. However, if not for the rule about abilities and what could specifically cause the monster damage, Ed also didn’t doubt that Armstrong would have been able to kill the earthworm too.

He pondered over his thought process from the second round.

The restrictions set by the Black Tower were hints, clues that laid out exactly how the game could be won. So what was he missing?

The earthworm was afraid of fire.

He could use the wooden stick to kill the earthworm…

...
Wait…

Ed suddenly froze, foot hovering in midair as he paused midstep.

*Could* the wooden stick really *kill* the earthworm?

The stick was just an ordinary piece of wood. There was nothing special or reinforced about the thing, while the earthworm’s skin was like metal plating. Ed had used all his strength and designed a fire trap to hem the earthworm in, yet he’d only managed to cause minor cuts and some bleeding.

He’d hit his limit and gotten nowhere.

Was there really a player who could kill the monster with only the stick?

Armstrong couldn’t do it, and the big, buff bastard had been trying for days now. Could Roy Mustang do it?

Ed didn’t reach for Momo to contact the stowaway, but in his head, he’d already come to a conclusion - it couldn’t be done.

No amount of physical strength could turn such a poor choice of weapon into a killing tool, not when he took into account the strength of the enemy. Abilities would have, but those were specifically restricted by the Black Tower.

“The use of all abilities is prohibited. Players can only use the kerosene lamp for light. Only the large stick can damage the earthworm,” Ed recited the rules out loud, wondering if hearing them again would inspire a sudden paradigm shift.

**Damage.**

The rule said damage, not kill.

“Even the rats in the dungeon know that Bill can’t see the light.” Why was that part so awkward? The Black Tower had nearly gone out of its way to mention that bit of information, like *that* was the most important clue.

Hurried footsteps down the tunnel snapped Ed out of his thoughts, and Ed looked up just in time to hear, “Oh my god, are you the man they sent to replace me?”

It was the third fucking time he’d heard that sentence, but Ed stopped himself from rolling his eyes at that revelation by asking a question of his own. “Who is Bill?”

The red-haired man paused for a second, a single heartbeat, and if Ed hadn’t been looking for it, he would have missed it. Confused and still frantic, the man stuttered. “Bill? Bill is… Ah, yes! Bill is crazy! Look at what he did to me!” They were familiar words, but suddenly something caught on Ed’s mind.

*He*. 

Taking stalk of the man’s injuries properly for the second time, Ed saw the blood seeping from the man’s torn work shirt.

**Blood.**

Once again, Ed took the kerosene lamp that had suddenly appeared within the course of their tête-à-tête, and watched as the man ran away.
Ed didn’t bother rushing this time. Instead, he watched the ground as he got lost in thought again.

He’d walked for 15 minutes when he heard a familiar, startled male voice deeper in the tunnel in front of him. “Ah! My clothes! Where are my clothes? My clothes are gone.”

Ed approached the man sprawled semi-naked on the ground. White boxers were stained with mud, and Ed was sure the man hadn’t looked quite this pitiful last time.

When Keys finally noticed the light coming from down the tunnel, he looked up and clearly saw Ed’s face. “Go! Run! The monster is still in there! You have to go!”

Ed raised the kerosene lamp, taking a moment to look pensively at the man’s face before he asked, “Bill Keys?”

Keys’ expression suddenly twisted. “Do I know you? How do you know my name?”

Frustration made Ed squeezed his eyes shut for a beat. His grip on the handle of the lamp would have broken the thing if Ed hadn’t heard it softly squeak a protest.

Silently picking up the stick from the ground beside Bill Keys, Ed twirled the piece of wood once before bringing it down hard and fast onto the already injured man’s head.

The sound of the impact was still jarring, but strangely familiar to Ed. And like the chef in the mole’s cave more than two weeks ago, Bill didn’t die right away.

One glassy eye remained to stare sightlessly up at Ed as the man’s hoarse voice seemed to come out of him like a final sigh. “Why… why?”

Fuck. Ed didn’t fucking know why.

If anyone had any right to ask that question, it was Ed and all the surviving humans. Why all of this? Why the games, the towers, the deaths…? Why everything?

Unable to answer either the man or his own questions, Ed watched quietly as the man stopped breathing.

At the same time in Luza’s industrial district.

As the sun began to set, the large, buff man suddenly appeared beside a manhole cover just outside an old factory. He hadn’t even stood there a full second before a young woman came up to him. Long, blonde hair was held up with two clips at the back of her head, making the ends of her hair stick out from the top of her head in a very sporty style, and sharp, brown eyes assessed the man’s face for only a moment before she spoke.

“You failed again.”

It wasn’t a question, but the big man couldn’t keep the sudden sheepish look off his face.

“Don’t say it, 1st Lieutenant. I’ve already gone through this instance too many times. It is impossible to clear.”

One perfect blonde eyebrow rose as the woman crossed her arms over her torso, the black material of her uniform’s undershirt pulling against her generous chest. She herself hadn’t tried the S3 instance, mainly because Major Armstrong had claimed the thing upon its discovery. Something about it being the ultimate test of his manly strength passed down in the Armstrong line for
generations.

“Are you certain that killing the earthworm is the only way to clear the instance?”

Major Armstrong was not a stupid man. Hell, Major Armstrong wasn’t even an aggressive man, despite his size. He had his moments, but all of his strength was usually used to protect, not to harm.

If Riza had guessed correctly, and both she and Dr. Lloyd Marks had speculated about it enough to feel certain, Major Armstrong had focused solely on protecting the humans in the instance from the big, awful monster, and ignored what may have been the actual mission.

At Riza’s question, though, the major took on a look of shocked incredulity.

Without any warning whatsoever, the major tore apart his shirt to reveal the large, sculpted breadth of his upper body.

In what Riza considered to be an overdramatic, over-the-top display of his assurance, Major Armstrong began a long, deep speech about the certainty that protecting the innocent and injured was always the main mission.

Riza kept her face completely blank, though she had to work extra hard to keep her sigh from escaping her lips. Any reaction would only encourage the major, and Riza knew from experience that this entire display would blow over soon enough.

For a moment, she allowed her mind to wander to her commanding officer. If nothing else, Riza knew that the colonel was alive. That was enough for her. While he accomplished whatever task had been assigned to him before the start of all this, Riza would look after whatever remained of their team. She had a job to do as the 1st lieutenant, and they had already lost enough people as it was.

**Underground Tunnel, S3 Instance**

“When Ding Dong! At 18:13 on November 30th, 2018, player Edward Elric has successfully cleared the single player instance ‘Kill Bill’, and obtained the reward ‘Earthworm’s Tears’.”

Earthworm’s what, now?!

No. Oh, fuck no.

Ed scowled harshly as he looked down the tunnel towards where the big earthworm would be.

If the pattern were to continue, Ed wouldn’t be able to leave the instance until he’d gotten whatever reward he’d earned from clearing the game. First had been Mosaic’s Match, then the turkey egg Momo, then Mario’s Red Gloves, and now… Earthworm’s Tears…

Fuck. Did earthworms even shed tears? Was that a scientific possibility, or a Black Tower phenomena?

Fucking hell!

Growling low in his throat, Ed turned away from Bill Keys’ body and stalked down the tunnel. He had no idea what he was going to do, but whatever it was needed to involve that monster he’d fought with twice now.
Walking deeper into the dark, Ed heard the hissing that was very familiar by now. Despite it being no different than the last two times, though, when it made its way to Ed’s ears, it became a high, yet clear, child’s voice.

Oh god, the earthworm talked.

“It hurts…. There’s so much blood. Who hit me? Why did someone hit me?”

Ed halted.

“I’ve been so good. I never eat people. I only eat leaves. Why do they want to catch me? Why do they want to hurt me…? what did I do wrong? It hurts…”

Repressing a deep sigh of mental exhaustion, Ed continued walking.

Just as he rounded the corner that would lead to the open cavern where the cage was last time, the whimpering child’s voice suddenly sharpened. “Ah! Light!”

All of the big worm’s attention focused instantly on the kerosene lamp in Ed’s hand. It moved back and forth like a snake intimidating its prey. With a short, quick hiss, it lunged toward the lamp. “No light! No light!” The thing as so large that it looked like it was going to attack Ed.

Without a second thought, Ed threw down the kerosene lamp, smashing it open before stomping out the flame.

The entire world around them both was plunged back into pitch-blackness. Ed heard the body of the large earthworm freeze midway to him.

Ed couldn’t see - he was virtually blind in this situation - but as unnerving as that was, he forced his panic down. At least he could hear what the monster was doing.

For long minutes, one human and one earthworm stood opposite each other, frozen in doubt and indecision.

After some time, Ed heard the sound of a large, heavy object being dragged against the ground. The earthworm… it was moving cautiously towards Ed.

As the sound came closer, Ed had to bite his tongue to keep from freaking the fuck out. Especially when he could vaguely feel the monster circling him a few times, like it was assessing him.

When something slippery dragged against the back of Ed’s hand, it took every single shred of control he could stitch together to keep from jumping.

From the feeling of whatever had touched him, Ed could guess that it was the big earthworm’s sticky head, and disgust came fast, but before he could move away, the childish voice spoke again. “It’s wet and sticky… like…”

With a start, Ed realized that he still had Bill’s blood on his hands.

Swallowing down his nausea and seriously wanting to get out of this dark tunnel as fast as possible, Ed sighed as he reached out and placed his blood-covered palm on the worm’s big head. Pretending he was talking to Al, Ed closed his already sightless eyes and muttered, “I’m sorry I hit you.”
Ed had found out earlier, after the second time he tried the instance, that the game didn’t restore the state of the Black Tower natives. While Ed’s clothes had been completely restored, Keys’ clothes had been removed from this copy of the instance forever. Now, it looked like all of the injuries Ed had dealt the earthworm from the two earlier rounds hadn’t healed at all.

Not that the earthworm could understand Ed’s apology. “You seem like a good person. You wouldn’t beat me like that drunk.”
Something sharp must have scraped against one of the earthworm’s injuries because there was a startled cry in the dark. Ed reached out his hand to try to catch the tears, but…

The fucking earthworm was faking it. There were no actual tears.

Ed bit his lip, frustration and exhaustion pushing him to the point of laughter. He swallowed it down as best he could as he considered his options.

Just like in Mario’s Monopoly Game, Ed needed to get ahold of the ‘Earthworm’s Tears’ in order to leave the instance.

With the kerosene lamp broken, Ed was walking basically blind, and while he still had the flashlight in his bag, he didn’t even consider pulling it out.

Trying to fight back his nausea at the slimy feel of the earthworm rubbing against his side, Ed stretched out a hand and softly stroked the head of the giant monster.

Seeing as he’d caused the thing’s injuries in the first place, guilt actually made it easier to offer the thing some comfort.

Before even entering the instance, Ed had subconsciously focused on one piece of information: the final boss of the S3 instance was the huge earthworm.

While that had turned out to be wrong, it wasn’t totally his fault. While tracking Armstrong, he’d heard the man talk about how he would try to beat the monster to clear the instance again that day. With Ed’s memory, those words had stuck in his mind and he’d banked on it.

The actual solution to the instance surprised him a bit. He was expecting to simply fight and beat a Black Tower monster, but from the beginning, there were too many unexpected restrictions. With those preconceived ideas, Ed rushed forward to attack without giving the situation proper thought. The second round had been even worse, because Ed had believed in his own wit. With his focus on finding a way to defeat the damn monster, the entire main mission fell to the wayside.

It was only after realizing that the odds were stacked against the players from the very beginning that Ed had begun to set the misunderstanding from Armstrong aside.

First of all, the tunnel was very long. Walking it carefully during the first round had taken Ed 15 minutes to reach Bill, and he’d kept his pace a steady, prepared one. Without barreling your way through the dark, there would only be about five-plus minutes left to defeat the big earthworm.

If Ed had miscalculated, he wouldn’t even have had time to see the monster. His 20 minutes would have been up, and he would have restarted the instance. The time limit was too unrealistic - it didn’t give players a very high chance of clearing the instance.

Secondly, there were clues laid out for anyone who’d care enough to pay attention. For example, the wounds on the red-haired man’s chest were cuts. Unless the earthworm could have suddenly picked up a weapon, there was no way for it to have caused the man that type of injury. There were also little slips of ambiguous language, little clues that implied that Bill wasn’t the earthworm.

In addition, there were hints from the Black Tower’s rules. First, it said that only the stick could harm the earthworm, and then it pointed out that Bill couldn’t see the light. The use of the two different pronouns was telling, even if the Black Tower’s goal was to mislead the players.

The earthworm was afraid of light, but Bill couldn’t see the light.
The trick was in the way the person interpreted those words. An animal afraid of light couldn’t see the light. Yet, a person who refused to admit that they did wrong also couldn’t see the light.

The loophole was subtle and hidden well, but it was deep.

These puzzles, all these games, seemed to have that in common. They required abstract thinking, shifting the paradigm. Extrapolation.

For example, if a fish has 3,418 scales on its left side and 3,418 scales on its right side, which side of the fish has the most scales?

The outside.

Ed had always been good at that, since he was a child.

Only, this time, there was no witty solution. The big earthworm still wasn’t actually crying, but Ed kept strokings it's head, pondering on how he could manage to get tears from the thing.

The disgusting, slimy worm was lying against Ed and sobbing without actual tears.

A helpless feeling was quick to well up in him. “Hey, it’s not my fault. I didn’t hurt you on purpose. You should blame the Black Tower. It only gave players 20 minutes. When a time limit is put on a person, like that, most people tend to panic. There was no time to pay attention to the hints and clues…”

Fuck, he was doing it again. Justifying himself. Not that he really had to bother with it, because the large monster didn’t even understand what Ed was saying. It simply cried louder in an attempt to overpower Ed’s voice.

Ed rolled his eyes, though he couldn’t say if it was at himself or the dramatic monster.

Settling himself against the muddy tunnel wall, the large earthworm in his lap, Ed continued to pet it for a while. He bit back his impatience, which was quickly mounting in the wake of his waning disgust. It took a long time, but the sobbing eventually tapered off some.

Confused as to why the thing had stopped crying, Ed’s hand stopped moving against the worm’s head. That’s when he heard a loud, annoying snore.

The fucking thing fell asleep…

It can’t be serious. This monster had literally just escaped from a cage - shouldn’t it be just a little more on edge than this?

It was impossible to fully know what had happened in the cavern where the earthworm was being kept, but Ed could make some educated guesses.

The leader of the circus had caught the earthworm somewhere and wanted to use it as a selling point with the audience coming tomorrow evening. Obviously, Bill and the red-haired man had been employed to guard the monster. Only, when Bill got drunk, he used the stick to beat and abuse the earthworm. The red-haired man had said that Bill was ‘crazy’, and he should have been referring to the fact that Bill had almost killed the earthworm.

The cage must have been broken when the earthworm resisted.

The red-haired man couldn’t just sit on the sidelines and watch Bill kill the circus’s current
Ed sighed, tilting his head back against the dirty tunnel wall.

As the earthworm slept on his lap, Ed couldn’t help but think of Nina again. Of Alexander.

He’d spent nearly seven months in Tucker’s house. He’d played and fought with Nina, and he and Al had bonded with the little girl in a way that Ed hadn’t allowed himself to since before his mother died. Before the fire. Before he lost his limbs.

Nina had been a happy little girl, a bright light in an otherwise gloomy house. While her father had seemed kind, attentive, and driven. Focused on his research, but at least he was still around. That was more than Van Hohenheim had ever done for Ed and Al.

Yet, in the end, Shou Tucker had cared about nothing more than his research, sacrificing his own daughter for his sick experiments.

Opening his eyes and taking in the darkness around him, Ed shook himself out of his own thoughts. Sure, there were parallels between the two situations. An abused… animal, the darkness, the smell of dirt, the feel of sweat and fear sticking his clothes to his skin. But this wasn’t the same as then.

Nina and Alexander were put to rest, given freedom from the pain of what Shou Tucker had done to them.

And now, Ed had an earthworm to take care of. Or, at least, get something out of. He also had a brother to find.

Pushing at the earthworm’s head, Ed growled, “Come on, get up. We gotta get out of here.”

The moment the thing was awake, it started to cry again. “I’m hungry, so hungry. I miss my mama…” And still not a single tear.

Ed climbed to his feet, dislodging the big head off his lap before tapping it twice and then slapping at the ass of his jeans. Ed wasn’t sure how he was going to get this damn earthworm out of here, and he knew that whoever the circus leader was, they wouldn’t just let Ed or the earthworm leave.

The darkness also didn’t help.

“Come on,” Ed muttered, beckoning the earthworm to follow him as he began to walk back up the tunnel. He kept his hand on the tunnel wall to make sure he followed some kind of path. When he didn’t hear any movement behind him, Ed turned to look over his shoulder, blindly searching the dark for his newest charge. 

“You coming?”

There was no response, no movement at all.

Ed wasn’t about to try and push the monster out of the tunnel, he wasn’t stupid, but he’d already gleaned some of the worm’s weaknesses. It didn’t want to be alone.

Ed didn’t even manage to make it 3 meters farther along the tunnel before he heard the shift and drag of the worm’s large body along the muddy tunnel floor. At first, it maintained a perfunctory distance between him, but it didn’t take very long for the worm to settle itself right behind Ed, rubbing its large head against the top of Ed’s.
A shiver of disgust came fast, but he pushed that down ruthlessly.

As they walked by Bill’s corpse, the earthworm paused, hissing in fear. “Bad person! Evil person!”

Ed didn’t argue, only rubbed its head and kept walking.

Soon, they finally made it to the instance starting point.

Well… now what?

“I want to go home…” the earthworm whispered into the silence.

“Go on, then,” Ed coaxed. He was pretty sure that he couldn’t leave without the earthworm’s tears, but he was also certain that the earthworm couldn’t leave either. So they were at an impasse.

Standing there in the dark made the seconds drag by slowly, but Ed remained still and silent.

Before long, the earthworm began to move again, and Ed sensed it swaying its head back and forth. It seemed to be taking in its surroundings for the first time - not sobbing, not hissing, not panicking. Ed let it.

“I… I’m free?” Oh god, it sounded so confused, and Ed had to close his own eyes, Nina’s hoarse, gruesome voice echoing in his head.

‘We play… now? We play now?’

The blankness of that thing’s cloudy eyes, the long, brown hair cascading down its dog-shaped head, the slow, careful way it moved to minimize the pain as much as possible… Not that it mattered. The pain was more than just skin-deep.

Unbeknownst to Ed, as he lost himself in his flashback, the earthworm slithered itself closer to him. Ed was only pulled back from his memories when he felt something large and wet drip onto his cheek.

Ed’s head snapped up, but he still couldn’t see in the dark, not that it mattered because in the next second, the big earthworm laid its head gently on top of Ed’s. “You are a good person.”

As it spoke, there was another drop of liquid on Ed’s face. With that statement hanging in the air around them, the worm hissed before twisting its body around and slamming into the ground, disappearing from the cave in moments.

Ed stood frozen for a second before reaching up to touch the tears on his face.

A sudden flash of white light had Ed slamming his eyes shut, the shift from total darkness to blinding light startling him into crying out.

When he managed to open his watery eyes, Ed noticed that he was back behind the factory in Luza’s industrial district.

Ed had gone into the instance around noon, but now the moon was already high above him. The flow of time in the instance must have run slower than the outside world, because Ed knew he’d only spent about an hour and a half in the game. Three 20-minute rounds and about 30 minutes trying to figure out how to get the tears from the earthworm.

Carefully, Ed looked around and took in the abandoned factory. He moved quickly and silently
back towards where he’d come from, finding an empty, already raided car repair shop a few blocks down the street from the factory.

He pulled the door closed behind him before reaching out and pulling the solidified earthworm’s tear from his cheek.

When it had landed on Ed’s face, it had felt like a liquid, but it seemed to crystalize as it came into contact with both Ed’s skin and the open, humid air of the tunnel.

The item was beautiful, a clear, crystal tear that shone like a diamond in the light of the moon. It was shaped like a large teardrop.

Ed knocked on the tear three times, but there was no response. He raised the tear to the sky, letting it catch the moonlight in full. Nothing. Looking around, Ed pulled off his backpack and grabbed one of the water bottles, twisting the cap open before upending the entire thing on the tear and his hand.

Wiping at it with his hoodie sleeve, Ed finally caught sight of words appearing on the tear.

[Prop: The Earthworm’s Tear
Owner: Edward Elric
Level: 1
Attack: None
Function: Wipe the tear on wounds, and it can quickly heal any injury, even broken bones.
Restrictions: Can only be used three times.
Note: If only these tears could regenerate amputated limbs.]

From a certain viewpoint, the level of this item was lower than that of Mario’s Gloves or the Momo Turkey Egg, but it was that very general quality of the item that made it indispensable to Ed.

In the past seven days, Ed had collected six abilities, and none of them had a healing effect.

At the moment, Ed’s physical abilities were great. As long as he didn’t break a bone, he could heal from just about any wound after a fight, but he could do nothing during one. If he was hurt bad enough and had nowhere to run to recover, he’d be prey. The earthworm’s tear could end up saving his life.

“It’s a pity it can only be used three times, though…” The S-type instances seemed to be a lot simpler than the other, more life-threatening games Ed had gone through, but the rewards were also assigned accordingly.

Allowing himself to finally relax for the first time since he’d been told he would be forced to attack the Tower, Ed leaned against the shop’s wall, his backpack acting like a pillow under his lower back.

He knew he wasn’t really going to manage any kind of meaningful sleep, but his body needed a break. His mind needed a break. This was the best he could do for rest right now.

In Luza’s shopping mall, underground parking lot.

The large, muscular form of the major leaned sulkily against the far wall, beefy arms crossed over his chest as he explained the steps of the instance for the sixth time that evening.

“I didn’t clear the instance after killing the big earthworm,” Armstrong muttered, still very much
Dr. Lloyd Marks sighed, having heard that same sentence six times now. “Are you sure you killed it? An earthworm can have its body broken down into two or three segments and it wouldn’t necessarily be dead. How did you kill it?”

Armstrong grunted. “It was dead, Doctor, of that I’m sure. I broke the stick in half and impaled the monster’s head. It wasn’t hard - the difficult part was accomplishing the task in 20 minutes. I tried many times before I succeeded, but even with the earthworm dead, the mission still failed.”

Lloyd stood from his chair and paced around the room. Having been focused completely on the threatening instances, Lloyd had neglected to pay any kind of attention to the S-type instances the organization was taking on. He’d heard all of Major Armstrong’s explanations again and again, but none of it made much sense.

“Alright. Walk me through it one more time, from start to finish, word for word. The Black Tower’s rules, the conversation with the two men, and the place the earthworm was held.”

Armstrong clenched his jaw, but he nodded, launching into a more detailed explanation than he’d ever given thus far.

About an hour later, Lloyd’s head dropped heavily onto the table, the soft thud of the impact making Armstrong wince in sympathy. “Bill isn’t the earthworm. You have to kill the blond man on the ground.”


Lloyd picked up his head and squinted at the big, buff man. “The Black Tower played on your directional thinking. It made you believe that what you had to kill was the monster that appeared at the end.” Rubbing wearily at his eyes, Lloyd sighed. “Tomorrow, try killing the blond man on the ground.”

Armstrong’s strong, square jaw dropped in shock. “You expect me to kill an innocent, injured man?!”

“Don’t think of it as a man,” the measured voice of Riza Hawkeye sounded from beside the door. “It is a Black Tower creature, just like the earthworm. And if what you described is correct, that man was likely the one to hurt the red-haired man you met first. I wouldn’t doubt that he was abusing the earthworm as well.”

Armstrong stared at her in silence, face going grim and stoney in thought.

“It’s likely the Tower also played on your sense of justice and sympathy. We are human. If given the challenge to take out an oversized version of a slimy creature to protect other humans, most people wouldn’t question it. They would go into the instance, maybe try it twice before realizing that the earthworm is too hard to defeat, and then give up,” Lloyd muttered, nearly to himself.

Armstrong’s tense body relaxed. He didn’t like the thought of being played, but he could accept that answer. “I understand. Tomorrow, I’ll go kill the blond man.”

Moving away from the wall, Armstrong strode right past Riza on his way out the door.

Riza sighed before pushing the door closed and staring at Lloyd with narrowed eyes.

“No, I don’t have any information on Colonel Roy Mustang. I’ve been going through the files
Breda brought in last week, but no one writes anything down these days. If I still had access to the database, I’d be able to give you more. Lieutenant Hawkeye, the only thing we know now is that he’s still alive.” Lloyd touched a hand to his forehead, likely stressed by the events of the last week.

Riza watched the man with hard, brown eyes, assessing his words as well as his body language. With a single nod, she rounded on her heel. As soon as she touched the doorknob, Lloyd spoke again. “Did you find anything on Kain Fuery or Vato Falman?”

Riza tensed for a moment, but that was all the answer Lloyd needed. Before she even spoke, the doctor knew what her answer would be.

“No. Master Sergeant Fuery and Warrant Officer Falman have not been located yet.”

Lloyd cursed.

Riza couldn’t help agreeing. Not only because they were part of her unit, but because of their specialties. Given a chance, Fuery would be able to come up with a method of communication spanning more than just two major cities, while Falman had a memory like a steel trap. If anyone had any idea of where Colonel Mustang was and what he was doing, it would be Vato Falman.

“I’ll send out 2nd Lieutenants Havoc and Breda to Central to see what they can find.”

“Lieutenant Hawkeye, I don’t think that’s for the best.”

Riza pulled the door open, walking out just as she replied, “It’s a good thing you aren’t my superior, then.”

The next morning, a group of three Attack organization members appeared in the back of the abandoned factory.

“You sure you’ll be able to clear it this time, Major?” asked a young woman with short black hair and a distinctive mole under her left eye.

“Of course he will. He knows what the real mission is now - it shouldn’t be hard,” answered a blond-haired man who walked beside the young woman.

“I have the correct information now. That is all I should need,” Armstrong smiled, expression unusually serious.

2nd Lieutenant Maria Ross frowned at the change in her unit leader, but decided to remain silent. Instead, she turned to her partner, Sergeant Denny Brosh. “What about you? Are you going to attempt S1 again today?”

Denny laughed. “They’re monkeys, Maria. It’s fun.”

She snorted, shaking her head at him. “If you say so.”

Coming up to the manhole cover that designated the entrance of the S3 instance, the group of three came to a stop. Armstrong gave each of his subordinates a small nod before he took a single step forward onto the manhole cover.

Nothing happened.

Everyone looked down at the metal cover under Armstrong’s feet before it finally seemed to click
for Maria. “It looks like someone has already cleared it.” Despite this being a statement, the slight uptick at the end of her sentence turned it into more of a question.

Armstrong’s large shoulders seemed to sink at her words, disappointment weighing him down. “So it seems.”

Denny winced. “We can still go try the S1 instance instead. That one shouldn’t have been cleared yet.”

Armstrong sighed, overly-muscled body seeming to shrink. “I detest leaving things unfinished,” he grumbled as he stepped back off the manhole cover.

Maria smiled sympathetically. “Dr. Marks said the instance isn’t too difficult. There are too many people in this town to believe that no one would have cleared it. At least there are still other instances around town left to clear.”

Armstrong nodded, straightening his back and standing tall again. “Alright, let's head to the S1 instance. This time, I will clear it today!”

A few blocks down the street, Ed went on unaware of Major Armstrong’s predicament. But even if he had known, he wouldn’t have changed anything. He needed to earn instance rewards, to increase his chances of survival during the Tower Attack Game in two days.

With the time that he had left, Ed went to the mall, sticking close so he could follow another Attack member and clear another S-type instance. He was following a blonde-haired woman when he accidentally triggered a different instance.

It was a single-player instance, and going in with no preconceived ideas gave Ed the chance to think it through clearly. It wasn’t difficult, but it took more time than the S3 instance had.

By the time Ed cleared the instance, it was early morning of the 10th day.

At 17:00 on the 23rd of November, Ed was informed by the Black Tower that he would be forced to participate in the Tower Attack Game. Since the Black Tower always ran according to the human time system, Ed knew he had only 10 hours left before he would be pulled into the Tower Attack Game.

Checking his backpack, Ed made sure he had everything he needed. Food and water weren’t something he required every day anymore, not since before the Mario Monopoly Game, but it had become even more evident afterward. Hunger wasn’t gnawing at him and thirst didn’t cripple him, but more than three days without either and Ed knew he’d start flagging.

Finding a sports store didn’t take long - most cities in Amestris had five or more of them - but from the moment Ed walked in, he knew he’d have a hard time finding anything useful. The sports store had already been raided, picked clean of anything even remotely weapon-like. Still, Ed made his way in carefully, going all the way to the back where the hunting section was usually located.

There was nothing, not on the shelves or in the glass displays, but Ed already knew there wouldn’t be. Instead, he went into the back storage area labeled ‘Employees Only’.

Unless you’ve worked in some kind of shop or store before, you wouldn’t even think to look in the back storage areas. Most people only ever saw the front of the shop, and to them, that was all there was. No doubt there were some people smart enough to go looking, but to Ed’s good fortune, while the backroom had been raided, it wasn’t completely hollowed out.
Ed found two knives and a set of four throwing daggers. They were blunted, but Ed was sure he could sharpen them well enough.

He made his way to an empty family restaurant, small and out of the way. Barricading the door, Ed pulled out Mosaic’s match and began to sharpen each knife meticulously. The match worked like a charm, like Ed had known it would. The knives were sharpened methodically, almost mindlessly, as Ed found himself spiraling down into his own thoughts.

There was no guarantee that Ed would make it through the Tower Attack Game, despite everything he’d done to give himself a fighting chance. And if he didn’t make it through, who would find Al? Or Winry?

That kind of stress wouldn’t help while he was in the game, though Ed was sure he’d be able to shut it off when he was in the thick of things. Still, he needed more information.

Lucky for him, he had a direct connection to the Amestrian player that had pulled everyone in Amestris into the Black Tower Attack Game. At the time, Ed had participated in the mentally-handicapped mode, but he knew this time he’d be facing the real game. The goal wouldn’t just be to ‘stay alive’. If he wanted to survive, he needed to clear the game.

Basic information so far stated that the Black Tower had a total of seven floors. On the very first day of the game, it had announced the three major rules. The third of which was: all players please attack the Tower.

Whatever time Ed had left could be the only time he had left.

Sitting at one of the public tables, Ed closed his eyes and breathed. Knives were strapped to his thighs and upper arms, he had everything he thought he’d need, and for the moment, the only thing he could do for himself was contact Roy Mustang.

Ed took out the turkey egg, knocking on it three times before softly whispering, “Mr. Mustang?”

There was an odd little melody playing through the egg and Mustang didn’t reply immediately, but Ed knew better than to push. After a few minutes, Ed heard “the second task has been completed”.

Then came the voice Ed had been waiting for. “Edward, are you alright? Is something wrong?”

To Ed’s surprise, Mustang actually sounded a bit concerned. For some reason, that made something in Ed’s stomach flutter hotly.

“Are you playing a game?” he asked, pushing down whatever the hell that had been.

There was a deep breath from the other end of the connection before Mustang replied. “Yes. I was pulled into an instance, but I just completed the second branch mission.”

Ed couldn’t help it, he smiled. So even the great Roy Mustang stumbled into sudden instances. Why was that thought so amusing? “Mr. Mustang, I’d like to ask for some information. I will be entering the Tower Attack Game in two hours.”

There was a pause on the line, but it was as quick as a heartbeat before Mustang seemed to completely understand the situation. “You’re being pulled into the Tower Attack Game. First floor, right?”

Whoever Roy Mustang was, he was both sharp and blunt, something Ed could appreciate down to his bones. Intelligence seemed to be a trait most of humanity lacked nowadays, but not this man.
“Yes. I was informed by the Black Tower 10 days ago that I would be playing the Tower Attack Game at five o’clock this afternoon. I’ve done all I can to prepare, but before I attack the Tower, I wanted to trouble you for some information.” Ed paused for a moment, before reluctantly saying, “You don’t have to tell me anything if you don’t want to.”

Mustang didn’t even take a breath before he replied. “When I entered the Black Tower, I was given the main mission: steal the turkey’s most precious turkey egg. That turkey egg was our little archiver. I wasn’t the only one, though - I had four companions with me. They didn’t know who I was, but they were hostile from the beginning. Their task was to protect the turkey egg.”

Ed frowned, leaning his head on his left hand. “Your task was exactly the opposite?”

“Yes,” Mustang answered. “I kept my main task a secret, and all of us entered the vast underground world together. Everyone native there were called underground people, but there was a clear line of division between the humans and monsters. Right at the center of their world is a pink river. Everything to the left of the river is called the Underground Kingdom, while everything to the right is the monster world. The turkey egg was in the monster half.”

The explanation paused for a moment, and then came the sounds of fierce fighting from Mustang’s end. Ed listened patiently.

Five minutes later, Mustang gave a small grunt before picking right back up. “We arrived in the Underground Kingdom, so we had to cross the pink river to get to where we needed to be. There was a ferry boat manned by one of the underground humans. From there, it became a puzzle. Only a maximum of three, but no less than two people, can be onboard the boat at one time, and if the boatman is alone, he’ll take the boat and won’t come back.”

Ed listened carefully to the explanations of the three games Mustang had faced. All of them were merely critical thinking puzzles.

It turned out that the turkey ambushed the group of five directly after the third game. Three of Mustang’s companions died right at the start, and only one person escaped. When he was the only one left, the turkey identified Mustang as a stowaway and tried to eat him. Mustang took exception to that, and in the end, managed to claim the archiver egg from a nest of thousands. With that, he’d cleared the first floor.

Taking it all in and examining it in his head, Ed pondered.

The three games had Mustang played weren’t impossible, nor were they particularly hard if someone enjoyed solving puzzles, but they were time-consuming. The hardest part was the fight with the turkey at the end.

Mustang didn’t need to say it, but it was obvious that the man had a very good offensive ability. Ed doubted the giant turkey would be any weaker than the big mole, and Ed hadn’t been able to really even harm that stupid beast. Now, he had a good chance of managing an escape, but actually defeating the big mole? Less than 20%.

The only thing going for him was that Edward Elric wasn’t a stowaway.

Stowaways were like catnip for any Black Tower monster, and strong ones were in rare form. It was the only advantage Ed had over Mustang.

When the man on the other end of the egg finished laying out everything, the conversation lulled. Mustang had already cleared his instance, and silence rung like a bell between them.
With the egg laying on the table, Ed lowered his head into the cradle of his arms. He hated this position, but it was one that always made him feel comfortable. It was childish, though, and made him look young and ignorant. It also didn’t help when most stools failed to allow his feet to touch the floor, emphasizing his lacking height.

Holding on to each elbow with the opposite hand, Ed smiled thinly. “Thank you, Mr. Mustang.”

There was a beat before, “Roy. You can call me Roy.”

That made Ed’s smile just a little bigger. “Thank you, Roy.”

“Edward, I doubt that I’ll be able to use the turkey egg properly if mine is the only one. I hope you can pass the Black Tower’s first floor.”

Ed barked out a laugh, feeling just a little lighter at Roy’s words. “Oh no, is that concern I hear?”

“If it was, I assure you that the only thing I’m concerned about is my ability to save the game.”

Ed grinned. He didn’t know why, exactly, but he had a gut feeling that this statement was a lie. “Bastard, you don’t make being your partner in this very easy.”

“Nothing worth having is easily given, Edward.”

Fuck, they were teasing each other. Or was this flirting? Ed didn’t know - he’d never really done either with strangers. Maybe it was the mounting stress of the last ten days. Maybe it was the fact that this could be Ed’s last few moments alive.

Whatever it was, Ed knew it wouldn’t last. With one deep breath, chin balanced on his automail arm, Ed asked for something he wasn’t really sure he wanted. “Mr. Mustang… Roy, if by chance I don’t return, could you do something for me? A favor.”

Roy fell silent for a moment, obviously thinking it over. “What is it?”

“I have a younger brother. His name is Alphonse Elric…” Ed didn’t even need to ask.

“Is he in Central? I’ll find him for you.”

Damn…

Ed had to close his eyes to steady himself. He didn’t know where this trust was coming from. Ed didn’t know anything about Roy Mustang other than that he was a stowaway… but suddenly, he wanted to.

He wanted to know why Roy was a stowaway, who the man had killed and why. His instincts already trusted the man, no matter the lack of information.

“Thank you.” It was really all he could offer.

Another pause. “You’ll be fine, Edward. You’re strong - you will live. Plus, you aren’t a stowaway, so you should have it easier than I did.”

Ed didn’t doubt it. He smiled, though, amusement coloring his tone. “Don’t worry, Roy. I won’t die. You’ll still be able to use the archiver in later games.”

There was a loud, booming laugh right before Ed grabbed the egg, closing the connection quickly.
For some reason, he was calm now. Settled. He’d given himself every chance to succeed, and he was sure he would.

Shouldering his bag, Ed strode out of the empty restaurant and made his way slowly to the center of the city. The walk took a little under an hour, and before long, Ed stood under the large, floating expanse of the Luza Black Tower.

It took mere moments before that damn familiar voice was back, speaking in Ed’s head in that high, clear tone.

“Ding Dong! The Black Tower’s first floor (Normal Mode) is officially opened. The single-player game is loading…”

“Sandbox is being generated…”

“Sandbox loading complete…”

“Welcome to the monster world!”

--

Riza stood in Dr. Marks’ office, an unreadable expression on her face as she laid out the situation plainly.

“Two reserve players from Central were found at the edge of town at approximately 15:30 this afternoon.”

Lloyd leaned back in his chair, Armstrong propped against the far wall. “Did you manage to get anything out of them?” the doctor asked.

Riza nodded sharply, hands clasped behind her back, spine straight, eyes staring at a spot just over the doctor’s left shoulder. For a moment, she could pretend that everything was back to normal, and she was only here to brief her unit leader. And then, she actually spoke and the illusion crumbled.

“Reports speak of a stowaway organization based somewhere in Central City. By the information given to us from the reserve players, it seems like the stowaways have a stranglehold on the majority of the city. We have arranged for Heymans Breda to infiltrate the organization as a covert operative.”

Lloyd brought a hand up to massage his temple, sighing heavily as he responded. “And there is nothing I can say to make your unit rethink that plan?”

“No, sir,” Riza stated.

“Then you should allow one of my subordinates to accompany Breda,” Armstrong cut in, chiseled face unusually serious.

Riza’s hard glare turned on Armstrong. “There is no one in your unit with the kind of knowledge or training required to pull anything of this caliber off. Major, our goal is to prevent this assignment from becoming a suicide mission.”

Armstrong didn’t look happy, but he nodded. The only people left from his unit were Denny Brosh and Maria Ross, and neither one was prepared for any kind of covert operation. Breda had the training, the know-how, and the instincts needed to fit in virtually anywhere, even a group of murderers.
“And let me guess, while he’s there, he’ll also be searching for Colonel Mustang?” Lloyd allowed himself a small, sardonic smile, but everyone knew of Roy Mustang’s importance. If anyone had any kind of inside information on the Black Tower, it was Roy Mustang.

Riza’s cold, brown eyes turned on him, and Lloyd shivered at the chill in her gaze. No one spoke, but no one had to. With a nod, he turned his chair back around and resumed his notes. He listened carefully for the woman’s footsteps as she turned and left, closing the door softly behind herself.

As soon as she was gone, Lloyd sagged in his chair.

“Fuck, she’s scary.”

Armstrong’s boisterous laugh nearly had him jumping out of his chair.
Okay guys, full disclosure, I have not been okay lately.

My grandmother dragged me into some kind of spiritual church experience that just.... I had a panic attack and they wouldn't let me leave until I calmed down, and their idea of calming me down was channeling spirits and chanting over me, and that just made me shake and cry....

I haven't really felt all that emotionally stable since, so I've been seriously struggling to write or read, or do much of anything but lay in bed and stare at my ceiling.

On that note: I am still writing when I can manage it... so seriously stick with me, I'm going to update as soon as I can.

Chapter 28 - Little Red Riding Hood and The Big Bad Grandmother

From urban streets to an oversized, extremely vast forest.

Ed wasn’t sure where he’d ended up. There had been no game music, no cheerful child-like voice to explain what he had to do next. Instead, there was birdsong.

The sky was such a vivid blue that it seemed more unnatural than anything else. A few marshmallow-like white clouds floated on the horizon, like a kindergarten drawing. Branchless trees stood tall and impossibly green.

It was like something out of a fairytale.

While all the trees were disgustingly oversized, the plants and flowers were all normal-sized. Ed was careful to avoid stepping on anything but the dirt ground, his soft-soled sneakers nearly silent on the open path.

After walking for a good five minutes, Ed stopped to check his supplies. Four throwing daggers were hidden in specially made holsters on his left thigh, while two longer hunting knives hid in sheathes - one on his left hip, and the other at the small of his back under his hoodie. In his backpack were two bags of cookies, a full bottle of water, a flashlight, a lighter, and a good length of rope. In his inner pockets were Mario’s red gem - or Philosopher's Gloves, as the item was called - and the Earthworm’s Tear.

When he was sure he had everything he’d brought into the game with him, Ed continued forward.

Right from the get-go, Ed could see that his experience on the first floor wouldn’t be like Roy’s. First of all, he was alone - not that he knew if that was the rule or the exception for Tower Attack Games. Second, no mission had been given, either secondary or otherwise.

Getting lost was far too easy in this type of forest, and Ed didn’t think a compass would actually help him, even if he’d brought one. Instead, he picked a path and walked forward, straight and as composed as he could be.
The tall trees blocked the sun, making it impossible to rely on it for direction, and the one saving grace Ed could find was a mountain peak only just visible above the treeline, shaped like the tip of a knife.

Using the knife peak as a reference point, Ed made his careful way through the forest. He walked for nearly an hour.

Not that it seemed to matter. The knife peak mountain was still a long ways away, the base of it not even visible past the crowded treeline.

“Fuck, I’m not getting anywhere,” Ed grunted, stopping once again to assess his surroundings. It was useless to continue walking with no direction in mind, but staying still wasn’t going to do him much good either. So what was the right answer here?

Leaning against one of the trees, Ed nearly lost himself in his thoughts. A soft, sudden sound pulled him back to reality, and he stiffened.

Keeping as still as possible, he strained his hearing to see if he could catch that sound again. Nothing.

Other than birdsong and the wind, there was no other sound.

Ed lowered himself to the ground slowly. On his knees, he leaned over, glove-covered palms pressed to the dirt as he lowered his ear to the ground and listened.

There it was.

Thud, thud, thud... Thud, thud, thud

It sounded like drumming, or a heartbeat, only it seemed to get louder the longer it went on.

Nope. Ed wasn’t about to stick around to find out what that was. Pushing himself upright, he turned back the way he came and took off running. Fuck making noise - whatever the hell was behind him was already dangerous enough.

Despite running at full throttle, though, Ed wasn’t quite fast enough.

A shadow soared right over his head, and in a flash of white fur, a loud BOOM had Ed nearly losing his footing and landing flat on his face. He only just managed to save himself by lowering his right shoulder and using the momentum of his run to roll forward twice before popping back on his feet again.

About ten meters away stood a very large, pure white rabbit, its black, beady eyes staring straight at Ed with an oddly dead gaze.

Ed didn’t even hesitate to bring out Mosaic’s Match from the tattoo on his left wrist.

It was like some kind of old western stand-off as Ed and the rabbit eyed each other for a long, drawn-out moment.

When movement came, it came from the rabbit. Quick as a bullet, the rabbit used its nimble long legs to propel itself forward straight at Ed.

Pushing off the ground with his right foot, Ed flipped over the deranged bunny’s head, using the arc of his jump to strike down at the rabbit’s unprotected back. Not that it fucking worked.
The second that the match and fur connected, sparks flew from the impact point, and the force of the blow knocked the bunny farther forward while it threw Ed farther away than planned. This time, there was no saving himself, and he slammed straight into a tree with his left shoulder. The instant pop that accompanied the pain told him all he needed to know about his injury.

“Oh, fuck! Fuck!” He’d dislocated his goddamn shoulder.

With no time to spare, and already knowing that his increased healing speed wouldn’t be able to work on a shoulder still out of its socket, Ed braced his arm against the same tree he’d slammed into, and angling himself just right, pushed sharply.

Through gritted teeth, Ed screamed. It wasn’t as bad as attaching the automail ports, but it wasn’t fucking pleasant.

Unwilling to let the enemy out of his sights for too long, Ed’s head came up and hard, angry golden eyes looked at the pure white bunny in front of him. They were back to being about ten meters apart.

Fuck this, melee fighting wasn’t going to do him any good. He needed another plan.

Turning on his heel, Ed dashed into the trees, the rabbit right behind him.

Ed had a good head start, so it didn’t take very long for him to find the perfect place to stop. A brush of berry bushes crowded around one of the largest trees, and Ed put himself directly to the left and a little behind the bushes. The second the rabbit saw that Ed had stopped, it skidded to a halt.

Ed didn’t give it any time to debate its next course of action. Hands on his hips, he took in a deep breath and yelled, “Fire Fist Ace!”

When Ed blew out, lips rounded and cheeks puffed out slightly, fire erupted from his mouth.

The first thing to catch fire was the berry bushes. Then, everything else.

30 seconds of 800 degrees celsius of fire burned hot and fast, and the second his attack time was done, Ed pivoted around and took off.

In a forest like this one, Ed knew that the flames would catch fast, spreading around and likely creating a forest fire so large it would turn nearly the entire forest into ash. Normally, Ed would care about that, but not now. Whatever forest this was, it was enemy territory, and if he could cause some damage to more than just the rabbit, the better off he’d be for it.

The only thing he hadn’t been expecting was how quickly the flames actually spread.

Licking at Ed’s heels as he ran, the flames singed the ends of his braid, warming the back of his hoodie to an uncomfortable temperature, and threatened to overtake him in moments if he ever dared to slow down.

Which is why he didn’t even stumble when something dinged in his ear, the child-like voice nearly drowned out by the blood pumping in Ed’s head.

“Ding Dong! Triggered branch quest 1: Disguise yourself as Little Red Riding Hood and enter the Monster Valley.”

Oh hell, he didn’t even have enough time to dissect that statement before a sudden cry caught Ed’s
“Fire! The Monster Forest is on fire!”

“How could that happen! Quickly, call the elephants! We need to put it out fast!”

The sound of footsteps came thundering toward Ed’s direction, and he knew that if he continued he’d run head-on into the bastards coming his way. Taking a quick glance over his shoulder, Ed saw that the fire had finally slowed, overtaking a wider range of the forest but allowing Ed to gain some distance.

From the sound of the voices and the footfalls, Ed could guess that the party in front of him had a total of about 20 people. It would be impossible for Ed to run away. Behind him was a raging forest fire, and in front were unknown enemies. To each side would be flames and uncertainty. If he stepped off the path, he would certainly become lost.

Making his decision quickly, Ed looked up at one of the tallest trees and jumped up. Climbing higher into the thickest thatch of leaves, Ed used whatever he could to mask his presence.

Not five seconds went by before Ed caught sight of the first talking person.

“Oh fuck…” he whispered breathlessly as more of them came into view.

They weren’t human but animals, or part animal, or… a mix of both?

In the lead was a large gorilla-man, its body startlingly human-shaped, despite the length of its big, bulky arms. It was dressed in a black vest that bared more than half of a hairy torso, a medium-sized barrel of water cradled against its chest and blocking Ed’s view of the gorilla-man’s lower half.

Not that Ed kept looking for very long, because directly behind the gorilla was a man with the head of a pig and the body of a professional weightlifter, a slightly small monkey-headed man, and a large snake-like creature that brought up the rear with some kind of water pipe in its arms. It sort of looked like a Nagina from some mythology books Ed and Al liked to read as children.

It didn’t matter how many appeared, they were all a weird, slightly nauseating mix of human and animal - be it their heads or their bodies that were strange.

Ed pressed his back against the trunk of the tree he was using to hide in, covering his mouth with both hands as he caught sight of a dog’s head.

Nina’s face invaded his mind, and Ed swayed.

He knew he’d fall into a flashback if he allowed himself, so instead, Ed bent forward slightly before throwing his upper half back, slamming the back of his head against the trunk of the tree as quietly as he could manage.

Obviously, it wasn’t as quietly as he’d hoped, because in an instant, the wide, black eyes of the dog-man swung right up, pinning Ed to the spot.

“An underground person! There’s an underground person!”

The dog-man rose the alarm, and instantly, every monster stopped, nearly 20 heads simultaneously turned up to look at Ed.
“Catch the underground person!”

“Capture him!”

Oh, fuck this noise.

Unwilling to let himself be captured by these… monsters? (Chimeras? Fuck, he’d go with monsters), Ed pushed himself off the high branch, jumping to another tree only to adjust his balance and then jump again.

Two giant monkey monsters climbed up the tree Ed had been found in, but Ed didn’t even hesitate, jumping from tree to tree like the ninjas in the anime Al used to love when he was still in the hospital. Two monkeys followed behind as the rest of the gang of monsters chased after him on the ground.

Oh, shit! Shouldn’t they be preoccupied with putting out the damn fire first?

Without anyone tending to the flames, the forest fire burned ferociously, chasing right on Ed’s heels just as much as the monkeys were.

Ed knew he wasn’t going to be able to keep this up for much longer. No matter the amount of strength and endurance Ed had obtained since the Earth came online, his pursuers were goddamned monkeys! He couldn’t keep outpacing them.

He was proven correct when an iron grip encircled his wrists just as Ed landed on the next tree.

Multiple methods of attack flashed through Ed’s mind, but each one was rejected. None of his abilities would be enough to handle all of the monsters waiting below for him, and he was more likely to lose the big match than make any noticeable use of it. So instead, he used the grips on his wrists to swing himself.

Hanging upside down, holding onto Ed with his hands while his feet clung to a higher branch, the monkey couldn’t stop the drive of momentum Ed was picking up, and soon, Ed had enough force to swing himself up. Using the tree across from them, Ed ran up the trunk and launched himself into a rough kick at the monkey’s midsection.

With a grunt, the money let go, but not before one of its own feet came down, striking Ed smack dab in the center of his back.

Unable to slow his descent, Ed fell hard, slamming into the ground with so much force he created a large crater in the ground. His entire body throbbed in pain, protesting the landing. Before he could even breath in, Ed was surrounded by monsters.

“An underground person!” a large orangutan said reverently, a hungry glint in its beady eyes. “I haven’t seen a fresh underground person in a long time.”

The man with the pig head had saliva running from his open mouth as he spoke. “Can we eat it?”

“Eat it! Eat the underground person!”

“Eat it!”

Ed’s mind seemed to go blank on him. Ideas and strategies fled as he came face-to-face with a much more vivid threat than anything he’d ever faced so far.
Should he have saved the game as soon as he’d entered? But then, what if something dangerous happened later in his mission. Shit, his mission. Ed didn’t even know what the game’s main mission was!

Wait… main mission…

It was impossible for the Black Tower to throw him into a situation where he had absolutely no chance of survival. He’d been given a branch mission just before everything went to hell, but he’d been too caught up in escaping to pay it much thought. Now, though, that could be the thing that saved him.

Reaching up behind his head, Ed pulled up the hood of his red jacket, his long, blond braid falling over his shoulder as he finally managed to pull the hood over his head. “I am Little Red Riding Hood.”

In an instant, it was like someone pressed the pause button. The slowly advancing monsters all stopped in their tracks, surprise and confusion stealing over some of their features as they all stood looking at Ed.

In the next breath, chaos erupted again.

“Little Red Riding Hood?”

“Who is Little Red Riding Hood?”

“Have you ever heard of Little Red Riding Hood?”

Surrounded by monsters, with no exit strategy and apparently no hope, Ed reached into his hoodie pockets, tightly gripping the round, smooth surface of the turkey Egg in one pocket and the gem-like ruby in the other.

The only thing he had to bank on now was the fact that the tower wouldn’t give him a death sentence in the form of a mission with no solutions. No game had been like that so far, and Ed was sure this pattern would hold, but it all depended on if he’d made the right move just now.

“Ah, I remember! Isn’t the grandmother’s mixed-blood granddaughter called Little Red Riding Hood?” a parrot up in one of the trees screeched out Ed’s saving grace. “Do you remember Grandmother’s daughter? She eloped with an underground person about 10 years ago and gave birth to a mixed-breed! Grandmother told me yesterday that her granddaughter was especially loyal. This little girl must’ve come from the underground world just to see her, right?”

Something hot and smothering flared in Ed’s chest, his cheeks heating up with embarrassed indignation. He had to bite his tongue to keep from screaming that he was a man.

Since he’d decided to grow out his hair, he’d been mistaken for a little girl more than once, and it rankled Ed just as badly as his height, but no matter how angry he was, he was in no position to blow up right now.

“Are you sure it’s a female?” the giant gorilla asked, poking at Ed’s flat chest. Ed kind of wanted to hug the thing.

“Of course it's a girl! Look at the shiny, blond hair! Not even the hood can hide it!”

Whoever had said that was lucky Ed didn’t catch them, because his fury bubbled up so quickly Ed knew he’d have blown up if he’d known who to direct the explosion at.
The gorilla reached out and gently touched his head, the weight of his palm nearly bringing Ed to his knees. He had to lock his legs to keep standing, and that little fact brought more perspective than just about anything else could have. There was no room for a temper tantrum right now. Not if he wanted to survive.

“Oh, I understand now. So you are the grandmother’s Little Red. Why didn’t you say so earlier? Hey! You guys go put out the fire. Little Red, I’ll take you to your grandmother.”

With a long arm securely herding Ed away from the rest of the clearly disappointed monsters, the gorilla man began to lead Ed up the path.

“You must really love your grandmother to face the Monster Valley. Why is no one escorting you, Little Red?” the gorilla asked as they walked.

“I didn’t want to inconvenience anyone;” Ed replied, as emotionlessly as he could.

The gorilla nodded. “Such a wonderful little girl! You are very considerate for an underground person. Although, it must be your monster half.”

Ed didn’t bother with trying to continue the conversation.

Winding through the maze-like forest next to a giant gorilla-man was already unnerving as hell, but the worst part was the fact that they were headed away from the mountain Ed had been headed towards originally. A half an hour of walking later led both the gorilla and Ed to a valley, and the whole way there, the gorilla wouldn’t shut up.

“You really are very loyal, Little Red. The harvest season is almost upon us. It's the busiest time of the year, and you even came to help your grandmother.”

Ed hummed and nodded, trying to keep a good half-meter between himself and the gorilla-man.

“In the last two years, the Monster Valley hasn’t been a very peaceful place.” Coming up to a large boulder protruding out from a wall of what looked like a natural crater, the gorilla leaned heavily against the huge rock, pushing it out of the way to reveal a hole.

Ed froze.

The gorilla looked back at him curiously. “Little Red?”

Gritting his teeth, the echo of the message ‘sneak into the Monster Valley’ still ringing in his head, Ed moved to follow the gorilla-man into the hole.

The moment Ed was inside, the boulder closed behind him.

“Ding Dong! Branch mission completed!”

The gorilla picked up an already lit torch from beside the boulder opening, illuminating a tunnel leading downwards. As the gorilla walked, Ed followed carefully behind.

The tunnel was spacious, like a huge cavern made for multiple people walking shoulder to shoulder. Black stalactites stuck out from the top of the tunnel, small beads of water forming at the tips of a few of them.

Deeper and deeper underground they went, and it was around 10 minutes before they finally seemed to make it to the end.
Another boulder blocked the way, and as the gorilla pushed it back, sunlight seemed to flood the surrounding area, instantly blinding Ed for a moment.

“The underground belongs to the first floor of the Black Tower. I hate going up above. Hey, Little Red, why were you in the forest between the first and second floors?”

And that was precious information Ed didn’t have before. So, the forest they’d just been in was the junction between one floor and the next? That would be information Dr. Marks would love to have.

Humming again but refusing to answer, Ed was relieved when the gorilla seemed to just let the question go, walking into the valley in silence for the first time since they’d started.

The valley was huge, and the elevation allowed Ed a bit of a bird’s-eye view of the whole place. The fact that there was a sun in the sky-ceiling-thing was surprising enough, but the three pyramid-shaped underground hills spaced evenly around the large valley seemed so very alien in what would otherwise be a normal village setting. And in the center of it all, the land was bisected by a clear, pink river.

Basic-looking mud houses clustered around some trees near the boulder entrance, a good-sized vegetable field spanning the front of each house, all of them ploughed and bare of crops.

There was no one in the valley, and Ed could guess that everyone else was trying to put out the fire he’d started, but that was for the better, really.

The less monsters who saw his face, the less of a chance there was of getting caught or called out.

The gorilla might not recognize the grandmother’s Little Red, but there was a very high chance that the grandmother herself would. Despite that threat, Ed could hazard a guess about the key to the Tower Attack game. The main mission, whatever it ended up being, would be located somewhere in this valley. Ed’s best bet if everything went wrong was to run and hide in the valley long enough to find an opportunity to complete the main mission.

With that thought in mind, Ed and Gorilla-man turned a corner and there it was - Grandma’s house in full view. A pale pink mud hut was situated between two very eye-catching green trees, causing an abrupt switch to the usual forest tones and calling attention. A golden fence encircled the vegetable field right out in front of the hut. In the middle of the vegetable field, a mirror-like stone was inlaid in the ground, catching Ed’s eyes for only a moment before his attention was drawn to the stone road paved from courtyard to house.

The gorilla didn’t hesitate, just went right up to the door and started knocking. “Grandmother, Grandmother! I brought your Little Red Riding Hood.”

Ed prepared himself for a fight, right hand on his left wrist, ready to pull out Mosaic’s Match. Either he’d have to run or he’d have to fight. Either way, as the muffled footsteps sounded from beyond the door, Ed tensed.

Like a giant stomping, each step shook the mountain under them.

The moment the pink door was pushed open, Ed shifted his right foot, ready to run.

A huge human/animal thing stood in the doorway in a large, fluffy white hat and a pink dress. Whatever the hell it was, it looked strong, tall and sturdy like a fucking brick house. It had to stoop down to get itself through the hut’s little doorway. The damn dress was straining over the thing, like some kind of bodybuilder wearing a little girl’s summer dress. The entire look was just... so
ridiculous.

The thing’s face was covered by a fluffy hat, the only visible parts of the monster being its hairy hands and the long, K-9-looking hind legs.

Walking with the grace and elegance of an upper class lady, the monster/human thing made its way out of the hut.

Ed stood at around 1.5 meters tall (5ft), and that height only came up to the bottom of the horrible monster’s chest. When it pushed back the brim of its hat, the menacing face of a wolf glanced back at Ed, with a prominent muzzle filled with sharp, yellow/white teeth.

The gorilla only smiled. “Grandmother Wolf, I brought your Little Red Riding Hood to you.”

Ed had already turned to flee the moment he saw the wolf’s face, but a large, thick palm pressed against his shoulder. Ed was horrified to find that he couldn’t break free. The grip was light enough that Ed could barely feel it, but somehow, Ed couldn’t move away.

“Yes, this is my Little Red Riding Hood. I will never forget her father’s bright yellow hair. Disgusting color, don’t you think, Mr. Gorilla? Like some kind of lioness.”

Grandmother Wolf opened her terrifying muzzle in what was similar to a smile from some horror movie.

Ed’s keen vision spotted the slightest bit of human skin stuck between her teeth.

Without waiting for an answer, Grandmother Wolf pulled at Ed’s automail arm, dragging him into the house and into her yard.

“My cute Little Red, you must be very hungry. Grandmother will make you dinner.”

As soon as Ed was inside the house, one large paw slammed the door shut. Outside, the large gorilla scratched his head. “Grandmother must be in a good mood today,” the gorilla muttered as he turned and walked back down the hill.

As soon as the door was closed and the two of them were out of view, Grandmother Wolf used the arm still in her grasp to casually throw Ed towards the fireplace. Spinning twice, Ed’s back slammed against the red brick, making him hiss but allowing him to keep his feet.

Lucky for him, Grandmother Wolf no longer seemed to care about Ed. Instead, she strode toward a pile of human limbs lying to the other side of the fireplace. Cursing loudly, she tore off the pink dress and threw it in the already lit fireplace.

“Take off that damn hood!” Grandmother Wolf yelled, chewing on a human wrist. “Damn those eyes of yours. Just like your father’s. Don’t you go thinking I’ll be feeding you anything good. During the next week, the only thing you’ll get from me are seven copper coins.”

Ed found himself relaxing the moment he registered those words. Seven days.

Bringing up a hand to brush the hood back, Ed noticed for the first time that his gloves were ripped. The shine of his automail instantly caught Grandmother Wolf’s attention.

“Look at that. Is that silver?”

Greed and hunger looked pretty much the same on a wolf’s face, but the instinct to stalk her prey
obviously kept the wolf monster at bay.

Quickly, Ed stuffed his hands into the pockets of his hoodie. The moment he felt the gem in his pocket, he acted. Bringing his hands around behind his back, Ed tried to look innocent. “I have no silver, Grandmother.”

The wolf slowly moved forward, suspicion in her stare, the human arm hanging limply in her left paw.

“Let me see your hands, you disgusting underground person.”

Pulling his hands out from behind his back, Ed held them up, fingers spread to show a pair of stark white gloved palms. “No coins. I promise, Grandmother.”

It seemed that worked well enough. Suddenly uninterested, Grandmother Wolf growled as she turned away, spitting out the bones as she chewed the rest of the human meat.

Ed didn’t even try to call her attention again.

Finally being out of the spotlight allowed Ed a moment to take in the space he now found himself in. The large living room opened into a moderate, yet very dirty, kitchen. Pink-tinted furniture filled the room, and it looked like everything was covered in a thin layer of dust.

Watching the wolf walk around the place, Ed realized that, for her, the hut could actually be considered small.

A fluffy pink rug made the floor in front of the sofa look like an animal, and above the fireplace was a stuffed human head.

Slightly curly black hair hung around the man’s head, framing a pale, sallow face. The eyes were mercifully closed, but the mouth was slightly open, like the man had just fallen asleep while hung up on the wall. The thin lips were blue and bloodless. Ed had to bite his tongue to keep his sudden terror at bay.

Grandmother Wolf finally finished eating the limp arm, tossing the bones casually into the fire. The scent of burning bones filled the hut in seconds.

“You better do your job right,” she snarled, wiping at her bloody muzzle with the back of her furry hand. “You’re already getting seven copper coins out of me. Tomorrow, you catch that damn golden hamster for me. If I don’t see that golden hamster’s corpse when I return…”

Ed’s spine went ramrod straight, and a chill struck goosebumps up his left arm as the werewolf glared threateningly at him.

As soon as she saw his obvious fear, the werewolf-thing smiled, using one large claw as a toothpick. “You’ll be my dinner.”

With that, the wolf monster turned on her paw pads, flicked her bushy tail, and slammed the door to the bedroom closed behind her. It didn’t take long for thunderous snoring to permeate the stale air.

For a moment, Ed stood still, waiting to see if anything else happened.

When nothing did, he began to carefully walk around the room, examining everything within sight.
There was a morbid domesticity to the place. An almost sinister fluffiness that raised the hair on the back of Ed’s neck. Despite the pink and the old-person feel, there were subtle traces of threats everywhere. Human hair was stuffed in the seams of the sofa, large butcher knives filled the sink, and there was the pile of slowly rotting limbs in front of the fire and the underlying scent of blood that never faded.

Moving over to the unusually large kitchen table that was covered in dust and virtually unused, Ed placed his bag against one of the chairs. He wasn’t about to lie down under a stuffed human head, but the table was as good as anything else.

Once he was seated slightly under one of the wooden chairs, legs crossed and elbows on his knees, Ed thought about everything that had happened between the time he’d been pulled into the Tower Attack game and now.

Apparently, the Black Tower’s first floor consisted of the underground, while the forest he’d appeared in was considered the junction between the first and second floors.

The gorilla, giant monkeys, Grandmother Wolf, Little Red Riding Hood…

Seven copper coins, seven days...

So whatever the main mission was, the time limit was seven days.

Clearly understanding that he wouldn’t be fighting the large wolf monster was a relief. Whatever the main mission was, it didn’t involve violence… Well, not so far. All he could do now was wait for the Black Tower to issue the main mission, and then work to clear it.

Knowing he wasn’t going to sleep in this weird, horrible house, Ed leaned against the chair and sighed, settling in for the night.

At around noon the next day, a loud noise was finally heard from Grandmother Wolf’s bedroom. When the large wolf monster came out, she was wearing a pink lace skirt. It clung to her large, strong body like a lifeline, and Ed scrambled to look away before he could even think twice.

Picking up a pink umbrella before striding resolutely to the door, Grandmother Wolf only stopped when she had a hand on the knob. When she looked back at Ed, she had a look of pure disgust on her muzzle. “Do you know how to catch that stupid golden hamster?”

Ed paused for only a second before answering honestly, “No.”

The wolf monster tisked. “Your useless mother didn’t even teach you something so simple? Damn, if it’s up to me to teach you, I’ll dock your pay! Six, no, five copper coins!”

Dropping the umbrella, Grandmother Wolf strode into the kitchen to pick up a pink jar before throwing it carelessly at Ed. “In seven days, it’ll be sowing season. I’ve heard rumors that the Circus Master recently got an interesting treasure, so I have to go and check it out. I’ll be gone for all seven days. As for you, take a good look at the land at the base of the hill.”

One long, dirty claw pointed out the back kitchen window, and Ed moved to follow the order.

Through the window, Ed saw an extensively large vegetable garden. The dark soil was already turned, prepared for sowing and planting. Narrowing his eyes to find what was obviously wrong with the scene, Ed caught sight of nine enormous holes about halfway up the hill.

“Those damn quick bastards. They already dug the holes again,” Grandmother Wolf muttered,
gritting her threateningly pointy teeth. “Today is the first day, but every day at 6 o’clock, you’ll have to put food in one of those holes and then hide close by. Once the golden hamster comes out to eat the food, catch it!”

And here it was, the challenge. Now Ed just needed to know the rules. “Can I put the bait in any of the holes? There are nine.”

“Of course! As soon as you place the food in the hole and stand there, that stupid golden hamster will think you’re feeding it. Since it likes you underground people the most, as long as you and the food are standing in the same hole, it will trust you. Of course, there is only an 80% probability that it will appear. The last 20% is for the black hamster.”

Ed frowned. “Black hamster?”

The wolf’s dangerous muzzle stretched in a malicious smile. “Of course. The black hamster prefers to eat you underground people. It’s too dangerous for you to try and catch the golden hamster on the first day. Since the black hamster is more energetic, there is a likelier possibility of the black hamster coming to eat you on the first day. It’s at least a 50/50 shot.”

Ed took in that information silently before asking, “Where do I get the food for the golden hamster?”

There was a growl and then a glare as the sharp claw jabbed at the jar in Ed’s hand. “How else? This jar, you idiot girl. Just put anything from your kingdom in the jar and you’ll receive a golden sweet potato. It’s the golden hamster’s favorite food - that’s also why it likes you underground people so much. Really, to choose sweet potatoes over the fresh, delicious meat of the underground people…” Beady, black eyes roved over Ed’s entire body, leaving Ed feeling nasty and violated.

Taking a slow step back, Ed asked his final question. “And I’m supposed to catch the golden hamster in seven days?”

“Of course! If you haven’t caught it by the time I come back in seven days….” The threat was left hanging in the air between them for a moment before Grandmother Wolf spun on her hind leg and sauntered to the door again, picking up the pink umbrella on her way out. Ed could hear her murmuring to herself about ‘delicious underground people’.

As soon as she was gone, a voice echoed in the room around Ed.

“Ding Dong! The main mission ‘The Monster Valley’s Happy Hamster Game’ has been triggered.”

“The rules of the game are:”

“First, there is only one golden hamster in the Monster Valley.”

“Second, there are a total of nine holes.”

“Third, 24 hours in the monster world are the same as 24 hours on Earth.”

“Fourth, put anything that belongs to the underground kingdom into the pink jar and you can get a sweet potato, the favourite food of the golden hamster. The food must be placed in the hole at 6 o’clock or it will be invalid.”

“Fifth, whenever the player and the sweet potato are present at the same hole, there is an 80% probability of a golden hamster appearing and a 20% probability of a black hamster.”
“Sixth, on the first day, the probability is 40% golden hamster and 60% black.”

“Seventh, players can only place food in the hole once every day. Placing it in two or more holes, or having the player and food not present at the same time means the probability of the golden hamster appearing drops to 0%.”

“Eighth, before field sowing, the hamsters are only active in their holes.”

“Grandmother Wolf plants crops once a year, but the hateful golden hamster is always stealing them. Grandmother Wolf is at her wit’s end trying to figure out how she is going to catch it, but perhaps her lovely granddaughter will find a way?”

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