All That Glitters

Summary

“We’re going to the Fairmont Bradley, downtown.” Roy was taking a moment to appreciate Ed in his suit. “Tonight is the kick-off gala for the International Film Festival.”

Notes

This one reeeally got away from me. Heed the warnings. In the mood for a bit of drama?

Ed was beginning to regret agreeing to work with this particular statistics professor. And not because he was a statistics professor. Ed wasn't a math snob, despite what Al insisted. While Ed would have been much happier as a teaching assistant for one of the broader branches of pure or applied mathematics, he would be the first to acknowledge that statistical analyses were an important part of research too. So it wasn’t the program that was making him scowl. It was the future workload that this first batch of assignments foretold.

Unfortunately, landing a position for the summer term after taking time off left him few options, and he’d had to take what he could get. Izumi Curtis had heard that Mr. Stats needed another TA for the summer session, and she had recommended Edward. Ed had accepted the offer because it was work, and because Izumi had arranged it, but he had to wonder how well she knew this guy. The money was better than the minimum he was earning at Pothos, but it looked like he was going to be busting a nut for it. He’d still be working a few shifts at Pothos, too, taking up the slack when someone was on summer holiday, but that would be a cakewalk compared to this.

And he also had to find the time to work on his research proposal.
Al had been home for a month post transplant, and so far, so good. His blood counts had risen steadily, an indication that the engraftment was successful, and while his liver function was a bit off, his doctors didn’t think it was anything to worry about as long as they kept an eye on it. Next steps included twice weekly checkups at the hospital, and a lot of self-monitoring for signs of graft versus host disease, which was a kind of reverse rejection. Since the chemo and radiation had left Al with literally no immune system pre-transplant, there was a distinct possibility that Ed’s white blood cells could attack Al’s tissue as foreign to them, causing a shit ton of problems.

And if the little bastards did, Ed was going to find a way to kick their microscopic fucking asses, the traitors.

For now though, the prognosis was good, and Al had insisted that it was time for Ed to get his head back into the university game.

So here he was, marking Intro to Stats assignments that were complete disasters. They were so bad, in fact, that Ed had serious reservations concerning this prof’s ability to properly convey the concepts to his students. Normally there was a range of ability demonstrated in formative assessment. Not in this case. Everyone sucked here. Ed wasn’t looking forward to the steady stream of desperate students beating a path to his office-slash-cubicle for extra help. Unrelatedly, Mr. Stats also bore a striking resemblance to the movie version of Lord Voldemort. All things considered, Ed couldn't resist referring to the guy as He Who Must Not Teach Math.

Ed buckled down and got his head back in the game, flipping open the next duotang. Not even a paragraph in, and it was clear that this was another disaster. He couldn't further question the professor’s credentials on this one though; this student obviously hadn't read the instructions.

Sixteen down, twenty-three to go.

Shit.

This was going to take hours. And Ed had a date tonight.

Roy’s aunt had passed him an invitation to some exclusive gala at a downtown hotel, and Ed was going as Roy’s plus one. He wasn’t even sure what the event was celebrating. All he knew was that there would be a lot of food, an open bar, and he had to wear a suit. Fortunately, he had a nice one, thanks to Granny Pinako. She had forced him to get fitted for Sciezka’s wedding last year, pointing out that he would eventually need something besides jeans, tees, and hoodies in his closet as his career progressed. It had been her treat – if you could call having some stranger run their hands all over you on the pretext of taking measurements a treat. Ed had come really close to ‘accidentally’ throwing a knee into the side of the tailor’s head when the guy’s hands had wandered a little too close to his junk.

The bottom line was that Ed was the proud owner of a custom-tailored three-piece suit that he actually liked, not that he would ever admit it out loud. A black, single breasted two-button with a blood red, close fitting waistcoat, Ed wore it with a tie that matched the vest and a flint grey dress shirt. And black, red-soled Adidas. A bit unconventional, but not quite as unconventional as Ed himself, so whatever.

Ed once again wrestled himself back to the task at hand, determined to get it done before his date showed up. He didn’t want to half-ass the marking; from what he could see, most of the students had put a lot of effort into the assignment despite their lack of understanding. The least Ed could do was to correct their mistakes and try to get them on the right track. He was pretty sure his labs were going to include a hell of a lot of basic teaching mixed in with the practical applications.
Two hours later he came up for air, still not finished but done, holy shit. He had seven more, but he was not doing them tonight. His brain was burned out, and his wrist was cramping from the number of times he’d written the same observation for each section of these botched assignments, with a ‘We will take this up during Tuesday’s lab’ tacked on to the bottom of the last page.

He stashed the finished assignments in his backpack and left the rest in a neat pile on the kitchen table. Al was still napping and Winry would be home soon, so Ed headed for the shower. He had over an hour before Roy was due to pick him up, and that was perfect. He really needed to decompress.

When he got out of the shower Winry was standing at the kitchen table, frowning into a duotang. “Jesus Ed.”

“I know, right?”

Winry slapped the folder onto the top of the pile, then plunked herself down in a chair with a sigh. “Rough day?” Ed asked, moving to turn on the kettle.

“Not really.” Winry said, watching as Ed took their mugs down from the cupboard and set about making coffee. “Staff meeting. I get that creating software is a science, and sound engineering principles mean an efficient, reliable product that works on real machines, but ignoring the creative process isn’t doing anyone any favors. Innovation doesn’t necessarily follow the scientific method.”

Nothing Ed hadn’t heard before. Winry’s degrees had legitimized her expertise, but her experience was about as unconventional as it was extensive. At the moment she was working at a company developing internet security software, which Ed thought was hilarious. Granny had encouraged it as a way for Winry to make her own way in the business. It was difficult though. IT was a male dominated industry, and the majority of her colleagues placed somewhere on the sliding scale of misogyny, ranging from the mildly condescending to the outright, rabidly vocal incel.

On the up side, it certainly didn’t hurt to have inside information about how your opponent does business, if nothing else.

Roy never sent a text when he arrived, always preferring to pick Ed up from the apartment. Winry rolled her eyes every time he showed up at the door, but Ed knew she was secretly charmed. She really couldn’t get over the way Roy treated Edward with such gallant care and consideration. A tough-talking IT vigilante she might be, but she was also a total sucker for romance.

Returning Roy’s greeting, Winry had a question. “Is that suit Armani?”

Roy shrugged, with a ‘What, this old thing?’ smirk. He was more handsome than ever in basic black with a mauve vest and matching bowtie.

“So. Where are we going again?” Ed asked as he shrugged into his jacket.

“The Fairmont Bradley, downtown.” Roy was taking a moment to appreciate Ed in his suit. “Tonight is the kick-off gala for the International Film Festival.”

Winry whistled, impressed. “Pretty classy.”

Built in 1901, The Fairmont Bradley had a noteworthy reputation in the entertainment district as the go-to venue for prestigious events, the International Film Festival among them. It first opened its doors as an exclusive private gentlemen’s club centred in a block of apartment flats; thanks to
extensive renovations in the late eighties at a cost of over twelve million dollars, the Bradley had become a world class hotel and convention centre. Its signature luxury event hall spanned two full floors, making it one of the largest in the world. Furnished in grand old style enhanced with high tech amenities, hand-frescoed cathedral-style ceilings, and a formal dining room, it was a favourite for virtually every event of international acclaim.

Not exactly Ed’s cup of tea, but what the hell. He was always up for new experiences.

Particularly when Roy was involved. Even when it involved wearing a suit.

Winry snapped a few pix of them for Al when he woke up, then waved the pair out the door.

The drive over was uneventful. Leaving the Mustang with a valet, Roy escorted Edward into the hotel, steering him with a hand to the small of his back. Ed did his best not to gawk in the entranceway of the hall, but it wasn’t easy. He felt like he had walked off the edge of the world directly into a glittering alternate reality. In a way, he supposed he had.

Black and gold were the dominant motif, with the official IFF logo tastefully displayed in various strategic locations, just in case, Ed guessed, some dumbass wandered in by accident and wondered what the hell was going on. Everything seemed to sparkle, and that included the guests decked out in their finest; tailored suits and designer haute couture presented a rich mosaic, constantly shifting. Ed felt like he was wandering around inside some pothead’s surreal fantasy.

A liveried attendant pressed a Champaign flute into Ed’s hand and moved gracefully on. Ed looked up at Roy, who raised a matching flute in salute, and then drained it. Eyes still on Ed’s, he held the empty glass out and slightly to the side. Another attendant cruised by and replaced it with a full one.

“Welcome to the Dark Side,” Roy said lowly, managing a reasonable imitation of Darth Vader.

Ed laughed, and a nervous tension he hadn’t noticed lifted from his shoulders.

Spending the evening with Roy in this alien environment was an education in areas Ed never knew he was so woefully deficient.

Ed would be the first to acknowledge that he wasn’t all that great at social games even in casual settings, but he didn’t really give much of a shit. Politics were Al’s domain, and that suited Ed just fine. Here, however, it quickly became apparent that the games being played were for much higher stakes. And while Ed still couldn’t care less about the impression he made, telling some vapid socialite to fuck off might reflect poorly on Roy.

As a result, he didn’t know how to respond when someone made mind-bogglingly simplistic statements about complex social issues, or how to shut down obnoxious jerks who firehosed their ‘other’ phobic opinions all over the place, or how to deal with assholes who made a point of shoehorning their offensive rhetoric into conversations no matter how far out of line they were.

But Roy did. From the outset, Ed realized that his most prudent course of action was to keep his mouth shut, glare at whatever bullshit the nearest douchebag was spewing, and let Roy handle it.

Because it was more fun that way.

Ed had never seen anyone verbally wrestle a moron to the mat with such finesse before. Roy dished out veiled insults with innocent charisma, talking his opponents in circles until they were too off-balance to fight back, all with lethal charm and a stunning smile. Most of his victims had no idea that they’d been pwned. Al was good, but Roy was in a league all by himself.
And this appeared to be his natural habitat. Watching him gracefully work the room, it would be easy to believe that Roy was just a glib, pampered pretty boy of no substance. His calm elegance and disarming manner made it easy to dismiss how precisely his offhand comments probed for answers to questions never asked. He blended in with this crowd of arrogant, entitled trendsetters with ease, one of the elite, without a care in the world.

Except that Ed had seen Roy at his lowest, struggling free of a nightmare, gasping, eyes filled with terror and grief. It had been hovering in the back of his mind ever since. Everyone was burdened with a past; bad luck, poor decisions, and regrets were unavoidable, for some more than others, and Roy had been through more shit than Ed could possibly imagine. He was glad Roy had trusted him enough to share it with him, but his heart ached for the man. He wanted to help ease Roy’s mind, but he couldn’t, not really. All he could do was accept it along with everything else that was Roy.

The evening progressed, and it wasn’t a total crap festival. The buffet table was definitely worthwhile. Ed even managed to text a pic or five to Al and Win, knowing that he would never be able to convey its sheer awesomeness with words alone. He was unobtrusively working his way around the table, determined to try absolutely everything - because, you know, Al and Win might want him to rate the canapes on a scale for quality or whatever – when he came to an enormous roadblock.

The roadblock was a tremendously large man who towered over everyone in the room, no exceptions. The man’s well-defined musculature was barely concealed beneath his impeccably tailored formalwear; it seemed that all he would have to do was flex his muscles, and his fancy suit would split apart at the seams to leave him shirtless.

Ed looked up into the familiar face of Alex Louis Armstrong, Mayor of Central City.

The Mayor was easily recognizable even without his extensive media presence. His build alone would be enough of a clue, but a head completely bald except for a single blond lock above his forehead, and a thick handlebar moustache accenting a strong cleft chin made him unmistakable. These rather intimidating features were softened, however, by sparkling blue eyes framed with distinctly long eyelashes, and a thoughtful, outgoing personality.

The big man noticed Roy first.

“My word!” Armstrong’s booming voice carried a surprising distance in the busy room, judging from the heads turning in their directions. “If it isn’t Roy Mustang! What a pleasant surprise!”

“Alex, how nice to see you.” Roy gave the Mayor his patented one-hundred-watt grin.

“And Edward Elric!” Armstrong appeared delighted to see him. “Wonderful! Tell me, how is young Alphonse?”

“He’s responding very well to his treatment,” Ed told him, grinning brightly to say so. “He’s not out of the woods yet, but the outlook is positive.” Ed turned to a surprised Roy to explain. “Al had an internship at City Hall. He was into his third term when he was diagnosed.”

“A brilliant young man,” Alex gushed. “I had the pleasure of working with him on a number of projects. We all dearly hope to see him back within our ranks when he’s well. Please do let him know that he is missed.”

“I will,” Ed promised.

The Mayor turned his attention back to Roy. “I wonder if I could take some of your time this
evening to discuss something of a sensitive nature,” he said, lowering his voice. “I can contact your office to arrange a meeting if you wish, but I would prefer that the conversation remain informal, and off the record.”

Roy looked at Ed, ready to make his apologies to the Mayor, but before Ed could assure his date that he was perfectly capable of looking after himself for a few minutes, a distinct chill settled over the festive atmosphere. It was an extremely localized effect, the cause soon becoming apparent.

No one could deny that Olivier Armstrong was a gorgeous woman. Her platinum blond hair framed a face of classical beauty, and her slender build was leanly muscled and perfectly proportioned. The gown she wore was sleek red silk, low cut to showcase her impressive décolletage, the red archly contrasting her pale skin, ice cloaked in flame. She swept purposefully up to the Mayor, treating the small group to a frosty half smile.

Roy was first to react. “Olivier. Left your enforcer at home this evening, did you?”

The Ice Queen was unfazed. “Events of this nature are not his cup of tea,” she said, eyeing Edward. “I see you brought your little toy, however.”

“Edward Elric, my sister, Olivier Mira Armstrong,” Alex made the introduction, frowning. “I understand you’ve met. Please believe me, when I mentioned that your brother told me you were feeling apprehensive about your role as a stem cell donor, I never dreamed she would use that information as an excuse to harass you in your place of employment.”

“As a distraction, I thought it extremely effective,” Olivier drawled, waving a dismissive hand. “Wouldn’t you agree, Elric?”

“I think it’s about time I hit the bar for another drink,” Ed said before he could say something that might embarrass his date. His best strategy at this point was a graceful retreat.

“No need to run away, little toy. I think I can tolerate you for a few brief moments,” Olivier purred.

“Too bad the reverse isn’t true,” Ed observed. “I’ll pass your message along to Al, Mayor Armstrong. See you in a bit, Mustang,” he shot over his shoulder as he walked away.

He didn’t care who had supplied the amused snort to punctuate his exit. He looked around and zeroed in on the bar. Time to ditch this sweet bubbly crap for something more his style. It looked like he’d need it.

Ed took his time getting to his ultimate destination. The place was packed, and Ed had never been anywhere like it before. He wanted to feel his way through and absorb what experiences he could. There were a lot of celebrities wandering around, easily spotted by the photographers documenting their every move. Many of them looked familiar, but Ed didn’t know who they were; he wasn’t into popular culture icons per se. He couldn’t have told a movie star from a Youtube personality to save his life.

But if Steven Weinberg or Edward Witten showed up, he would be fanboying all over that shit.

Because Ed was weird. He’d known it for most of his life, a personal revelation smacking him in the face in his tender years. And honestly, he was fine with it.

He wondered if Roy would be too, when he finally realized just how odd his boyfriend was. Ed was fairly sure Roy wouldn’t mind. He probably had a pretty good idea what he was getting into and hadn’t made a run for it yet. Ed hoped he would stick around.
Because Ed had already fallen hard.

It was actually terrifying to wind yourself into another person’s life, to trust, and to earn their trust. It was a complicated business, because the closer you became, the more likely it was that skeletons would start spilling out of random closets, each with the increased probability that someone’s emotional feet could be kicked out from under them. Roy had trusted Ed enough to reveal the darkest part of himself with no bullshit, and no excuses. He couldn’t have known for sure that Ed wouldn’t pull away in disgust. It had taken serious guts, no question.

As he slid into a seat at the bar, Ed contemplated the idea that maybe it was time to open up, too.

“What’ll it be, Golden Boy?”

Ed looked up, surprised.

Spikey was behind the bar decked out in the hotel’s formal livery, polishing a wine glass and grinning to beat the band. Ed kind of missed the dark glasses and fur collar.

“Hey Spikey, nice to see you,” Ed said, and he meant it. They’d battled a giant millipede in a flooded sex shop and enjoyed ice cream in the aftermath, but Ed still didn’t know the guy’s actual name. To be fair, though, he didn’t know Ed’s either.

“Spikey, huh?” The tall man’s grin got wider. “I like it. How about a beer? You look like you could use one.”

“Sold. Whatever you have on tap would be great.”

Spikey rolled his eyes. “This is the Bradley. We’ve got everything on tap. How would you like an ice cold Corona?”

“In a glass, preferably. I don’t think it would be appropriate to pour it directly into my mouth from the spigot.”

Spikey laughed. “I like you more and more,” he said, topping up a tall, frosted glass and sliding it in front of Ed with practiced panache.

Then off he went to see to other patrons. Ed watched, impressed with Spikey’s expertise. He was a completely different personality outside of the sex shop. But of course, most people were.

Someone took the seat next to Ed. He looked over, fully expecting it to be Roy. Instead, he found a distinguished older man. Broad chested with buzzed white hair and a neat, steel gray beard, his blue eyes twinkled over a genial smile. Ed thought he was vaguely familiar.

“Good evening, young man,” he said. “I saw you sitting alone at the bar and thought you might appreciate some company.”

“Hey,” Ed said, tipping his glass in greeting and turning his attention back to the fascinating collection of bottles behind the bar. “I’m here with someone.”

He didn’t want to be rude, but he wasn’t in the mood to play a bullshit guessing game. As in, what was this guy after? Innocent conversation? A hook up? A fourth for Bridge?

Old Guy was not put off. “How foolish of your companion to leave a beauty like you unescorted.”

“I don’t need a babysitter,” Ed said mildly, sipping his beer and refusing to make eye contact.
“Your eyes are particularly striking,” Old Guy went on as if Ed hadn’t responded. “Mesmerizing. I can’t help but imagine them looking up at me, over those sweet lips stretched around my cock.” He tapped what looked like a folded c-note on the bar.

Ed burst out laughing. When he looked over at Old Guy’s face, he laughed even harder. The douchenozzle was absolutely livid, glaring at Ed with his jaw tight and his fists clenched.

“Sorry,” Ed said when he’d got himself somewhat under control. “You caught me off guard. I thought people around here would have a little more class than I’m generally used to. Turns out there’s an even distribution of assholes everywhere.”

Then he stood up and walked to the other end of the bar, still chuckling. He felt kind of sorry for Old Guy, despite the fact that he was a creep. No one liked to be laughed at, but working at Pothos pretty much guaranteed that nothing explicitly sexual shocked Ed anymore. Old Guy’s attempt to do so was so lame by comparison that Ed couldn’t help himself.

Spikey set a fresh drink in front of Ed when he slid into his new seat. The bartender raised an inquiring eyebrow. Ed shook his head.

Someone thumped into the seat next to Ed. Old Guy. Ed sighed.

Old Guy waved Spikey away. He went, frowning.

“I thought I made it pretty clear that I’m not interested,” Edward told him, loud enough that other people sitting at the bar turned to look.

“Careful, boy,” Old Guy said quietly with a dangerous glint in his eye. He placed his hand on Edward’s thigh and squeezed. “You don’t know who I am.”

Ed looked down at the hand gripping hard into his upper thigh. Then he plucked it off, pressing his fingers into the pressure point under the web of Old Guy’s thumb just enough to draw a wince.

“Who you are, is a fucking moron who won’t take no for an answer,” Ed said with a sunny smile, not bothering to lower his voice. “Back off. This is your last warning.”

He pressed his fingers in just a bit harder, then released Old Guy’s hand. The creep scrambled out of his seat and vanished into the crowd. Ed picked up his beer and drained half in one go, then noticed Spikey rushing frantically toward him.

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When Ed’s eyes blinked open in an unfamiliar room, his reaction was immediate and predictable.

“Where’s Al?” were the first words out of his mouth.

“At home, Ed. He’s safe.” Winry was sitting in a chair beside the bed. It was nice, sometimes, that she knew him so well.

But if Winry was here-

“Gracia is with him.”
Hughes. Standing behind the chair Roy was sitting in, on the opposite side of the bed from Winry. Roy looked relieved and uncomfortable at the same time. Why was the room so . . . white?

The rusty cogs in Ed’s head were slow to turn, but turn they did. “Elicia-“

“Is with Gracia’s mother.” Hughes again. “We didn’t want to risk Al’s health by taking her over there. Everyone is safe. Including you.”

Roy didn’t say anything; he was watching Ed with an expression that Ed couldn’t decipher.

“Now tell this idiot,” Hughes gestured to Roy, “that what happened wasn’t his fault.”


“You’re in the hospital. You were attacked.” Hughes was the answer man apparently. He pulled out a pen and notepad. “What do you remember?”

Ed thought it over. “The party. Sitting at the bar. Some old guy was hitting on me.” He thought harder, frowning when nothing came. There was a huge, unsettling gap in his memory between the bar and a hospital bed.

Hughes flipped through his notepad and filled in Ed’s blanks. “The bartender noticed you were being bothered by another guest, so he was keeping an eye on you. He saw the other guest slip something into your drink, but by the time he could get to you, you’d drained a good portion of it.”

Ed broke into a cold sweat. “What the hell?”

Hughes continued, all business. “The guest, who had left the bar briefly, returned when the drug began to take effect. He tried to escort you away, but the bartender and some of the other guests wouldn’t allow it.” Hughes lifted his eyes to grin at Ed. “Apparently, you had made it pretty clear that he was no friend of yours. An ambulance was called, and the police. The suspect is in custody. He seemed to think his position as a city counsellor placed him above suspicion. The hotel’s security cameras didn’t agree.” Hughes grin became predatory.

Ed’s heart rate was way up. “I’ve . . . been through something like this before,” he said slowly. “I’m . . . could there be . . . there might be a connection.”

“There isn’t,” Hughes stated firmly. “I back checked that immediately. I’ll dig deeper, just in case, but I’m convinced that this incident is in no way connected to the previous incident.”

Ed’s sigh of relief was so deep that he felt like he was deflating. He looked over at Roy. “So. How do you figure this is your fault?”

“I brought you to the party. I shouldn’t have left you on your own.”

“I don’t need a babysitter,” Ed said, feeling a distinct sense of déjà vu. “The only person to blame is that old guy.”

“All the same-”

“Nope. The old guy.”

“But I was-”

“Nope. The old guy.”
Roy sighed, still not convinced. “I suck at protecting people,” he said, dejected.

Ed poked a finger into Roy’s ribs, resulting in a squawk that Ed wished he could have recorded. It would have made a great ringtone.

“When can I get out of here?” Ed wanted to know. Hospitals sucked.

“They want to keep you overnight for observation,” Winry said.

“I’m fine,” Ed said. “I’d rather go home.” He still had assignments to mark. Which might be easier to deal with while he was disoriented. Or not. And hospitals sucked.

“Well, I’m sure the doctor will want to know that you’re awake,” Hughes said. “After she checks you over and gives you the all clear, I’ll see what I can do. I’m sure Alphonse would be much relieved to have you home as well.”

Wait.

“Um, Detective Hughes,” Ed started warily. “Did you meet my little brother?”

“Sure did! You have a lovely family!” Hughes’ grin was positively demonic. “You, Winry, and Alphonse have to come over for dinner one weekend when Al’s immune system is more robust!”

Oh shit. Ed had a feeling that his reality was about to undergo a major paradigm shift.

End Notes

Next one not started on paper, but pretty much finished in principle. 😊

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