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**snipers solve 99% of all problems**

**by** silentwalrus

**Summary**

Ed had thought, after the whole Promised Day, homunculus, entire country harvested for alchemical batteries thing, the batshit quotient of his life would have settled down some. He really ought to have topped out the meter with that one. But no. The bullshit is just getting started.

“Are you fucking kidding me,” Ed demands. “The wizards?”

Podfic & Chinese translation available! See notes

**Notes**

i thought simultaneously too hard about this and not enough. don’t ask me how any shit lines up i don’t care. i am fulfilling a very specific kink of mine and it’s called worlds collide nonsense and imaginary systems technobabble.
WAIT, WHY DOES ED HAVE HIS ARM AND ALSO HIS ALCHEMY? WHAT CANON ARE YOU USING?

listen, ive never heard of a canon in my life. if this were a serious story, we would take narrative consequences blah blah moral blah blah sacrifice seriously. This, however, is not a serious story. I’m throwing ed elric at wizards. what more could you want.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

Ed had thought, after the whole Promised Day, homunculus, entire country harvested for alchemical batteries thing, the batshit quotient of his life would have settled down some. He really ought to have topped out the meter with that one. But no. The bullshit is just getting started.

“Are you fucking kidding me,” Ed demands. “The wizards?”

Mustang sighs. “Yes. The wizards.”

“But they’re all loonies over there!”

“Nonetheless, we have been asked to resolve the situation.”

“Why us?”

“Do you want to be the one to explain to General Armstrong why her dear childhood friend from summer camp abroad isn’t getting help with her terrorist problem?”

“Why the fuck isn’t she the one here, then! You telling me the Ice Queen can’t handle some terrorists?”

“These terrorists use soul bonds, Fullmetal, so forgive us all for calling in an expert.”

“You just want her to owe you a favor,” Ed growls.

Mustang’s mouth ticks up just a hair. “You’re getting better at this, Fullmetal. Though primarily what I want is to not be disemboweled and left to be savaged by rabid bears while dear Olivier laughs and watches.”

“I’d buy tickets to that,” Ed mutters. “What the fuck is this about soul bonds?”

Mustang’s face loses some of the amusement. “The briefing so far has been… less than satisfactory on most details,” he says, pushing a folder across the desk. “But from what I understand, their number one most wanted raised himself from the dead.”

Ed snatches up the folder. “Raised from the dead?” The briefing is way less than satisfactory: there’s practically nothing here, just four pages of notes about location (wizard loony land, who cares), a pathetically scant threat estimate (whoever did that analysis is clearly just as pleased to have next to no details to offer as Ed is to get them) and one page is just a handwritten letter on weird beige paper. Ed frowns at it and holds it up. “Fuck is this?”

“General Armstrong’s friend - one Amelia Bones - is the director of law enforcement for their government, and she is the one who requested help. She is not, however, reaching out in her official capacity but rather as,” Mustang’s mouth purses eloquently, “a member of a vigilante group of private citizens.”

“What.”

“Because their government is insisting that the terrorists don’t exist.”

Ed squinches his face up. Governments cover up wild shit all the time, obviously, but terrorism tends to be co-opted and used as propaganda fodder, not denied. “Do they exist?”

Ed flips the letter over and finds it, immediately recognizing Hughes’ handwriting. “Hughes speaks wizard?” he asks, scanning the page. *Hate to ask this of you... no other help...*

“English,” Mustang corrects. “No, he recorded Olivier’s verbal translation. If anyone else in the military speaks English we’re not aware of them.”

Ed flips through the measly handful of pages again and eyes the Intelligence seal on everything except the letter. “How official is this?”

Mustang shrugs. “We’re Security. General Armstrong has brought us evidence of alchemical terrorism that has the potential to become a national security threat.”

“Wizards have alchemy?”

Mustang sighs. “No, Fullmetal,” he says in his *do keep up* voice. “But nobody’s going to take a report with the word ‘magic’ in it seriously.”

Ed waves a hand. “So we’re on the up and up but only as far as it takes to paper over the bullshit.”

“And as you said, it can be very valuable to have General Armstrong owe you a favor,” Mustang says. “After this I’m not going to be the only one with an IOU.”

“With me doing the entire military’s dirty work, as usual,” Ed says in comfortable disgust. “When do I leave?”

“We will be heading out the day after tomorrow,” Mustang says. “Once we receive the Imperial travel documents securing passage through Xing. I’d suggest you wire Alphonse and let him know we’ll be passing through the capital.”

Ed’s so distracted by *Al! Yay!* that he almost doesn’t see the catch. Almost. “*We?*”

Mustang smiles. “Why yes. It’s official military policy to send no man alone when traveling across the Divide. Hawkeye and Havoc will accompany us to the gateway in Guangshi, and I will be joining you to rendezvous with our contacts and determine whether we’ll need to apply any more... resources.”

“Oh, you’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” Ed says.

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The contact rendezvous is at someone’s literal fucking house. Getting there is a fucking nightmare, because first it’s three days’ train ride across the desert - thank fuck for the new rail lines - and then another three days upriver in Xing, and then *another* day in a boat along the coast. They’re not alone, at least: Al and Mei join them when the river passes through the imperial capital because neither of them have been to Guangshi.

Ed’s never been to a port city before either, Amestris being landlocked, and Mustang must be feeling slightly less bastardsly than usual because they take an entire day to “rest up” for their “big trip” after they check in with the local magistrate to reassure his Imperial Lingness that they’ve arrived where they’re supposed to and haven’t hared off to do god knows what to his country. Ed, Al and Mei spend the entire day walking the shore and investigating the dock markets, eating fried octopus and lime-soaked clams and buying sea pearl earrings (for Winry), thirteen books on tidal basin ecology, ocean navigation, deep-sea predators and water-specific alkahestry (for Ed and Al),
and brightly colored cloth wind pennants shaped like fish (for everyone. “Souvenirs!” Al had insisted. “They’ll make a nice gift no matter who it’s for.”)

“So,” Al says after they’ve dropped off their crap in the hotel room and gotten back to chewing on fried shrimp on an open pier by the market. “Wizards.”

“Wizarffs,” Ed agrees, kinda muffled by his mouthful of shellfish.

Mei makes a face. “Is it true they keep themselves segregated out there? Alkahestrists living in secret apart from everybody else?”

Ed shrugs, yanking the tails off another skewer of shrimp so as to more efficiently load them into his calorie hole. “No idea. The intel we’ve got on anything over there is a fucking joke. Only thing we know for sure is their ‘magic’ is basically just impermanent alchemy, so nothing they make is actually stable.”

“I think only General Armstrong’s been across, that we know of,” Al tells Mei. “Her family is really old and they have distant relatives living out there, but I haven’t heard of anybody else crossing over. You’ll be meeting a guide, right, brother?”

“Yeah, think so,” Ed says, chewing. “Mustan’s doin’ all the ‘rranging. ‘Pparently crossing the anomaly is supposed to really suck.”

Al gives him a sharp look of you’re telling me this little fact NOW? “Will your automail be alright?”

“I don’t think it’s that bad,” Mei says. “There’s people who trade with them here. And we saw people selling those translation rocks at that alkahestric bookstore, remember?”

“That shit is unnatural,” Ed declares, telling Al I’ll be fine with his eyebrows because these days Mustang kicks up way the fuck more of a fuss about environmental hazards to his automail than he does. “There’s nothing that should be able to translate language that can be applied to a rock. A small rock.”

“At least you don’t have to learn a whole new language just for this assignment,” Al says, but he also looks displeased by linguistically impossible rocks. All three of them had looked them over and all three of them had been totally at a loss as to how the fucking things worked, not least because they only translated to and from languages from either side of the anomaly. They shouldn’t.

“I know there’s some alkahestrists down the coast that have studied the Divide, but all the research we have in the capital is mostly about mapping it,” Mei says doubtfully. “Which is, well. It’s mostly over the ocean.”

“And there’s really not much data beyond measurements,” Al sighs. “The most interesting thing was that radio waves can’t pass through - which, well, there could be any number of reasons for that. And we have practically nothing on their culture.”

“I haven’t heard of any people from there crossing over to this side,” Mei says, tugging on her braids and frowning. “There are some accounts from Xingese travelers, but I haven’t read them.”

“We’ve got practically nothing in Central,” Ed admits, because he’d spent the day before departure rooting through all the wizard books in the library (zero point two, nothing but four paragraphs in some old traveling Cretan cartographer’s journal) and hunting down the two Intelligence analysts who’d compiled the briefing (who had burst into simultaneous tears of commiseration when Ed
had complained about having jack shit - jeez, Hughes hires them highly strung).

Additionally, the letter had been super unclear about the whole soul bonds thing - Armstrong’s friend claims her Lord Wal de whatever came back from the dead through ‘dark soul magic’, but with literally no evidence Ed’s pretty firmly on the side of ‘this guy just fucking hid out building his power base for ten years and then told everybody he resurrected himself to seem scary’. Also, who names a terrorist group death eaters? Ed hmphs. "Our best intel is from twenty fucking years ago, from what Armstrong remembers crossing over as a kid to go to fucking summer camp. With wizards."

Al taps reprovingly at Ed’s metal leg with his cane. “They’re people just like us, brother. And they’re asking for help.”

“We’re gonna help,” Ed complains. “Just - wizards!”

“This is our chance to learn more than rumors,” Al points out. “And if a whole society of people decided to follow their own branch of alchemy, impermanent or not, then maybe there’s something to it that we haven’t thought of. They could have some really interesting insights. They’ve got to at least have libraries,” he adds, only a little uncertain.

“If their stupid terrorists haven’t blown them up yet,” Ed says, but he can’t put any venom into it when Al, as usual, is extremely fucking right. This is why they send Al to do diplomacy and Ed to beat people insensate with their own inadequacy. “Fine. After I’m done there I’ll ditch Mustang if I have to and get us some books.”

“Bring me back some too!” Mei demands.

“Obviously,” Ed says, not least because these days Al and Mei were sharing textbooks or whatever it is the university kids were calling it these days. Ed, like with all things that make Al happy, wholeheartedly approves while also lurking in the background holding a very big hammer.

Mei looks pleased, at least. “Let’s go talk to the market administrator and ask who’s gone across recently,” she says. “Maybe we can talk to someone who’s been.”

Al beams at Mei like someone’s handed him a kitten. “That’s a great idea!”

So yeah, Ed approves.

The administrator in the main market does know of three merchants who have traveled across the anomaly, but regrets to inform the imperial princess that two are in caravan to Yangluo and one is currently on business across the anomaly itself. He personally does not have much information, beyond that what the merchants bring back is mostly artwork, cloth and fresh translation stones, as they don’t last more than a month without their mystery batteries going dead or whatever.

“It’s fine,” Ed says when they reconvene outside the administration office. “Not like I won’t find out soon enough. Let’s go get some of those steamed buns we saw by the fish market, I wanna get my money’s worth outta this day. Probably don’t even have buns in wizard world,” he mutters, slinging his arm over Al’s shoulders and steering them back down the street.

They get the buns, and they’re delicious, and they end up spending the rest of the afternoon in one of the alkahestric bookstores stacking up even more books to take home (cardiac diagnostics, Al, multi-application array design, Mei, energy conservation in transmutation, Ed.) In the evening practically every street gets lit up with elaborate paper lamp strings, and it turns out there’s a night market, too, so by the time they return to their rooms Ed’s almost forgotten that he’s here to go see
fucking *wizards* and solve their stupid magic terrorist problem.

At least Mustang doesn’t make them get up early. They trapse out to the gateway close to noon, which is on the outskirts of the city and up one of the jungle-covered hills that make up the entirety of the coast minus like two meters of beach. The gateway itself is marked by two carved posts covered in imperial lions: it looks like a freaky wobbling stretch of grey air, but the two guards on one side of it are literally sitting and smoking and playing pai, so clearly this shit is only alarming to dumb foreigners. Mustang presents their papers to the little customs booth a few meters from the gate, they get nodded through by a bored official, and Hawkeye and Havoc salute Mustang while Ed gives Al and Mei a tight hug.

“Keep a journal,” Al instructs, then amends, at Ed’s disbelieving look, “If you have time. But think, brother, we could get a research paper out of this,” and Ed has to hug Al again for that. His little brother always knows just what to say, even if it is in service of manipulating Ed into taking notes.

“We’ll be back before you know it,” Ed says, and strides into the wobbly air. Like hell is he gonna let Mustang go first.
Chapter 2

Crossing through does, actually, suck saggy goat balls. Ed feels like every molecule of his body is trying to fit into its neighbor as a crushing, airless squeeze grips his lungs and makes him feel like every hair follicle is being smushed out of each individual pore like a billion micro tubes of toothpaste. But it is not, actually, anything near like being dragged through the Gate, so Ed grits what he currently hopes are his teeth and shoves through.

He falls out the other side with a *pop*, with only a slight stagger and a manageable heave to his stomach. A discreet check of his automail proves his leg is perfectly fine - barring any horrible delayed-reaction surprises - and then Mustang pops out too, grimacing but otherwise looking annoyingly unruffled.

The opposite side of the anomaly is still coastal jungle - water lapping at the slope down Ed’s right, chittering dark green rising up to his left - only now instead of midday it’s fucking nighttime. It’s also significantly more humid, and as Ed completes his 360 a hulking figure steps out of the trees.

Ed braces automatically, on edge after his skip through the fucking anomaly, but the guy stops well away from them. He’s a real fucked up looking dude, with absolutely insane hair, a peg leg and a bulging mechanical eye that moves independently of the natural one. He’d look like a character from a children’s play about pirates only he’s wearing a poncho. He’s holding some kind of thin stick in his hand - and his eye goes right to Ed’s automail leg, which makes Ed tense and open his hands in preparation to clap.

The guy doesn’t do anything, though, just flicks his freaky eye up to Ed’s face and then Mustang’s. “Mustang?” he grunts, his accent making it sound like Mosstang.

Mustang holds up a translation stone. “You are…?”

“Moody,” the guy says, in a way that makes Ed have to chew his cheek to keep from adding *well in that case I’m Sarcastic and he’s Insufferable*. He must be the right contact, at least, because Mustang doesn’t fry him. “Who’s the boy?”

“This is Lieutenant Colonel Elric,” Mustang says, putting a hand on Ed’s shoulder as Ed bristles further. “He’s a specialist on my team. Are we waiting for anyone else?”

“No,” pirate guy says harshly, apparently hearing the *hurry up and get us moving* just as clearly as Ed did. He gives them another gross once-over before turning around. “This way."

He stumps along the shore and further into the trees, moving awkwardly but quickly on his peg leg. Ed has a superior moment with his own automail, his stride indistinguishable on either side these days thanks to Winry’s experiments with titanium, and wonders vaguely why this guy didn’t buy a leg from whoever made that fucking eye.

Which can *clearly see through clothes*. Ed levels a belatedly disgusted look at Pirate Guy’s back. Peeping fucking tom.

“How’d you lose the leg, boy?” Pirate Guy says loudly, like a fucking *mind reader*.

“In a poker game,” Ed says flatly. “Your eyes go below my waist again, I’m fucking deckling you. Fair warning.” If the guy can see through clothes, *is* he a mind reader? Ed immediately starts running through the most complicated problem he knows - alchemically induced atomic fission in uranium-14, purely theoretical until he and that girl from Central U figure out a stable containment
system for both base material and byproduct - and that carries him to the top of the hill and into a small clearing. Man, if the guy is a mind reader Ed really hopes Mustang’s thinking about nothing but porn.

Their destination is a moldering shed that looks like it’s ended up at the wrong end of a couple dozen bear attacks. Pirate Guy rummages around in there and comes out holding what looks, to Ed’s expert eye, like a fucking flowerpot.

“This is a port key,” Pirate Guy tells them, dead serious. “When all three of us touch it it’ll take us to base.”

Ed squints at the flowerpot, because on a second look he could swear there’s almost a shimmer in the air right at its edges. He reaches out with his right hand and definitely feels a hint of tingle right before Mustang puts his hand down too and everything goes fucking apeshit.

It’s like god flushed him down the toilet. “Holy shitting fuck,” Ed half-yells, nearly pitching forward as he’s abruptly spat out of the universal sewage flue again. At least the anomaly crossing didn’t nutshot him with fucking concentrated essence of motion sickness.

They are now in - a city. A residential area by the look of it, with weird bulbous cars parked all along the street. It’s still night here, but now instead of being too warm Ed’s jacket is gonna need a little help with the wind insulation. Mustang’s staggering slightly next to him, which makes him feel better, but Pirate Guy looks like he’s trying not to smirk, which makes Ed vow revenge.

“Here,” Pirate Guy says, digging in his poncho for something. Ed would watch him just in case, but Mustang’s already keeping an eye on it and anyway something on their right is almost vibrating in the corner of Ed’s vision. He turns towards it, squinting to get a better look, and gets a lot more shimmers this time. The air in front of the row houses ripples with some kind of distortion, visible even though the only light is from some shuttered windows and a couple of distant streetlights.

Ed squints harder, blinking rapidly to try and get a clearer look. He can’t fucking imagine what the hell it’d be: it doesn’t actually look anything like the anomaly did, but he can’t think of what would make atmospheric distortion like this besides magic. Mei taught Al about qi and both of them tried to teach Ed, but so far he’s had jack all success in sensing the mystic currents or whatever. Maybe this is what they were talking about. Maybe it’s on the visible spectrum on this side of the anomaly and presents as weird air shimmers. Ed kind of wishes he has a camera to record whether or not this is real or just all the concussions finally catching up to him.

Pirate Guy finally digs out whatever he was looking for before Ed can go over there and start poking things. “Read this,” he says, thrusting a scrap of paper at Mustang.

Mustang gives it a long, slow look. “Do you have a translation?”

“What?” Pirate Guy snatches it back, then lets off a stream of gibberish that’s got to be swearing.

“Is there a problem?” Mustang asks mildly. Ed can’t imagine what the fuck is so contingent on Mustang being able to read a piece of paper, but that’s just gonna go on the already too long list of questions he’s going to ask the first librarian he comes across, starting with can wizards mind read and how the fuck do you make a flowerpot teleport people.

“Just wait,” Pirate Guy growls, then waves his stick and mutters something. And then blue-white mist gushes out of the stick and coalesces into - a shark. A shimmery translucent shark. The floating fucking ghost shark does a loop in midair and hovers in front of Pirate Guy, who straight
up tells it, “Get Albus. We’re having some translation problems.”

The shark dips once like it’s fucking nodding and then winks away into nothingness. “Did we just fucking see that,” Ed says under his breath.

“Unfortunately,” Mustang mutters back, sounding just as happy about it. “How much do you want to bet the stick is a weapon?”


“Most things are,” Mustang murmurs, just as there’s a crack and another person teleports in - this one with an actual pointy hat, a bathrobe and a white beard straight down to his fucking knees.

“Hello, Alastor,” he says, a stick in his hand as well. “You called?”

“Yes. They can’t read English,” Pirate Guy says shortly.

“Ah. In that case, the order of the phoenix’s headquarters can be found at number twelve grimmauld place.”

And then the shimmer to Ed’s right roars apart, coalescing into an entire fucking house, spat out by the air like a watermelon seed with a paved walkway and gables. “Welcome,” beard guy says like this is all totally normal and expected, opening the iron front gate and walking into the garden. “We can speak freely inside.”

Ed and Mustang have basically no choice but to follow beard guy into a house that literally wasn’t there twenty seconds ago - though maybe it was, and that was what the shimmer was indicating, an invisible compression of mass. Setting aside the utterly impossible violation of physics - and he has to set it aside, or he will go bonkers, right now - Ed has to admit that’s at least better fucking opsec than just having the vigilantes meet in someone’s totally unsecured living room.

That sentiment lasts about as long as it takes to get through the front door, because this place looks like a cross between a funeral home and the kind of haunted house the Ringers and the Welltungs set up for the kids every harvest festival back in Resembool. Ed likes all things gargoyles, sure, but this place is way less ‘gargoyles’ and way more ‘gangrene caused by mold’.

“So! You are our Amestrisan visitors?” Beard Guy says with unexpected cheeriness, turning around in the foyer before they get more than a couple steps in. He twinkles at Mustang as Pirate Guy shuts the door behind them. “I assume you are the one in uniform.”

“Indeed. General Roy Mustang, Lieutenant Colonel Edward Elric,” Mustang introduces them, smiling like they’re not all standing way too close in a creeptastic front hall lit only by the streetlamps outside. “You are…?”

“A pleasure to meet you, Roy, Edward,” Beard Guy says. Ed tries not to grimace; the translation rock smooths away accents on everything except names - the bits that don’t translate, presumably - so it’s extra freaky to hear perfect Amestrisan and then have Ehhhdwordr drop in there like a rock in a bowl of chicken stew. “My name is Albus Dumbell Door.”

That doesn’t sound right, not least because Albus had the accent and the rest of it didn’t, but it’s not like Ed’s gonna remember this guy’s name anyway. “I am the headmaster of hog warts school of witch craft and wizardry and current head of the order of the phoenix.”

“My understanding was that we were to meet with Amelia Bones,” Mustang says, probably because this guy looks like he’s a hundred and fucking three and also like he just crawled out of
some kind of world’s ugliest nightshirt convention.

“Unfortunately she is currently tied up in court due to her official position,” Beard Guy says all apologetic. “She will join us as soon as she is able, and in the meantime I believe I can fill you in on the basics. I’m sure that you have questions.”

That’s not a great first start, having an expected police contact swapped out for some schoolteacher they have no background on, but again, it’s not like Ed and Mustang have any choice. “Of course,” Mustang says graciously, somehow managing to make it sound like Beard Guy now owes him a favor. “Lead the way.”

They end up in a sitting room that would probably give whatever professional cleaning team got called in for it six kinds of hepatitis. Ed can’t sit like he wants no part of the seat touching him, because unfortunately all Mustang’s ramblings about body language and power moves have if not sunk in than at least left a stain, so he settles for sprawling in one ghastly armchair and thanking his erratically lucky stars for the lasting habit of keeping his gloves on.

Mustang sits down next to him, clasping his hands over one knee and looking relaxed and unperturbed and not at all like he’s going to have his entire uniform double dry cleaned the second he sets foot out of here. Beardy sits down across from them, and Pirate stumps around to stand behind him like a bodyguard.

“I’d offer refreshments, but I’m afraid I’m not the master of this house and creature isn’t terribly fond of polite overtures,” Beardy says. Whatever the fuck that means. “Now… is it just the two of you?”

“For the moment,” Mustang says noncommittally. “We’re here to evaluate the situation on the ground.”

“Bones said her pal was a general in the most feared military in all the Unplottables,” Pirate pipes up, not even bothering not to sound caustic as hell. “What, is two men all she could spare?”

Mustang half lids his eyes, smiling his most guileless rattlesnake bastard smile. “Typically Elric alone is sufficient to resolve this kind of problem, but on this occasion General Armstrong felt it prudent to be… thorough.”

Ed has a stupid moment of wondering why the hell Mustang just called him Elric for what might be the first time in his life before his brains come back online and remind him that, fucking obviously, none of these wizards have ever fucking heard of the Fullmetal Alchemist, let alone the Flame. Pirate wouldn’t be trying to measure Mustang’s dick if he had the first clue about who he was dealing with. Ed’s pretty bad, sure, but Mustang got sent out against garrisons in his capacity as an alchemist. Since they haven’t heard of them, though, saying some dumb shit like don’t you know who we are, well, no you don’t but we’re super tough I promise is just gonna be embarrassing.

“I’m afraid we’re in no position to turn down help,” Beardy says, even as his eyes flick over Ed and then Mustang with a sharpness that doesn’t match his tone. “What exactly has Amelia requested of you?”

“She wrote General Armstrong requesting whatever aid she felt able to give, as she does not have the resources to neutralize the cadre of violent terrorists who had recently shown a dramatic resurgence in activity,” Mustang says. “Our orders are to resolve the situation. Due to the difficulty of communicating across the Divide, as of right now we are dependent on you to provide the most current situational intel.”
Ed scowls, because that last sentence was Mustang as good as saying *we might be dependent now but if we don’t get what we need from you I’m sending Fullmetal out to get it.* “Explain the soul bonds,” he orders. “You think this lord whatever actually came back from the dead?”

Beardy peers at Ed over his glasses. “Yes,” he says. “He has.”

“And we think this because…?” Ed says leadingly, because usually when people make claims like that they at least pretend to have evidence.

Beardy sits back with a huge sigh, like being asked for proof of resurrection is a huge imposition. “Some background is needed, I think,” he says. “Tom Riddle - Lord Voldemort, as he styles himself - has pursued immortality through any means all his life, even as a student at hog warts itself. He began gaining followers over thirty years ago, from most of the oldest and wealthiest wizarding families, and he expanded his agenda to advance their blood prejudices and use their support to grow his power ever higher.

“Fourteen years ago,” Beardy says, tone heavy, “a miracle happened. Riddle went to the house of the potters, and while he succeeded in murdering James and Lily, their son survived, and in doing so reflected the killing curse back onto its caster. Riddle’s body was destroyed - but due to the dark rituals he had undergone in his quest for immortal life, his spirit remained, and while he was greatly weakened he could still possess and influence others. Four months ago he manipulated many - some his followers, some innocents - into helping complete his darkest ritual yet, and successfully returning him to his body, stronger than he was before.”

There’s a pause. “While this is of course very interesting,” Mustang says delicately, as Ed sits with his mouth open, “I meant information more along the lines of estimated numbers, methods of operation, past attacks and potential future targets. That sort of thing.”

“You don’t believe us,” Pirate says, normal eye narrowed at Mustang while the pervert one stares down Ed.

“Because you’ve presented zero evidence,” Ed says, in what he considers a very accomodating tone. “What ‘dark rituals’? You’ve provided absolutely no specifics beyond the timeline of the ‘resurrection’. Is this just normal for you people? Is coming back from the dead common enough that you just take it on faith when some whackjob cultist says woo hoo, yippee, I’m back, suckers?”

“No,” Beardy says, looking like he’s smiling under the acres of beard. “It’s not common. Unheard of, in fact.”

“So why, exactly, are we all hopping on this guy’s dick then,” Ed says sharply. “Where is your evidence. *Resurrection* is a big fucking jump to make from one motherfucker dropping off the map for fourteen years and then popping back up again.”

“You don’t get to skive off even if they turn out to be garden variety non-soul bonded terrorists, Fullmetal,” Mustang murmurs, sounding way too entertained.

“You said yourself you don’t have all the facts,” Pirate guy says, looking at Ed. “We’ve fought this war before. We know what Voldy’s capable of. What he did isn’t going to change just because you think it’s impossible.”

“It’s not fucking impossible,” Ed says irritably. “You just have no evidence. Put some up or cool it with the whole back from the dead thing. It’s not like you need us to buy in. Terrorists are terrorists, okay? You heard Mustang, we’re going after them regardless of what kind of batshit fear
tactics they spread.”

Beardy looks up and exchanges a long look with Pirate. Ed doesn’t know who is arguing what, but both of them seem to be arguing it pretty fiercely. It’s unclear who wins, too, because they both turn back to Ed and Mustang looking pretty unhappy.

“Officially, there is no mobilization of ministry forces,” Beardy tells them soberly, “because it is believed to be impossible to rise from the dead. We speak to you of his resurrection because what made it possible is what makes him so difficult to defeat. Just as his revival required certain… components, killing Voldemort will require certain - conditions to be met.”


Another long battling Pirate vs Beardy look. “Among other things, there is a prophecy,” Beardy finally says, “whose wording implies that the power to vanquish Riddle is specific, possibly unique, and resides in a certain individual marked by Riddle himself - arguably given that power by the mark alone.”

Ed stares at Beardy with a dawning fury so intense it’s transmuting itself into wonder. Then he slowly swivels his head to stare at Mustang, because Ed can’t fucking deal with this alone and Mustang arguably deserves it more. “There’s a prophecy.”

Mustang is staring straight ahead like there’s an answer, any fucking answer to this, written on the wall. “I heard.”

“A prophecy.”

“A prophecy.”

“A prophecy.”

“Yes, a sodding prophecy,” Pirate snarls. “It was what made Voldy target the potters in the first place -”

“Oh, perfect!” Ed exclaims, only slightly hysterical. “No problem! Just tell him there’s a prophecy that he’ll be in, oh, the town square at twelve o’clock next Sunday, mine the entire place with tripwires and then take an early lunch! Problem fucking solved!”

Pirate bares his teeth at Ed, but Beardy’s expression is mild. “Do you not have seers in the Unplottable lands?”

“No,” Mustang says carefully. “Not in Amestris. We do, however, have some other notable professions. Are you familiar with the concept of a sniper?”

Ed feels his mouth twist as Mustang says it, crazy laughter dying in his throat, but for once he keeps his mouth shut. Last year’s border dispute with Creta had spawned a rash of guerilla attacks in the farming towns along the river, and one of the worst swathes of devastation was a State Alchemist defector whose specialty was creating hard vacuums. Really fucking big ones.

A lot of people had died before they’d even got there. The defector was smart, and kept himself both out of sight behind debris and almost constantly surrounded by a totally airless vacuum with a radius nearly a hundred meters across. Nobody had been able to get close. Mustang was useless with no oxygen to transmute anywhere near the target, and even Ed wasn’t strong enough to push a transmutation across that kind of distance and without any line of sight. Mustang had radioed for Hawkeye.
It had taken two shots: one for her to see how her bullets behaved in a vacuum, the second to put the Void Alchemist down. Ed had been the one to transmute her a tower she could aim from, out of Void’s range. He’d been crouching next to her, hands on the transmuted dirt, ready to cover her as she laid down and laid out her rifle. It was taller than he was. He’d asked, can you -

And she’d said, if I can.

The first shot had warned Void of the danger, but it hadn’t mattered. Ed had seen him run for it, a tiny shape sprinting desperately for cover and then the retort of Hawkeye’s rifle dropping him to the ground. Like it was the sound itself that did it, the opposite of a starter’s gun, and not a four centimeter long bullet. She’d gotten him center mass, just below the heart, and by the time anyone got to him through the previously unpassable area he’d been dead long enough to start to cool.

They spent the rest of that day collecting the bodies and pieces of bodies Void had torn through. The entire platoon of soldiers stationed in that town were dead, and something like a third of the civilian population too. A lot had ran. It wasn’t anywhere near a sure thing that the rich farmland town would ever recover.

It also turned out that both Ed and Hawkeye were extremely surly drunks. They’d huddled together in the back booth of the one shithole bar left in the destruction of the town, and Mustang had wisely chosen to fill in for the absent bartender and keep their drinks coming all night. Ed had tried to explain his array streamlining formulas to Hawkeye to make her feel better, and she’d utterly destroyed him in arm wrestling. They woke up the next day in a field twenty minutes’ walk from the bar, Ed wearing Hawkeye’s uniform jacket and she in his leather one, Havoc snoring ten meters away and an infuriatingly chipper Mustang laying in on the horn of the car he’d parked down the way.

It had been enough to get them to the soldiers’ funerals - well attended - and the Void Alchemist’s - not at all. Ed and Hawkeye had stood for the eulogies, saluted for the honor guard, accepted the thanks of some of those soldiers’ parents and siblings and spouses. For killing Void. For, in their eyes, just revenge. Amestris was war country. People understood blood. Change did not come overnight.

Sometimes you aren’t smart enough, fast enough to find the magic sweet spot. Sometimes you don’t find the right solution until after you’ve executed a wrong one. Sometimes prison or capture is not an option, through lack of resources or distance or what the fuck ever. And if these wizard terrorists aren’t even officially being recognized as a problem by law enforcement, well. What’re these vigilantes gonna do, tie them up in their basements? Sneak the terrorists into jail?

“I know what a sniper is,” Beardy says quietly. “It is not one of the resources available to us at this time. In any case it would not be enough.” Beardy looks at them bleakly, exhibiting a distinct lack of twinkle. “Riddle has split his soul, and bound and hidden the fragments in places that are surely devastatingly well guarded, even if we knew where they were or how to reach them. Unless every single one of them is destroyed, killing Riddle will only get rid of his flesh body, leaving him able to return, and rise again.” Beside him Pirate nods, grim.

Ed and Mustang both stare at them for what’s probably too long a time. “But if you destroy his body,” Ed finally says, in a slow, please-help-me-understand voice, “like what happened fourteen years ago, he stops killing people now, right?”

“It would release him into the world as a shade, reduced but able to possess at will,” Beardy says, all gravely like this is a fucking tragedy or whatever.

“Would discorporating him improve his current tactical position and increase the threat level he
poses to the general population,” Mustang says, as bluntly as possible to try and actually get through to these clowns.

“No,” Beardy says slowly. “But we cannot be certain what failsafes it will unleash, or what preparations Riddle has made in case of just such an eventuality.”

“I see.” Mustang sits back. “That’s certainly something to consider. Do we know when Director Bones will be available to meet?” How soon can we talk to somebody who actually knows what the fuck they’re talking about?

“I’m afraid if she hasn’t arrived yet she may not make it tonight, but certainly tomorrow,” Beardy says, apparently not picking up on the pretty blatant fuckyou.

“Right. Thank you for your time, gentlemen,” Mustang says, standing up and dusting off his lapel. “You’ve given us much to think about and it is, indeed, late; we’d best reconvene tomorrow. Fullmetal,” he adds in his actually-giving-orders voice, “locate the target and evaluate any defenses. We’ll rendezvous here at 0900.”

“Where are you going?”

“To bring in Hawkeye,” Mustang says. “And Havoc.”

Ed’s grin feels decidedly wicked as he pops up off the chair too, trying not to visibly wipe the backs of his pants legs. “Shouldn’t leave ‘em behind in the first place.”

Mustang briefly rolls his eyes skyward. “Quite. I’d like to retrieve the rest of my team, Moody, Albus, and I think we’d both prefer it if I had an escort.”

“Bring food too,” Ed demands, as his stomach makes it known that he hasn’t eaten in almost two hours and expresses serious concerns about the state and availability of wizard food. “I mean it. If you come back without pork buns I’m stealing your fucking wallet.”

“Gods forbid I let you stray into a life of crime,” Mustang bitches, tone all genteel since they’re in company, but Ed just grins. He may just have suffered through an honest to god briefing with prophecy as a key component, but he also just won pork buns and he knows it.
Chapter 3

Beardy follows Mustang out to the front door and Pirate keeps watching Ed like he’s gonna do a trick, so he belays his planned exploration of the house to glare back and address his concerns like an adult. “What?”

Pirate just eyes him some more. “Pretty big orders he gave you.”

“What.”

“Track down Voldy and evaluate his base? All by tomorrow morning?”

Ed gives Pirate a look that lets him know exactly what he thinks of the condescension. “It’s not by tomorrow morning.” Though it would be just like Mustang to demand a fully caught magic terrorist criminal by the stroke of fucking midnight, oh, I’m sorry, is that just too much for you, Fullmetal? “And what the fuck do you mean, big orders? That’s the whole fucking objective. Find the guy, take him down.”

“And he puts it all on you?”

“What? It’s my fucking op anyway,” Ed says, annoyed. If all Pirate wants to do is rehash what they just talked about Ed’s got better shit to do. “He’s just here to heckle and give me ulcers.”

Beardy turns up in the doorway before Ed can leave, though, and smiles beardily at him. “Would you be so kind as to accompany Roy back to the boundary, Alastor? I can help Edward settle in.”

Pirate and Ed grunt in synchronized annoyance, Ed pushing out into the hallway first. “Right this way,” Beardy says, sweeping ahead of Ed before he can go abuse Mustang some more. They’re around the corner and up some stairs before it fully sinks in that Mustang left him to sleep in this fucking biohazard.

Oh, that son of a bitch. Ed cannot believe Mustang didn’t spring for a hotel room. Fucking hell, do wizards even have hotel rooms? Are all their houses like this? They can’t all be like this, there’ve got to be families raising children and if you bring a toddler in here you’ve got sixty seconds before they choke. Wait, do wizards even have money?

“There are a few others your age staying here, though I’m sure you’d all prefer proper introductions in the morning,” Beardy says like this is some consolation prize. Ed just stares blankly at him, wondering what the fuck age Beardy thinks he is. “For now let us see where you might retire. I must warn you not to go wandering, as many areas of this house are still dangerous,” Beardy adds, so Ed resolves to do a top to bottom exploration as soon as possible no matter how gross this place is. “Though hopefully we can find a spare room without too much trouble. I’m loathe to wake up Molly, and there should be…. aha! Here.”

Pushing open the closest moldering door reveals a dank little depressive episode of a room, with the dust and grime so thick on the floor that for a second Ed thinks the hardwood is carpeted. “You’ve gotta be kidding me,” he says aloud.

“It’s not much, but it should suffice for the night,” Beardy says with the kind of geniality that tells Ed he did notice Mustang’s fuck you, alright, and is paying it back in kind on the nearest hapless victim. “I wish you a peaceful rest and kind dreams. We have much to discuss tomorrow.”

And with that fucking fortune cookie slip Beardy whisks off down the hallway. Ed considers the
pros and cons of transmuting the floorboards to trap him midway down the stairs and leave him planted there for the night like a grandpa garden gnome, but decides against it. If whoever the fuck else is in this house is asleep then making a racket is gonna be a worse first impression than he’s already going to make.

He enters the room, shutting the door and prying open the window so that he can at least have breathable fucking air in here. He’s got orders, but Mustang can just fucking sit on them and wait after leaving him to spend the night in a condemned hovel full of wizards. Ed pokes the fossilized mattress with his boot, then strips the sheets off, claps and transmutes it shorter and thicker. A lot of dust but no bugs or weird mysterious gross stuff shakes out of the transmutation, so, great, he doesn’t have to burn the entire house down, and transmuting both sheets and bedframe to match the new dimensions produces similar results. When he’s done Ed sits on his new clean bed, digs out the ration bar tucked into his inner jacket pocket and moodily polishes it off.

Wizards.

Then Ed sighs, fishes out his field notebook and gets on with fulfilling his promise to Al. If he doesn’t get a research paper out of this he’s going to break some goddamn kneecaps.

-o-

Ed ends up catching a couple hours’ sleep despite having to do it in a room designed specifically for creepy doll children, though he still wakes up - he flicks aside the decomposing curtains - about an hour before dawn. He exercises, looks over his notes, wishes he’d brought more than one pair of regular gloves as he has to transmute clean everything he’s wearing and then goes looking for something to eat.

And something with magic in it. On it, whatever. Potential interesting research paper topics include studying the specifics of how magic interacts with alchemy, so he might as well get that test out of the way just in case it turns out to be super boring.

There’s no sign of Beardy downstairs, or, well, anybody, but he finds a kitchen and then a cold cellar, which contains both cheese and cured ham. The doors don’t seem to want to open in this place, but an automail foot in a steel-toed boot is generally a pretty universal lever with which to move the world. Ed leans against the kitchen counter, chewing, and lets his gaze travel over the soot-stained tiles, peeling cabinets and fossilized oak table. Working on the assumption that weird air shimmers indicate magic in effect - not a great theory, but all he’s got at the moment - absolutely nothing in this kitchen is magical. Ed frowns, crams the rest of the ham and cheese in his mouth, dusts off his hands and goes hunting.

It’s fucking dark as hell in this house - naturally not a single window has been cleaned in the past, presumably, six to eight thousand years - and nothing seems to be wired for electricity, so Ed has to transmute a flint striker out of a flagstone and light the couple of candles in wall sconces he comes across. It takes some standing in the living rooms and staring straight ahead while looking out the corners of his eyes in flickery candlelight, but he eventually catches it. “Aha,” he hisses under his breath, striding up to one of the framed paintings on the wall - a huntsman in weird pants sleeping under a tree with his weird dogs - and examining the faint haze curling around the edges of the frame.

His hands tingle even through the gloves as he takes the painting down and inspects it. He can’t tell what the magic is doing, but maybe it’s another size thing like the invisible house was and the painting’s real dimensions are like four meters across. It doesn’t feel heavier than it should, and it looks like a normal painting, oil on canvas, not fucked up in any visible way.
Ed sets it down on the grime-encrusted coffee table and considers the best way to test the tingle. It’s the only indicator of magic presence beyond visible air distortion he has to work with, and that posits some kind of particle exchange with the surrounding elements; it’s got to be giving off some kind of radiation. The painting feels like wood and paint and cloth, carbon and oxygen and zinc oxide, so it really shouldn’t be emitting anything, but it is and a quick way to test what’s going on is to change the composition and see if the magic is just a surface coating type deal or bound to the molecules of the painting itself.

Ed claps, charging a simple wood to graphite array, and he’s just about to lay hands on the frame when the painted man fucking jumps up and starts screaming.

Ed shouts in surprise and loses the transmutation to alchemical discharge, sparks crackling around his hands, only suddenly all the other paintings on the walls are moving and also screaming, the dogs in the first painting are howling at a volume that indicates they are not two inches tall and made of oil and pigment but rather full size and in the room with him, and some of the paintings are jabbing their fingers at him and yelling while others are running around and running into other paintings. The yelling and wailing starts coming from upstairs, too, and then a door slams open, then another, and a bunch of people come crashing into the room to join in the circus.

Ed is not a fan of being yelled at and even less a fan of having those magic sticks pointed anywhere near him, but right now his biggest concern is that the fucking decor is coming alive like a bad horror drama. “What the fuck is happening,” he snarls, as a bunch of kids thunder down the hallway and spill into the room behind everybody else and it sinks in that he’s hearing total gibberish because when Mustang left he’d taken the translation rock with him.

Ed’s gonna transmute Mustang’s asshole shut. In the meantime he settles for making sure his back’s to the wall and figuring out the fastest way to get rid of all their magic sticks if this gets ugly. “Keep pointing that at me and we’ll see how far it can go up your nose,” he snaps at the worst offender, a short guy in the top hat, because he’s not gonna clap until he absolutely has to.

That just makes the guy wave it and yell louder, and Ed’s about to snarl and take a swipe when a guy with a mustache waves his own stick and says something and with a tingle and a weird pop in Ed’s ears suddenly everybody’s making sense again.

“- you doing! Top Hat is shouting. “How did you get in?”

“Intruder! Thief!” the huntsman painting hollers from Ed’s feet, pointing accusingly up at him. “He’s come to kill us all in our beds!”

“Who are you? Who let you inside?” some ginger lady demands.

“Why is the painting moving,” Ed yells back, because he feels it’s a more pressing question here. “Why can it talk?”

This brings everybody to a screeching halt and gets him a lot of wide eyed stares. “You’re a muggle?” one of them says dumbly.

“He’s a wear wolf,” Top Hat says urgently. “Look at his eyes!”

“I thought wear wolves couldn’t be muggles,” one redhead guy says confusedly. “Or, I mean, the other way around, I guess -”

“He’s not a muggle,” Mustache says, the only person not shouting like a fucking maniac. “He’s one of the delegation from the Unplottables, I believe. Amestris, yes?”
The two disjointed words just clicked, however, and instead of responding to the one sane person Ed has to round on Top Hat. “A werewolf? You people have fucking werewolves?”

Top Hat backs up quick, still pointing his stick at Ed’s face. “Of course! Did you think we wouldn’t know?”

“Know what? That werewolves are real?”

“Yes,” Mustache answers, suddenly sounding tired. “He’s not a werewolf, Dedalus -”

“Look at his eyes!”

“ - not everyone with an unusual eye color is a magical creature,” Mustache finishes, now sounding like he wants nothing more on this mortal earth than to crawl into bed and sleep for ten thousand years. “He’s from across the boundary.”

“And we don’t have werewolves,” Ed says. “Because they are fictional.”

“Not here,” one of the guy redheads snorts.

“Yeah, sure, whatever,” Ed snaps, because the sheer volume of nutty shit is forcing him to triage and a lot of disturbing implications are filtering through. “These paintings aren’t just fucking talking, they’re reacting to current fucking events. Are they sentient?”

“You don’t have moving portraits in Amestris?” one redheaded guy says bemusedly.

“No, we don’t. Is this thing alive,” Ed stresses, jabbing down at the frame with one finger.

“It’s a painting, mate,” another redhead says, voice identical to the previous one.

“Yes, thank you, we’ve established that,” Ed snaps. On second glance it turns out it’s not doppelgangers, just twins. “I asked how is it talking. What’s powering it. Who even did this?” Ed sticks a finger at the picture. “Do you know you’re stuck in a painting?”

“I am a painting, you dog! I am the leisure portrait of Lord Antimignius Black the Third -”

“Why did you take the painting off the wall?” says a redhead suspiciously.

“To find out why the fuck it was moving,” Ed snaps, because he’s not about to tell them he was gonna try and transmute the hell out of it just to see what happened. Especially not now that it turns out they might be people. “Are there human souls bound to these fucking things or not?”

A lot of eyes go wide, and Ed really doesn’t like how the non-redhead girl suddenly looks very fucking worried. “Well?” he demands.

“Human souls?” Suspicious redhead asks incredulously. “In a painting?”

“Are they?” Ed sees a lot of confused glances and shrugs go around the room. “Do you all not know the answer?”

“They aren’t human souls,” Mustache says in a please-stop-brandishing-the-machete-sir voice. “They are facsimiles imbued with an imprint of their subject’s personality - a copy, given limited awareness of its surroundings, but not a person.”

“How are we defining person here,” Ed presses, because no fucking automaton can respond like that, like a live human, so naturally and specifically and in real time. Nobody looks even slightly
certain about any of what Mustache is claiming, and the non-redhead girl, the only other person here besides Ed with skin darker than skim milk, is starting to look a little green. Ed stabs a finger down at the painting of Hunt Lord Whatever, who gasps in outrage and turns away in a huff. "You can’t program *that* level of response. Do you even know how they’re made? Do *any* of you *know*?"

"I’m sure there are books that explain the process in detail," Mustache says, but Ed knows when he’s being sold a crock of pig shit with a mint sprig on top. "We can look into it together if you like. I know that magical painters go through years of specialized study, but I must admit I don’t know what the techniques entail, mister… I’m sorry, we didn’t get your name?"

"Elric," Ed says tersely. Like hell is he letting these whackjobs call him Ed.

"A pleasure," Mustache lies through his teeth. "I’m Remus loop in. This is Molly Weasley, and her children, Fred, George -"

A lot of names go dragging by, people nodding or mumbling greeting as they get pointed out, putting away their sticks. Ed watches all of them with narrowed eyes and comes to terms with the fact that he’s not getting any decent answers out of any of these cattle. It wasn’t that they were hiding magic painting secrets from him: he saw their faces. They just don’t know. They don’t care that they don’t know. Most of them, anyway. The sole non-redhead girl still looks disturbed, shooting glances at both him and the paintings on the wall and on the coffee table.

"Are you here alone?"

Ed flicks his eyes back to Mustache, who’s apparently concluded his little roll call. There’s no point pursuing the paintings question with him. Ed will just have to find his own answers later. He shrugs. "For now."

Mustache doesn’t really smile, but he puts away his stick and makes with the open body language in Ed’s direction. "Who brought you in?"

It’s a nice try, but friendly bounces off Ed like shrapnel ricochet on a good day and he’s not exactly feeling receptive at the moment. "Some teacher."

"A teacher?"

Ed shrugs again. "Beard down to here."

"Ah." Ed gets some incredulous looks for that. Maybe mentioning the length of someone’s beard here is the equivalent of making a raunchy dick joke. "Head master Dumbell Door," Mustache says. "Did he say when he’d be back?"

"This morning," Ed allows, because it’s not like they won’t find that out themselves as soon as he gets here.

"Well," an older redhead lady says. "In that case I’ll just go get a start on breakfast." She doesn’t sound super happy about it, but it’s like some sort of signal for everybody to start relaxing, some of the wizards yawning and shuffling out with a couple last curious looks at Ed.

That’s politer than the open staring he gets from everyone who hasn’t left the room, which is mostly the kids, one crazy-looking guy with a prison haircut and Mustache. Ed sighs and goes to stick the painting back on the wall, but Lord Paint Guy isn’t having it. "Unhand me!" he hollers, the dogs baying up at Ed again. "The likes of you are unfit to even clean my boots!"
Ed promptly drops the painting back to the coffee table in disgust. “See, that’s just fucking unnatural. Am I groping some dead guy’s soul or not?”

“You godless cur! I demand to be inspected for damages!” Lord Paint Guy shouts.

“For the love of merlin,” Prison Haircut mutters, then, “Creature!”

_Something_ appears right next to Ed with a _crack_, and before Ed can control the reflex he kicks out and punts whatever it is across the room. In the next second he has time to think _oh fuck did I just full force kick A CHILD_ before the shape hurriedly rights itself and proves to be a not just a child but a goddamn chimera.

If Ed’s arm was still metal he would’ve had to stop himself from blading it on reflex. “Fuck, sorry,” he tells the chimera kid through gritted teeth. He’s putting his metal leg up someone’s ass clear to the _knee_ for this. “You okay?”

To the astonishment of absolutely everybody Prison Haircut starts cracking up laughing like a lunatic. “S-sorry,” he barks, looking anything but, lank dark hair swinging as he doubles over. “He just - clear across the _room_ - oh, merlin -”

The kid looks okay, not standing like it’s - he? - is injured and staring at Ed with enormous bulging eyes. Crossed with a bat, with those eyes and ears, Ed thinks, nauseated with anger. The little chimera boy can’t be more than knee high, and he’s wearing what looks like a dirty rag around his waist. “Sorry,” Ed repeats, trying not to sound like he’s actively planning to waterboard the still laughing wizard with carbolic acid. “What’s your name?”

“That’s creature,” Psycho Asshole gasps, wiping his eyes. “He’s the house elf.”

“Did I fucking ask you?”

That at least gets Psycho Prison Asshole to stop laughing. Even the dogs in the painting stop barking. “Oi, he’s my house elf,” Psycho says, frowning, suicidal or stupid enough to admit it. “It’s not like he was gonna answer you anyway.”

“So you did that to him,” Ed says very evenly, pulling his white cotton gloves off one at a time and taking the black leather ones out of his inner jacket pocket instead. “Good to know.”

“Did what to him? You’re the one who kicked him clear across the room,” Psycho says, scowling at Ed and taking his magic stick back out of his pocket.

“That’s just what happens when things teleport into my personal space,” Ed says flatly, because he hasn’t stayed alive this long by _not_ kicking things that suddenly appear way the fuck too close to him. He flexes his hands in the heavy gloves, settling the fit, and pivots to Psycho. “There’s a big fucking difference between having a reflex and doing _that_ to a _child_.”

“Serious hasn’t done anything to creature,” Mustache says abruptly, stepping forward. “He’s not a child, either. He’s just a house elf.”

“Do you… not have house elves either?” Non-redhead girl says tentatively, also stepping forward like she and Mustache are actually gonna do shit to stop Ed. “If you don’t have werewolves…”

The chimera boy hasn’t moved from where he picked himself up by the wall watching them, eyes flicking back and forth. Ed flexes his right fist, gloves creaking. He doesn’t know what the fuck a house elf is but these fuckers seem real fucking sure about it. “Does the word chimera mean anything to you?”
He gets a lot of puzzled looks for that one. “Uh... you mean the lion head, snake tail, goat body thing? My brother took care of a cub for his job once,” one of the redheads volunteers.

“No,” Ed says, although that does sound like some real fuckin’ sick alchemist threw a whole zoo of animals into a circle and let it rip. “I’m talking about human-animal transmutation.”

There’s another silence, most of the wizards exchanging baffled looks. “Wait. Transmutation is alchemy,” non-redhead girl suddenly says, biting her lip. “You think creature was... made?”

“Well, you mean by wizards?” Ed says tightly. “That’s a different thing.”

“Are you telling me he wasn’t?” Ed says tightly. “If she at least knows what alchemy is, that already makes her leaps and bounds more educated on the subject than the rest of these brain heroes.

The girl shakes her head, looking relieved and curious but most of all sure of herself. “I’ve researched house elves. There aren’t any records of them being artificially created in any way - the earliest texts have references to groups of them living in deep forests. As far as I can tell they’re a naturally occurring magical species that got brainwashed by wizards.”

Ed turns to the kid. “Were you born like that?”

“Answer him,” Psycho says.

The kid eyes Ed. “Born like what,” he finally says, in scratchy voice.

“Were you ever human?” Ed asks, a solid half of his concentration on not just transmuting Psycho into a toilet.

And that right there is unmistakably a sneer. Not a child’s expression. “No.”

Some of the bone-deep tension in Ed’s shoulders uncoils, loosening down his arms. He lets out a slow breath between his teeth, nods slowly and then turns back to Psycho. “So you just think it’s funny that I kicked him?”

“You know what? Yeah,” Psycho says meanly. “Creature’s got it coming. He’d sell us all to the dark lord for a moldy biscuit. We can’t even free him because he’d run and tell the death eaters everything he knows, even if it’d get his stupid self killed too.”

“So you call him creature, order him around, laugh when he gets hurt and keep him against his will,” Ed says caustically. “I’d be pretty fucking happy to sell you out under those conditions too. And what the fuck was that about brainwashing?”

“It’s been going on for generations,” the smartypants girl who knows all about elves says with surprising vehemence. “To the point where they now teach themselves that their place is servitude, and that they deserve horrible punishments and to live in abysmal conditions. A lot of them are so brainwashed they’re terrified of being freed.”

“So he’s a slave,” Ed concludes, leather creaking on the knuckles of his gloves. “And this shit is common.” No fucking wonder practically nobody wants to go to wizard world; the only real mystery is why the fuck Xing isn’t constantly dealing with waves of refugees from this fucking hellhole.

“It’s very common.” Smartypants says quietly, bitterly. She’s looking down at the floor now. “And there’s really nothing I can do. Not right now.”

“You can’t just open the door?” Ed asks, voice coming out more biting than incredulous. “Here,
I’ll hold psycho over here down, you clear a path to the hallway.”

“Ha!” Psycho barks.

Smartypants half-smiles, but it quickly falls and she shakes her head. “House elves are bound by their magic to the house and master of the house. It takes a deliberate act from the master to free the elf.”

Ed turns a gimlet stare on Psycho. “I’m sure I can convince him.”

Smartypants shakes her head again. “It would put us all in danger,” she says quietly. “He really would go tell the dark lord.”

“We really cannot free him,” Mustache says, actually sounding apologetic, putting a hand on Smartypants’ shoulder. Ed looks around the room: nobody else has said anything, and none of them look surprised, or concerned, or even resigned. They don’t care. “He has made his intentions very clear.”

“I know,” Smartypants says more sharply, though she’s looking down again, fluffy hair falling around her face. “It doesn’t mean the whole thing isn’t despicable.”

Ed considers the pros and cons of pulping both of Psycho’s cheekbones and then moving on to give every other wizard asshole here a love tap to remember this conversation by. Mustang will ream him out for hours if he does it, which isn’t enough to stop Ed but does make him consider the long game of just quietly making Psycho’s life hell instead. On that, Mustang has an ironclad standing policy of don’t fucking embarrass me by getting caught.

If the… house elf… explicitly plans to go straight to their lord whatever, then freeing him gives Ed an express ride straight to the terrorists.

If the elf’s plan is to sell information - if the wizards are telling the truth, or even know the truth here - then the elf is going to try and set up a meeting with the terrorist group. The wizards all seem pretty certain that the terrorists are going to want this information, which is a decent chance that the terrorists will actually try and meet with the elf. Thus leading Ed straight to them.

“Hold it,” Ed says sharply, a horrible suspicion beginning to form. “What exactly is the terrorists’ political agenda? What are they pushing for?” Because if it’s A-okay to fucking own slaves in normal society, then it’s very possible that who gets labeled a terrorist might just be inconveniently active people who believe in inconvenient things like human rights and, oh, ending slavery. "Your death eaters. What the fuck do they want?"

“To kill all the muggle born,” one redhead guy says sharply. “You unplottables are really out of touch, aren’t you?”

Ed couldn’t give less of a fuck how backwards these slavers think he is. “And those are?” he says, with galactic patience.

“Me,” Smartypants says. “And everyone else like me.” For a second Ed thinks she means her ethnicity, because she definitely looks like she’s from somewhere a lot sunnier than the rest of these milk-faces, but then she says, “Neither of my parents have magic. That’s what muggle born means - my parents are muggles.” Her mouth twists. “The death eaters think that makes me impure.”

“They also want power,” Mustache says, eyeing Ed. “But blood prejudice is central to their agenda and the core of their recruiting strategy. The enslavement and mass killing of muggles, muggle
born and other races seen as intrinsically inferior is both a favored tactic and common goal of death eaters.”

“Huh.” Not the anti-slavery crusade; just good old fashioned genocide. That’s kind of depressing, actually, but it does make things simpler.

Also, the elf can teleport. Ed, currently, can’t. Before he frees the elf he has to figure out how to at least track him first. Fucking teleporting should be at the top of his list of magic shit to crack apart anyway.

Ed squeezes and relaxes his hands, then starts unstrapping the gloves to swap them back out for the white ones. “Somebody said something about breakfast?”
Chapte...r Notes

hermione we all know u got a weakness for hot foreign dudes and that this one’s at least heard of the periodic table but ed’s too highly strung for u

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The… elf… gives Ed one last long inscrutable look and vanishes with another crack, so that’s that problem tabling itself for now. The wizards pretty much all look like they want to say something to Ed but can’t figure out how, so he decides to spare them the burden of cognition they’re clearly unprepared for and heads for the kitchen himself.

He ends up last one in, however: he doesn’t expect the food to be fucked up, because the cheese and ham he had earlier were perfectly normal examples of their species, but he has absolutely zero desire to nestle in at the cozy band of crazies communal table they’ve got going in the kitchen, especially since plates, napkins, mugs, cutlery and kettles of boiling water are flying around in the fucking air setting themselves. Ed stays the fuck in the hall until everybody’s seated and the maelstrom of possessed kitchenware dies down, but he can’t reverse engineer teleportation on an empty stomach. He goes in.

“Elric, was it? Your plate is here,” Breakfast Lady says when he tries to go sit at the very furthest corner of the kitchen. She’s pointing over at all the teenagers, clustered on the far end away from the adults.

“Did you just try to sit me at the kiddy table?” Ed says blankly, too caught in the absolute dissonance of that idea to properly sound enraged about it.

“I’m sorry?”

“Never mind. I’ll stand.” Ed scoops up the plate of eggs and toast and puts his back to the wall, leaning against the end of one of the kitchen counters. “Thanks for the food. I’d pay but my CO is a fucking dick and dumped me here without even knowing if you guys even know what money is.”

That makes the entire redheaded half of the room bristle. “Yeah, we’re aware of it, thanks,” one of them says acerbically.

“Grea’. What kin’ is it?” Ed says around half the toast. He rolls his eyes and swallows his mouthful at the blankly hostile looks. “Paper, coins, fairy wishes, credit, what?”

“You didn’t know if we used money?” one of the redhead kids says incredulously.

“You do ‘magic’,” Ed says sarcastically, with accompanying bunny ear fingers. “How the fuck should I know how you pay for anything?”

“Wizard money is all coins,” Smartypants pipes up. “Muggle money has coins too but they’re small denomination. Theirs is mostly paper and credit.” She cranes around a redhead to look more directly at him. “I’m sorry… who did you say dumped you here?”

“My CO,” Ed says, bored. “Commanding officer. He’s picking up my tab. Are all of you in the
vigilante thing?"

“You’re in the military?” Smartypants says, surprise rippling around the entire kitchen. “Is that why you’re here?”

“You didn’t answer my question,” Ed points out, nicer than he might’ve been since Smartypants seems to be the only person with both morals and brains so far.

“We’re not of age,” she says, shrugging. “They won’t let us join.”

“Hermione,” Mustache says quietly from up the table, in a *we’ve been over this* tone.

“You know you don’t have to formally, like, join a club to be a vigilante, right,” Ed points out, because that’s one of his very least favorite tones to hear ever. “You don’t get a special badge or anything. You just go out and do the shit you need to do.”

Breakfast Lady actually gasps at this like Ed’s dropped his pants and mooned the entire table. “Elric, she is a *child!*”

“And you got a bad case of terrorists,” Ed points out, mostly to be an asshole. “Doesn’t sound like they give much of a shit how old you are.”

“That’s what we’ve been saying,” Smartypants says, looking deeply vindicated.

“Muggles join the army at seventeen,” one of the twins says, with the tone of getting back on the rails of a familiar argument.

“Seems like wizards have armies too, in the Unplottables,” says the other twin.

“Yeah, Elric, when did you join?”

“Twelve,” Ed says blandly. Everybody stops chewing. “But I was a special case.”

“*Twelve?*” Breakfast Lady demands, looking horrified.

“Yeah, I had shit to do,” Ed says vaguely. He’s gotten the *oh my god you were twelve?!?!?* hysteria so many times that his brain just skips right over that whole act at this point, though the initial looks on people’s faces are usually pretty fun. “Why’re you so freaked about teaching the kids vigilante shit? That’s way better than the military. Like, sure, the pay is crap, but at least you don’t have to follow orders. Or get court martialed.”

There’s a lot of pity on the adult faces, which is *hilarious* coming from *wizards*, but the twins are now looking at him like they’ve just woken up in a candy factory. “Do you worry about court martials a lot, Elric?”

“Would you say they are a major concern in your life?”

“Uh, no,” Ed says. “They know if they kick me out I’ll just go make crazy money in the private sector.” Though honestly they’re probably more worried about him defecting to Xing or something instead. Or going back to East and starting a cult. Most likely both.

“Can’t getting court-martialed put you in jail?” Smartypants asks, sounding concerned.

Ed has to laugh. “Oh, that’s a good one,” he snorts. “Jail! That is *hilarious*. It’s hilarious, see, because it’s a lot harder to use someone who’s in jail. In the military they can just give you orders.”
“You don’t sound like you like being in the military much,” the only redhead girl kid observes.

Ed shrugs, getting back to his breakfast plate. “Pay’s good.” That’s nowhere near the whole of why he didn’t crack his alchemist’s watch over Mustang’s head and skip off into the sunset after the Promised Day, but it’s not like this crop of daisies will understand any of it.

“But you just said you can make a lot of money in the private sector,” Redhead guy with a ponytail says, piping up from the adult side of the table.

Ed shrugs again. “But no’ acceff’ nearly af’ much refearch,” he says through the rest of the toast.

“What kind of research?” Smartypants says, perking up.

“Alchemy,” Ed says, hiding the roll of his eyes by scooping more food in his mouth.

The twins exchange looks. “Like lead into gold?”

“That’s illegal,” Ed says comfortably, sopping up eggs with his last remaining scrap of toast.

“So have you done it?” the other twin says, everybody now giving Ed extremely interested looks.

“Uh, everyone’s done it,” Ed says, frowning at them. Lead to gold is like, page three of kiddy alchemy 101. “It’s the most popular course demo at every school fair ever.”

More exchanged looks. “But it’s illegal?”

“They turn it back,” Ed says irritably. “It’s allowed for school demos and things. You just can’t go around counterfeiting. Gold starts turning up out of nowhere, the town alchemists are the first place they look, and if they catch you it’s seven years’ military service. Most alchemists don’t bother.”

“Is that what happened to you?” Smartypants says, eyes wide.

“What? No.” As if he would have gotten caught, even as a kid back in Resembool. “Lead to gold is like the most boring fucking thing there is, you just knock off three protons and you’re done.” It does take good control, because if you don’t know what you’re doing you can exhaust yourself just dumping power into the array using it like a prybar when a scalpel is what you need, but Ed’s not about to tell them that either. It’s why the military started drafting the gold counterfeiters instead of just throwing them to the firing squad - if you’re good enough to make it efficient and bold enough to think you can get away with it, they can use you.

“Knocking off protons?” Smartypants says, eyes even bigger now. “But - you - only particle accelerators can do that.”

“Particle accelerator?” Ed rolls the words around, considering. “Okay, yeah, not inaccurate, but alchemist just sounds better.” He cocks his head at Smartypants, who’s staring back at him with something like alarm. She’s not an idiot. “Where’s the nearest library?”

Immediately after the words leave his mouth Ed remembers Mustang’s inability to read the piece of paper Pirate handed him. He knocks his head back against the cabinets sharply and hisses through his teeth. “Fuck. First. Is there a translation rock for books?”

“What do you need a library for?” Psycho says suspiciously.

“To fuck the books, dipshit,” Ed snaps. “What do you think I’m gonna do in a library?”

Psycho narrows his eyes. “Oh, is that what your military sent you here for? To sit and read some
“There’s a library upstairs,” Smartypants says quickly, before Ed can transmute Psycho’s pants to his chair and give him a haircut with thrown cutlery. “I know a translation spell for text - it’s for greek, but we could try to modify it?”

“Upstairs? Great,” Ed says, putting his plate down with a clack and pushing off the counter. “Let’s go.”

“The library’s not safe to enter,” Mustache says immediately, exchanging a quick look with Psycho that screams absolutely the hell no. “It hasn’t been cleaned yet and is full of dark books in any case.”

“Creature, don’t let anybody in the library,” Psycho orders more directly, eyes boring into Ed. Nothing happens, but Psycho doesn’t look disappointed or mad or anything so presumably the elf heard with his magic elf ears.

Ed narrows his eyes right back. “Alright, let’s go find a different library,” he says, because if he just transmutes a hole in the wall now it’ll turn into a fight and then Mustang will drone at him for literal days and then probably assign him a stakeout in a sewer. He’ll just have to wait until they’ve relaxed their guard to find out what it is in there they want to hide so bad.

“Um,” Smartypants says, hesitating, then brightens. “We could go to the welcome collection library. It’s not far.”

“I’ll come too,” Redhead not-a-twin says quickly.

“Me too,” Redhead girl says, hurriedly picking up her plate and taking it to the sink.

“All of you still have cleaning to do,” Breakfast Lady says, in a tone that would probably be sharper if she weren’t still eyeing Ed with, if he had to guess, appalled disapproval.

“Come on, mum, it’s the holidays!” Redhead girl snaps right back, whirling on her.

“We’re all going to be together, and it’s not like you can just keep us all stuck in this place forever! It’s only muggle London, anyway!”

“I’m muggle born,” Smartypants adds in a reasonable kind of voice that makes her sound very responsible, especially next to Miss Redhead. Ed would know, because Al uses it next to Ed a lot, to devastating effect. “I know my way around.”

“I’m an adult,” Ed mutters, not really wanting to get saddled with babysitting but also really needing a library. If he’s reliant on wizards to do magic to books for him to be able to read them then he needs to start learning their language pronto.
Naturally they all hear him. “See? Elric’s an adult. He’s in the military,” Miss Redhead says instantly. “And, again, we’re just going to a library.”

“We’ll come too,” one twin says, both of them standing as well. “We’ll make sure nothing happens to runny kin and gin-gin.”

Faced with a gang of teenagers - and honestly, why doesn’t she want them out of her house - Breakfast Lady scowls and caves, though maybe that’s only obvious to Ed because she starts a double-sided haranguing tirade with her kids first.

Ed doesn’t listen because Psycho’s also scowling, watching him hard. “Your officer just left you here? With no orders?”

“Nah. I got orders,” Ed allows, feeling benevolent in the face of impending books.

“And they are…?”

Ed shrugs. “Find a library.”

“Those are your orders?”

“Yup.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Ask my CO if you like,” Ed says sweetly. “He’ll be back here... well, realistically, whenever he feels like it. I’m sure you’ll get along great.”

One of the best revenges Ed learned as he got older is that instead of jerking around authority dicks himself - much - he can just pass them off to Mustang. They can cry into his lapels about how mean and awful Ed is while Ed actually goes and gets shit done, and at the end of the day the problem’s either appeased by Mustang’s slime-speak or flat roasted. Win-win. Al might even call it diplomacy.

And Psycho looks real unhappy with it but also like he knows there’s nothing he can do, which is Ed’s favorite look on people. He fucking hopes Psycho complains: Mustang deserves a goddamn headache for ditching Ed here, in this house from hell, with a bunch of slaver wizards and hyperactive fucking kids.

Who seem to have gotten what they wanted. “Let’s go,” Miss Redhead says, hustling them all out of the kitchen. “Come on, we need to get to the pipe.”

“The tube,” Smartypants corrects.

“Right. The tube.”

Ed does not like the sound of that, but it’s not like he has much of a choice. He has to wait by the door while Miss Redhead and her brother go and get their wallets, and the twins and Smartypants all wait with him. They’re all pretty unapologetic starers.

“What are you looking for?” Smartypants asks, at least pretending to act like a normal person. “At the library. Are you researching something?”

“Teleportation,” Ed says. “Theory’s best but a how-to manual can’t hurt. The equations if they’ve got them.”
They all exchange looks, Smartypants’ more conflicted than the twins’. “Do you mean apparating?”

Ed huffs. “I don’t know, do I?”

“This,” one of the twins says, and disappears with a loud crack.

Ed, propelled entirely by instinct, is already whirling around. The twin’s behind him now - in front of him once again, as Ed completes his about-face, guard up. The twin looks kinda surprised by that, but not as surprised and fucking angry as Ed is. “You fucking too?” he demands. The port key had been one thing, that had sounded like some kind of device, and the elf was a magical species apparently, okay, fine, but this - “You also fucking teleport?”

“You tracked me,” the twin says, frowning, sounding uncertain.

Ed frowns back at him, because - he did. “Do it again,” he orders, this time paying attention to whatever the fuck it is that raised his hackles and told him behind you right before the twin reappeared.

It’s something a lot like the magic tingle, coupled, if Ed had to guess, with his combat reflexes. The twin teleports to the right of him, then behind again, then to the left, then to the corner of the room, and each time Ed jerks in the right direction but basically only as the twin’s already appearing. When the twin teleports somewhere out of eyeshot and presumably rooms away Ed can’t sense anything at all.

It’s nowhere near what he’ll need to tail a teleporting asset. “How are you doing that?” he demands instead. “What’s powering it?”

The twins look at each other, then back at him. “Our magic?”

“Yes obviously it’s magic. How does it work?”

They explain to him about destination, deliberation, determination.

“So you’re telling me,” Ed says praying to a dead and absent god that he’s just understanding it wrong, “that you just wish really hard, and it just happens?”

“Not everybody can do it,” one twin says.

“You can die if you mess it up,” the other one adds.

“How do you mess it up,” Ed demands. “There’s no fucking equation. Do you just not wish hard enough?”

“Lose focus, yeah,” one twin says.

“Apparate while drunk.”

“Exhaust yourself.”

“Overextend your reach.”

“There are anti-apparition wards,” Smartypants puts in. “The nasty ones let you splinch yourself in place.”

“You can stop people from teleporting?” Ed says, focusing on the relevant part of that nonsense.
Smartypants nods. “Most of those spells are pretty difficult to cast unless you have a lot of time or you’re a very strong wizard, but some places have them anchored to the grounds or buildings. It’s why you can’t apparate at hog warts.”

“So,” Ed says, trying to assemble this fucking jigsaw puzzle of facts from hell. “You’re saying it’s powered internally. By your own… magic, sure, whatever. The targeting is just… visualizing your destination.”

“You can only go to places you’ve already been,” one twin adds. “Otherwise it’s really risky.”

“Risky,” Ed begins, about to absolutely lose his mind on how they clearly can’t even fucking understand what the word means, but then Miss Redhead comes thundering down the stairs. “Quick, before she changes her mind,” she hisses, and blows everybody out the door.

Ed gets carried along in the resulting exodus, trying not to growl under his breath. This shit is why he didn’t socialize with teenagers even when he was a teenager. “What about the visible spectrum emissions?” he demands as they all hurry off down the front walk.

“The what, mate?”

“The radiation. Whatever particle interaction is happening to create the weird fucking air shimmer on magic shit.” They pass through the front gate and onto the sidewalk, Ed gesturing back at the house. The shimmers are way less obvious now, almost invisible in daylight but still present at the very edges, where the magic house squeezes up against the other ones.

They all look at the house, but most of them look confused and Miss Redhead just looks impatient. “I don’t see anything,” Not A Twin says squintily.

“Me either,” Miss Redhead says, not even looking at the house. “Are you sure it’s magic?”

“I’m getting something when you use it,” Ed says crossly. “And I can see and feel it on magic items - the painting, the fucking flowerpot. It’s like heat haze.”

"Flowerpot?" Not A Twin mutters.

“Don’t think I’ve ever seen anything like that,” a twin says skeptically. “You said it was on the painting you took down?”

“Yes. And there’s a physical sensation when you… apparate… around me,” Ed says, trying not to grind his teeth. Al’s been bitching extra hard about cracked enamel and jaw strain lately, but Ed is not going to fucking say I get a tingle when you teleport.

“Do you not get anything?”

“Wands get warm sometimes,” Smartypants says doubtfully, which supports Ed’s radiation theory - if she’s talking about their weapon sticks, anyway - but does fuckall about his understanding of the visual phenomena. Hell, it may be just another one of those side effects of Ed having hit the Gate so many times he should have his own revolving door. He’s gonna have to ask if Mustang’s also seeing this shit, though that might not even be a useful data point because as far as Ed knows Mustang doesn’t have Ed and Al’s trick of picking up the approximate elemental composition of things with a touch. Ed figures it takes minimum two trips to get that little bonus: he could do it after losing his arm, but Al had only gotten the hang of it after they got his body back.

Ed’s about to ask more about the teleporting - can they teleport objects independently? - when the door of the house starts rattling, and Miss Redhead immediately spins and grabs her brothers’ sweaters. “Go go go!” she hisses, and fucking again Ed gets swept up in the gang of overgrown teenagers pelting down the sidewalk like the porch is going to explode.
Then the door bangs open behind them, and Ed decides it’s in his best interests to not waste any more time when he could be at a library. He books it.

The kids slow down pretty quick, with the kind of panting that indicates they’re going back to walking out of discomfort instead of preference, and from there they all bunch behind Smartypants and act like a rookie convoy in occupied territory. Ed starts scanning their surroundings in suspicion but nothing seems out of place: once they get out of the residential block the streets fill up with people pretty quick, with those weird smooth cars zooming around and bunching and jostling at the colored electric stoplights. Nobody’s dressed too crazy and nobody gives their group a second glance, though everything is just slightly off enough to Ed to feel slightly surreal. It certainly doesn’t look like a city menaced by terrorists.

It’s not that far of a walk to the train station, though they do get delayed for a minute when Ed sees a parked motorcycle in cherry red that gets him this close to trying to transmute a camera out of the nearest materials to hand. He needs a photo of this bike. When he gets back he’s transmuting his own to look just like it. The cars here all look weird but this bike is the platonic ideal of what all bikes should be, and if Ed were alone he’d be in serious danger of… borrowing it. He’d give it back. Eventually. Probably.

It’s saved by the presumable owner showing up just as Miss Redhead starts to look like she’ll risk dragging Ed’s elbow. “I kind of wanna fuck your bike,” Ed tells the guy honestly, gesturing, then, clocking the bemused incomprehension of Stranger Speaking Foreign At Me, gesturing more eloquently.

Somebody in the wizard posse squeaks, but the bike guy grins and gestures back, so Ed winks and waves as he turns back to the train station. The twins and Miss Redhead are giving him impressed and considering looks while Not A Twin and Smartypants look mortified. “You can’t do that!” Smartypants hisses, herding them down the station escalator.

“Just did,” Ed says, not interested in trying to figure out which part is sending them into hysterics. He’s got bigger questions anyway. “When Mustache guy did the translation magic, does that not transfer? Does he have to do it to both parties for it to work?”

“What?”

“Bike guy couldn’t understand me,” Ed says. “Wait, is it just one language - can you understand me?” he finishes in Xingese.

“Yes,” she answers, at least now looking more puzzled than embarrassed. “I didn’t recognize the translation spell but it sounded general. If… the bike person… didn’t understand you then yes, presumably it has to be applied both ways…”

“That’s fucked up,” Ed says, mentally remanding all translation technical questions to Al. If he starts thinking about how he got magic done to his mind just for some fucking translation he’ll backflip off the research pier and not resurface until he has some fucking answers.

“You said it,” Not A Twin mutters.

The train station is dirty but still sleeker than Ed’s used to, even in Central; there’s a lot of polished metal. Smartypants leads them to a bank of ticket machines and confidently starts feeding paper bills into one. Ed’s watching with interest and trying to see if he can figure out if they count in base ten from the denominations when Miss Redhead rounds on everybody with an impressively determined look on her face. “Let’s go visit hairy.”
Alarmingly, this makes everybody stop and look at each other like what she’d said was *let’s go rob a bank again.* And like they’re considering it. “Whoa, what happened to going to the library?” Ed demands.

“We can go there after,” Miss Redhead says impatiently. “When else are we going to get a chance like this?”

“We can’t,” Not A Twin says unhappily, everybody totally ignoring Ed.

“Why not? We know where he lives,” Miss Redhead says.

“Only Fred and George can apparate, and we don’t have any brooms or anything,” Not A Twin says.

“We can take the train,” Smartypants says quietly. “It’ll be a couple hours, but we can do it. Islington to Surrey’s not that far.”

“Dumbell door said he has protection there,” Not A Twin says doubtfully.

“So? We’re just visiting,” Miss Redhead says sharply. “Besides, you said he had bars on his windows. You said his uncle had him locked up like an animal. And we haven’t even been allowed to write to him all summer -”

“Who’s hairy?” Ed interrupts, figuring it’s about time to find out what the fuck kind of adolescent prison break they’re planning here exactly.


“You just said the same word twice,” Ed says, more resigned to the translation fuckery than anything at this point.

“Hairy’s our friend,” Smartypants says. “I guess it… sounds like hairy to you.”

“Hairy potter,” Not A Twin says, like it’ll clarify something.

“Hairy potter,” Ed repeats back to him skeptically. “That’s a rough one.”

The twins immediately reel with laughter. “Hairy ceramics professional,” they howl in tandem, making some passing commuters look around at them.

“Why don’t you just drop me off at the library,” Ed says, not making it a question.


“I’m sorry, Elric,” she says reluctantly. “Muggle libraries won’t have anything on apparating, and we can’t access any of the magical ones on our own.”

Ed stares at her. “You mention this now?”

“We’d already all agreed to go to the library before we knew what you were looking for,” Miss Redhead lawyers instantly, then adds when Ed turns his glare on her, “And we’ll help you get into the library back at the house when we get back.”

Ed folds his arms. “Try again. I don’t need your help getting in there.”
“Against a house elf? Yeah you do,” she says immediately. “Creature can make the whole house turn against you, and serious gave him a direct order. He has to keep everyone out no matter what. He can do a lot of very nasty things to you, just following that order, and he’s going to remember who kicked him so hard he flew this morning.”

“Yeah? And what are you gonna do about it?” Ed demands. “If this elf is such hot shit.”

“Trick serious into giving him a conflicting order,” Miss Redhead says easily. “Creature won’t try to stop you on his own, he hates serious. And serious won’t suspect I’m up to anything at all.”

“It’s true,” Not A Twin says. “Nobody ever expects gin ee to be a right ass.”

Ed considers his options, which are annoying as fuck across the board. Trying to find a library on his own would take too long, and he suspects not leaving the kids to their own devices would mean saying fuck it, tying them up with alchemy and bullying them into giving up a library location. And then dragging them all with him, presumably at this point bound and gagged. He doesn’t know what librarians here are like but he doubts they’d love him hauling in five teenagers in DIY prison shackles.

Besides. Ed did, technically, agree to babysit these delinquents, even if he agreed under false pretenses and as such isn’t bound by the contract in any reasonable court of law. Babysitting isn’t like other contracts. Kids aren’t something you can ditch, even if they’re scheming traitorous little wizard spawn.

“All of you owe me big,” he says sharply, interrupting the standard abusive sibling noises coming from the redhead contingent. “Don’t think I won’t collect.”

“Right,” Miss Redhead says firmly, a girl with no sense of self preservation. “Have we got a trace on us, Hermione?”

Smartypants frowns. “I can’t trigger the under age magic laws. Fred, George, do you know the --?”

Most of their words become gibberish at that point, because it increasingly looks like magic terminology just straight doesn’t translate. Ed, disgusted, turns back to at least have a closer look at the ticket machine, which makes Smartypants break off and rush over to finish feeding it bills and collect the spat-out paper tickets. Ed unceremoniously gets one shoved into his hand and hustled through the turnstiles.

At least their numerical symbols are the same. What Ed’s seen of their alphabet looks like extremely simplified Old Drachman runes, but it’s reassuring to know math is math. Though with Ed’s luck here in wizard land they probably fucking use the numbers backwards or upside down or something equally unconscionable.

It turns out these trains are a metro system like they have in Baozhe, only underground in tunnels instead of on elevated tracks over the city. When they board the redheads are all acting like they’ve never fucking set foot outside the house before, staring at everybody and curiously touching the poles, which is kind of disturbing Ed in a did-these-kids-grow-up-in-a-cult way. Smartypants alone is acting normal, though if Ed’s reading her face right she’s embarrassed when she grabs Miss Redhead and Not A Twin and urges everybody to seats in the very corner of the carriage.

Ed stays standing, hooking his elbow around a pole and looking down at them. Asking a bunch of teenagers isn’t exactly the best research method, but it’s not like he has other options right now, and he has no idea how long this ride will be. “What’s with the muggy born shit? You’re a wizard, but your parents aren’t? Is magic genetic or does wizard not mean what I think it means?”
All of the kids glance around in what they probably think are extremely casual ways, like they want to make sure nobody’s looking at them or overhears. It makes them look like they’re about to conduct some kind of six-way drug deal. “What?” Ed says bluntly, not looking around. Nobody’s looking at them except the old lady across the aisle on the left of him and all she’s doing is checking out his ass.

“Muggles don’t know about us,” Miss Redhead says lowly, narrowing her eyes at the lady behind Ed.

“What, seriously? You are segregated here?” Ed says incredulously. “Are you telling me - that’s why you’re all acting like we’re about to get copped by the truant officer?”

“Everybody here is a muggle,” Not A Twin says uncomfortably, eyes dodging around. “They’re not supposed to know about us.”

“Seriously? Like - everybody? This whole train?”

Both twins shrug simultaneously. “Well, yeah. As far as we know. Wizards usually stay away from muggle spaces.”

“Like what? The metro?”

“Most wizards fly,” Not A Twin mutters. “Or use the flue.”

“Instead of the tube?” Ed says sarcastically.

“Most cities are muggle,” a twin says, shrugging again. “Wizards tend to stick to the wizarding villages.”

“That’s fucked up,” Ed says frankly. “How do you get anything done? Shit - you said your parents aren’t wizards. How do you hide that?”

“My parents know,” Smartypants says, mouth turning down slightly. “There’s special dispensation for parents of muggle born.”

“There’s all these laws in place to make sure muggles don’t find out,” Not A Twin says. “It’s why we can’t do magic outside of school while we’re underage. It’s called the statute of secrecy.”

“That sounds seriously fucking unsustainable,” Ed tells him, adding to Miss Redhead, “Quit staring. It’s public fucking transport, people only start paying attention to you if you start paying attention to them.”

“How is it over your end, then?” a twin says curiously as Miss Redhead gives him a dirty look but at least stops her glare match with Ass Grandma. “With… alchemy?”

“Anyone can be an alchemist,” Ed says, then, accuracy forcing him to amend, “just like anybody can do physics. Some people are naturals, some people take years to understand really basic shit, some people struggle so much it’s just not worth it. But anyone can learn.”

Not A Twin has his face all scrunched up. “Muggles can do alchemy?”

“I’m not a wizard,” Ed says pointedly.

Smartypants is looking very thoughtful. “Your entire country is Unplottable, though,” she says, half to herself. “I wonder if that changes things.”
“Still no clue what the fuck that means,” Ed says confidently.

“It means your entire country has spells on it that make it unfindable by muggles,” a twin says.

Ed seriously fucking doubts that. “We don’t have wizards.”

“What, at all?” Not A Twin says, looking all wide-eyed and upset about it.

“No,” Ed says pointedly. “People know about you guys, but mostly nobody wants to cross over even just to visit. Now that I’m here I can see why,” he adds under his breath.

Though honestly this metro train’s not bad, and if Ed weren’t here on a job and stuck with kids he would’ve liked to explore the city. He definitely would’ve liked more time with that bike and any others like it. Maybe more people would visit if the easiest anomaly crossing wasn’t in the ass end of Xing.

Not like he’s telling these kids any of that. If they’re living in some kind of crazy secluded wizard cult they probably can’t handle their worldview upended too much. Ed can’t fucking imagine how their society runs at all, if they apparently have their own laws and law enforcement but apparently hardly even enter cities. And the wizard terrorists apparently target the non-wizards, which, what? When a rogue alchemist goes off the deep end and starts murdering, it’s a little fucking hard to miss. But hey, if the wizard government is telling the wizards that the terrorists don’t exist…

Thinking about the utter unsustainability of this system sets a new creeping suspicion to dredging itself from the depths of Ed’s consciousness. This one’s worse than the ‘maybe the terrorists are fighting against slavery’ thing - which he still has to corroborate with an outside source. “What powers your... magic?” he asks, keeping his tone as neutral as he can. “Where does the energy come from?”

Smartypants frowns while all the redheads exchange looks and shrug. “Us?” Not A Twin says. “It comes from inside, mate. From being a wizard.”

“How long do you live? On average,” Ed says, sinking feeling not growing but not lessening either. Beardy had looked old - but maybe he was forty and had just physically aged. Ed doesn’t know how much of his own lifespan he knocked off when he used himself as fuel to heal his little impalement problem back in Briggs, and it hadn’t changed anything in him physically that he can notice, but that was just once. If wizards are using it all the time...

“Uh, like a hundred fifty?” Not A Twin hazards.

Well that doesn’t fucking sound right. “How do you count years?”

“How long do you live? On average,” Ed says, sinking feeling not growing but not lessening either. Beardy had looked old - but maybe he was forty and had just physically aged. Ed doesn’t know how much of his own lifespan he knocked off when he used himself as fuel to heal his little impalement problem back in Briggs, and it hadn’t changed anything in him physically that he can notice, but that was just once. If wizards are using it all the time...

“Uh, like a hundred fifty?” Not A Twin hazards.

Well that doesn’t fucking sound right. “How do you count years?”

“Three hundred and sixty five days around the sun, mate,” a twin says, bemused. “Why?”

So they live significantly longer than the average citizen of Amestris. Well, good. “If you don’t know what powers the magic you’re doing, there’s a chance it’s drawing on your own lifespan,” Ed says shortly. “That doesn’t look like it’s the case here, but it also doesn’t make me real fuckin’ optimistic about finding out where it does come from. All energy comes from somewhere. Everything has a cost.”

“What powers alchemy?” Smartypants asks curiously. “Wizard alchemists don’t mention any energy source - it’s assumed to be an application of magic.”

“Tectonic shift,” Ed says testily. He can’t not explain, but seriously, they have bigger questions. “Or, if you do it the Xing way, something called the dragon’s pulse that I’m like sixty percent sure
is solar radiation. You seriously don’t know what powers your shit? Who’s studying it?”

“There’s… some researchers in nor way who study runes,” Smartypants says uncertainly.

“What about universities? What kind of research programs even are there?” Ed demands, because ‘some guys somewhere looking at runes’ is not what he wants to hear when looking for peer-reviewed academic investigation.

Now Smartypants looks like she just smelled something really bad and then realized it was coming from her. “The only wizard ing university I know of is in bang ladesh,” she says unhappily. “There are specialist academies in France but those are mostly for charms. I don’t know if they do research.”

It takes a good couple seconds for Ed to fully process what the hell she just said. “One university?” That can’t be right. “Are we talking about the same thing?” Please let them be talking about two different things. “Advanced education? The place where people get degrees? Publications? Research? Holy fuck, how do you people get doctors?”

He is getting real sick of all the whaaaaaat? looks they keep exchanging every time he opens his mouth. “Do you mean healers?” Not A Twin asks dubiously, but Smartypants is shaking her head.

“Doctors like my parents are doctors,” she says, frowning at the redheads. “Are there medical programs for wizards? Centralized ones?”

“Healers do apprenticeships,” Miss Redhead says, eyeing Smartypants dubiously like she’s the one who’s spewing the crazy talk.

“Holy fucking gods,” Ed marvels. “It’s - you’re in the fucking dark ages. Segregated, not even living in cities, no centralized medical research - no fucking wonder you don’t know where magic comes from! It’s a fucking miracle you're all even alive! What’s your infant mortality rate? Are you even vaccinated?”

“The whole where does magic come from thing is really bothering you,” Not A Twin observes. Ed’s eyes maybe bug a little. “Bothering me?” he demands. “You mean it isn’t bothering you? You don’t know where your ‘magic’ comes from. Teleporting something is not fucking cheap, do you understand me? You’re disassembling down to the molecular level, in seconds, and then traveling and re-forming, perfectly. Just storing that information - your shape, your mind - even for just a second! Is prohibitively expensive in energy cost. If the cost is coming from inside you, then each of you is a walking goddamn bomb, and we run right up against the hardware limits on human biology on that one. Either you’re a different species than I am, a different kind of human with a different structure on the molecular level, or your energy is retrieved through you, not from you. From somewhere else. Most likely fucking hypothesis is door number fucking two, and you don’t know where that door goes.”

Now they’re all looking at him like he’s the guy in the town square that likes to share his personal views on being abducted by aliens at top volume to random passerby. “I don’t think you need to worry too hard about that, mate,” a twin says, like he’s humoring Ed. "People have been doing magic for hundreds of years and nothing bad's happened.”

“Oh, you have proof of that, do you? How do you know you aren’t exploding babies on the other side of the world or something?”

"I... think people would have noticed reports of exploding babies,” Miss Redhead says carefully,
after a short silence.

“It doesn’t have to be *literal,*” Ed growls. “*My point is,* you don’t *know.* In alchemy, there *is* no ‘I did it but I don’t know how’. If you don’t know how, it *doesn’t work,* and thank *fuck for that* because it keeps the total nightmare scenarios out of the hands of most of the freaks who’d pull *that* trigger with a smile. And if you’re doing shit like *healing* - do you know how badly a *normal* doctor can fuck you up if they don’t know what they’re doing? And you want to add *magic?*”

There’s a lot of wall-eyed looks going around the entire train car now, not just on the kids. Ed needs to calm down. He’s gonna give himself a heart attack and die and then Al is gonna have to cross over here and burn this entire wizard hell to the ground and doing that will make him sad, so Ed needs to calm down. He’s yelling at a bunch of *kids* on the train about how they don’t understand *magic.* There’s not a lot of ways to go from here but most of them are up.

Ed exhales hard through his nose and pulls himself together. “Just - never fucking mind. Which one’s our fuckin’ stop?”

Chapter End Notes

I figure hermione, as the nerd kid of two dentists, would definitely have been to the Wellcome Library
They get out in another residential area, the yards around these row houses slightly bigger and the flowerbeds significantly fancier. Smartypants goes and talks to the station booth attendant for a minute, then comes back and strides off confidently across the street and into a park.

Naturally, they get wildly lost within the first five minutes.

Ed can admit that every street and every house here looks almost freakishly identical, but he’s not feeling too charitable about losing daylight when there’s actual shit he could be doing. There’s not even anything he can do besides pointedly suggesting they go back to the station and ask the attendant to draw them a map. It’s not like he knows this area or can even fucking speak to anyone without more translation magic.

He trails along behind the kiddy platoon, disgruntled and planning to do something about it. This hairy guy they’re visiting is going to graciously donate some of his magic shit to Ed’s experimental design cause so he can actually have something to show for an otherwise wasted day. ‘Wizards are crazy, have no idea how their own magic works’ is not the kind of promising intel he set out to gather, and it probably means his and Al’s research paper is going to be groundbreaking in the most annoying sense of the word: no references, no peer research, just the two of them and their intellectual pickaxes, breaking the fucking ground. That means a lot of face time with wizards, and that’s gonna mean dealing with their fucking slavery problem.

One thing at a time. First terrorists, then fucked up not-really-chimera slavery.

Ed really needs to think through the magic bullshit, though. He’s got no idea what the limits are, given that teleportation is apparently common enough that teenagers are doing it. Magic isn’t permanent, apparently, but there doesn’t seem to be any equivalent exchange going on at all. How is teleporting impermanent? The effect happens and stays happened. The energy involved has to be massive… or the wizards have some way to cheat. Something that cuts the cost or displaces it or otherwise allows them to do really intense shit without breaking the generator, so to speak.

And there’s a chance here that whatever the wizards are doing with souls can bypass the Gate - which is both good and bad, because it’s possible their way doesn’t require a blood toll, which would mean there’s no toll to un- do that shit, either.

Unfortunately, if it doesn’t have a toll, then it’s way the fuck easier to do.

Ed can’t explain the Gate. Equivalent exchange breaks down there completely. His arm for Al’s soul - that doesn’t, didn’t and will never make any kind of sense. How is that equivalent? But he can understand what will send an alchemist to the Gate, and it has a pattern of effects: knowledge and ability gained, body parts lost. If that’s as far as he can get with ‘magic’ - just being able to describe the patterns it works in, the ripples it creates on the world - then he can work with that.

He grimaces. Dealing with the terrorists is going to involve a lot of this kind of quick and dirty surface-level bullshit, he can just fucking tell. Ed hates the term generalist with a fucking passion and his annual State Alchemist assessment always brings the rant to the forefront, because that’s his official category of all things and while okay, yeah, he gets why that’s so it’s only because he keeps getting thrown into the kind of situations that give him no choice but to expand breadth and
sacrifice in-depth understanding.

Not that he doesn’t understand. And figuring shit out on the fly is kind of his whole wheelhouse. But generalists are people who dabble, and Ed does not fucking dabble. Ed crushes it.

And once the fuck again he’s gonna have to crush it in annoyingly short timeline - ASAP, before the terrorists decide to strike again - and without Al, which is just depressing. If shit gets any more annoying Ed is gonna bully Mustang into bringing Al over as a research consultant anyway, danger or no.

“Elric!”

“What!” Ed snaps. Miss Redhead is waving a hand in his face. “The fuck you want?”

“We’re lost,” she says sourly.

“I fucking noticed,” Ed says impatiently. They’re back in a park again, and Ed’s pretty sure it’s the one they started in. “What do you want me to do about it? I told you to go ask that station attendant again.”

“We’re splitting up to search for the right street,” Miss Redhead says, pointedly ignoring him and turning to point at the park entrance. “You and me and Hermione go this way, Fred and George and run go there. We’ll meet up at -”

She stops, mouth open, staring, then blindly grabs for Smartypants’ arm. “Is that - look!”

She takes off towards the playground without waiting for a reply. “Hairy!” she shouts, waving her arm, and the other kids take off after her, only the twins having the dignity to walk.

Miss Redhead’s running right at some kid sitting on the swings of a playground. Ed mooches after them, pinching the bridge of his nose. New Kid is even darker than Ed, hair short but going everywhere the way Al’s does when he sleeps on it wet, and he’s wearing a giant pair of glasses that look like they routinely endure cycles in a particularly bitter laundry machine. He looks utterly gobsmacked to see them all, and when he leaps up off the swings Ed’s not proud of how disgruntled he feels that they’re more or less the same height.

“Hairy!” Smartypants cries, throwing herself at him. “We were looking all over for you!”

New Kid’s face, visible through Smartypants’ hair, does a series of things that imply he is both happy and fucking furious about this. Naturally, he expresses this by yelling.

Ed, predictably, can’t understand a fucking word. He sighs, sits down on the vacant swing, pulls out his notebook and starts recording the hypotheses and “results” of his interrupted magic-alchemy experiment this morning, adding his observations of the air shimmers.

He’s interrupted barely a minute later, when New Kid’s ranting turns his way as he waves his arm at Ed and says what’s probably, and who the fuck is this asshole?

“That’s Elric,” Smartypants says. “Elric, this is Hairy.”

Ed grunts and gets back to his notebook. Hairy the New Kid says something sharp, then sharper. “He’s not,” Smartypants says defensively. “He’s from the Unplottables. Right, Elric?”

“I can’t understand anything he’s saying,” Ed says, bored. “Translation magic has to go both ways, remember?”
“Oh,” Smartypants says as Hairy glances down at him in surprise. “Right. He… was asking if you work for dumbbell door.”

Ed snorts. “What, Beardy the schoolteacher? Mister ooooh we can’t kill lord woogie boogie because there’s a prophecy?” Gods, that would be worse than Mustang. At least Mustang has a brain. “Like fuck. I feel bad for whatever students have shit enough luck to end up in his classes.”

Not A Twin makes a choked noise and both twins give Ed identical delighted grins. Smartypants, however, frowns deep. “What prophecy?”

“Beardy kept going on about how some prophecy is why they haven’t just assassinated your lord fuckaroni motherfucker. Says it’ll just let him go possess people.”

Not A Twin, Smartypants and Miss Redhead all exchange dire looks at that, but the twins’ eyebrows just bounce up at Ed. “You don’t believe him?”

“It’s horseshit,” Ed says frankly. “You can’t just have a free floating soul. If they aren’t bound to something they disappear from the plane. As for splitting it - how would that even work?”

Though even as he says it he’s forcibly reminded of Amestris’ very own lord fuckaroni, who had extracted parts of himself in the form of homunculi and turned those loose on the world. Ed would argue that those were not parts of his soul - if he even had one - just the warped versions of existing souls from the Xerxians he’d absorbed into himself. They weren’t aspects of his personality just because he named them Lust and Greed and Envy and said they were. Ed is strongly of the opinion that anything claimed by psychopaths messing with souls and murder just to get some immortality should be taken with a grain of salt. Or a whole canister.

However. It might be - technically - possible that wizard lord macaroni has done something similar.

“He can definitely possess people,” Miss Redhead says grimly.

“What was the prophecy?” Not A Twin demands, looming over Ed.

“How the fuck should I know?” Ed sticks his notebook back in his jacket and stands, dusting himself off as he pointedly ignores the way his eye level is somewhere around Not A Twin’s chin. “I highly doubt there even fucking is one. Beardy might believe whatever some crackpot psychic told him and decided it meant something about some special way to kill your lord macaroni, but that’s got nothing to do with me.”

Hairy chooses this moment to interject in the kind of tone people use for sentences that end pretty exclusively in “bitch”. “Oh! Sorry, Hairy,” Smartypants says. “Here, I’ll - translate. Fred, George, are you sure you can’t try professor loop inns spell?”

They devolve into magic talk again. Ed takes the moment to consider taking the prophecy seriously, then scoffs and shakes himself. Beardy hadn’t said bullets won’t work; he’d straight up admitted that he hadn’t tried sniper fire because he didn’t have a sniper. Mustang does have a sniper, and if she discovers her skillset is not applicable in that particular way then they’ll just move on to the next thing. If lord fettucine does turn out to have been making homunculi then Ed’ll just corner them in some bunker and tell Mustang to let his little pyromaniac hands have a fucking field day.

Something about the thought rings hollow. Ed frowns to himself. It feels a little like when he’s testing theoretics with Al, when an equation looks right at first glance but on deeper examination
has something pretty damningly wrong with it. This theory got proven, though. They proved it pretty fucking definitively, what with the whole Promised Day motherfuckery bullshit circus. Mustang can kill homunculi even without Ed’s help; he torched Lust into a greasy cloud of ash particles and nearly did the same to Envy. Even if the terrorists are fucking around with human transmutation and binding souls, it’s quite literally nothing they haven’t dealt with before.

Why does he feel like this isn’t going to work.

Well, he did just waste the entire day traipsing around with a bunch of bickering idiot brats who are apparently quite certain that their entire society is a cultivar of morons. They’re all using a power they don’t understand and don’t want to understand, the whole wizard thing is sounding more and more like some kind of isolationist cult whose internal rivalries have started to spill over and claim collateral in a body count of normal people. Oh, and they have slavery. Which Ed is going to have to deal with, fucking hell, he doesn’t fucking want to. Everywhere he goes people are always, always doing horrible, awful shit to each other, and it doesn’t stop, it doesn’t change, it’s fucking intrinsic. It’s built the fuck in. No matter what he does there’ll always be more.

Why bother anyway.

For a second Ed feels like the two halves of his brain have separated, because he - doesn’t think that. That can’t have been him thinking it, feeling it. The Elrics don’t do despair. You always keep walking. You always get up.

The hairs rise in a wave on his neck and arms.

He whirls around, scanning the park. Nothing. Fear uncoils in his gut, and that’s wrong too. Exposure to the Gate has recalibrated Ed’s adrenaline triggers to the point where most things that really should trip his fear reflexes don’t, and this - feels - wrong. He knows when it comes from his body or from his mind, he knows what it does to him, what it makes him think or say or do. None of this is right.

The kids’ voices sound muted. Cold seeps into his body like laudanum, the automail port in his thigh starting to pulse and then throb with a heavy, insidious ache. Ed steps sharply away from the kids, trying to listen to his senses, figure out what the fuck it is. It’s afternoon now, getting late, the sun sliding down and shadows growing between the trees. It was warm during the day but now the temperature’s dropping, the smells changing, the air going still. This is not a summer evening anymore.

Something’s moving not quite right on the other side of the park.

Something very, very basic in Ed is telling him he does not want to know. He keeps going anyway, slowing down but not stopping. Not until he sees what it is. Two shadows are drifting towards him, too tall, too unnatural looking. The air is warping around them; they aren’t walking. They aren’t touching the ground. Not human.

Ed backs up a step, then another, then gets his freezing body under control and backpedals it to the kids, unable to take his eyes off those - things. “Yo,” he says hoarsely, throat sticking. He tries again. “We gotta go. Now. Get the fuck out of here -” where would they even go? “- get back to the train station.” You got lost on the way here, they’ll never find it in time. “Run.” You’ll just lead those things to other people.


“Can’t you feel that?” Ed rasps. He has to swallow and cough, his entire mouth dry and
uncooperative. “Can’t you see it? We have to go,” he presses, which is when another teen comes around a tree and into Ed’s peripheral vision, stumbling to a halt and looking shocked when he sees them. “Fucking get out of here,” Ed snarls, jerking his arm at all of them. “Look! You fucking see those things?”


*That does not* sound good. “What the fuck are those things?”

It’s Not A Twin who answers, breath hissing between his teeth, but the word he says is gibberish, doesn’t translate at all. *All* the kids are staring now, frozen, watching the things glide closer.

Ed has to move *now.* They don’t have time for fucking taxonomy discussions. He risks a glance around and sees an underpass tunnel in the bank leading up to the road behind them, off to the left. He grabs Smartypants by the arm and stabs a finger at it, feeling like he’s wading through snowmelt. “There. Take everybody. Go,” he snaps, because some shelter is better than none and if he can bottleneck those things maybe he can trap them.

For a second the new guy that came out of the trees looks like he’s gonna bolt in the opposite direction, but Ed doesn’t fucking have time for that and grabs him, shoving him hard towards the tunnel. The guy stumbles into a run, the other kids glancing back fearfully, too fucking slow, and Ed has to turn his back on those floating things and chase the kids like a sheepdog, shoving them faster, yanking up Hairy when he nearly falls. “Take him,” Ed snaps at the twins, shoving Hairy between them, and to their credit they grab an arm each and keep the kid moving, on his feet as they hit the underpass and pound down the concrete walkway.

Ed leaves off his harrying and spins around, bracing. The *things* are at the mouth of the tunnel now, and it takes him precious half seconds too long to realize when he stopped the kids fucking stopped too. “What are you *doing? Get out of here!*

The twins are white-faced and Hairy’s still slung between them but they have their sticks out, Miss Redhead fumbling for hers. “We can’t -”

“You can *call for help,* you fucking *idiots! Get moving!* If you stop fucking running I’ll kick your ass! *Go!*

“Elric -”

“I said *run.*” Ed jerks a throwing knife from the sheaths along his spine and hurls it full force at the closer of the things. The knife sinks in right under where a man’s clavicle would be, dead on target, and disappears.

The thing doesn’t even slow down. A horrible dry rattling sound starts up, like the shake of a rattlesnake’s corpse. Not human, not fully corporeal. Ed can’t feel his fingertips anymore. Projectiles are out. Hand to hand, out. One of the kids yells something, and silvery mist shoots past Ed and battens to one of the advancing things.

*That does* stop it - but only for a moment. The rattling sound intensifies and the silver mist wavers and dissolves. When it dies somebody behind Ed lets out a small gasp, almost a sob.

The dark things start to move again, leisurely, slow. Predators that know the prey can’t outrun them. They drift into the mouth of the underpass, and something in Ed knows like it knows gravity that if those things close with them they’re dead.

For a second the array just - won’t come, and that bewilders and infuriates Ed so fucking hard that
it burns the slush from his brain. The equations snap into focus and he claps, drops to a crouch and rams a wall of earth across the tunnel, blocking those things off with cement and dirt a meter thick. Another clap extends the tunnel outwards towards the things and seals off the other end, and Ed’s doing it blind so he makes that wall even thicker. The aching cold and fear lessen noticeably - but not enough.

Some dirt crumbles off the middle of Ed’s wall. Then some more. Ed back up sharply, the kids scrambling behind him. It doesn’t stop. The wall doesn’t buckle but it’s - disintegrating. Something from the other side is making a crack. What the fuck are these things.

Alchemy can’t stop them. Ed can’t stop them. There’s nothing he can do. He’s going to die here, he’s gonna watch these kids die, and Al’s going to be alone.

The rage may be late in coming, but when it hits it’s like being submerged in pure mercury. Ed claps and smacks the wall and the tunnel squeezes like an automail fist, merging, melting into itself to form a smooth inner shell with no cracks, no crannies, no escape. Nowhere for the fear to ooze through. There’s iron oxide in the ground, and aluminum, not a lot but enough, and Ed forces a temperature variable into his active array to channel the exothermic discharge from the surging rock and shoves it through the transmuted thermite, until he can feel the reaction take, until the waves of heat from the rock start to crisp the sweat on his face.

And then he grinds, harder, hotter, smaller, closing the space, smaller than a car, smaller than a coffin, smaller than a fucking shoebox. He twists the sides of the asphalt oven into each other until they meet, until the pervading sense of wrongness is gone and the you can’t you can’t you can’t is just a dwindling echo down the back of his spine.

His breath shudders on the exhale, and when he claps again he more or less has to crouch and touch the ground due to his knees choosing now to get an inconvenient case of the jellies. It’s a good thing he has to put more or less his entire focus into containing the thermite reaction he started inside the now-fused lump of earths and metals that used to be the tunnel, because directing tricky temperature variables is a good way to redirect the adrenaline. He knows damn well what a bad flashback day feels like, and being dropped unexpectedly into the middle of one is highly fucking suboptimal.

He just killed those two things. They better have not been some kind of - of wizard chimeras.

Ed grits his teeth. He’ll deal. He bleeds off the excess heat, diluting it through something like a couple hundred meters of dirt, then levers himself up again and turns to check on the kids. All the pasty ones look extra pale, and Smartypants and Hairy don’t look very steady on their feet either, grabbing onto each others’ arms for support between the twins. “You guys okay? What the fuck were those things?”

They glance at each other and then Smartypants says something to him, only it’s gibberish again. “Names don’t translate,” Ed says, too tired to put enough bite into it.

The nonsense that comes out of Smartypants’ mouth is longer this time, a full sentence. Ed stares blankly for a full five seconds before any implications process. “You understand me at all?” he tries, and she shakes her head a little helplessly, saying something back.

Whatever translation magic Mustache did is clearly gone now. “Fantastic,” Ed sighs. His knees still feel unstable, which is bullshit considering the metal one shouldn’t even be able to feel anything. “You good? Everybody okay?”
Gesturing gets his point across, and everybody’s nodding until Miss Redhead gasps and their little crowd parts to reveal the new kid who’d almost bolted, sprawled out behind them on the ground. Ed swears and pushes past to roll him over, checking his pulse; fast but not weak, breathing okay, eyes moving under his eyelids. No bruising or swelling or scrapes on his head; probably didn’t hit it when he fell. Looks like he just passed out. Thank fuck.

“He’s fine,” Ed says brusquely to Hairy, who’d scrambled over to kneel beside the kid almost when Ed did. “If he doesn’t wake up in a minute we’ll carry him to the doctor.”

Hairy seems to understand, or at least recognize the all clear military handsign Ed waves over the prone kid’s body. “Call for help,” Ed says, twisting around to look at the rest of the kids and miming a phone to his ear. “Or however you fuckers do it. Send your magic ghost shark messengers. All of you need a doctor.”

And Ed needs some translation magic pronto, because he highly fucking doubts that what just happened is normal for sleepy little public parks, even if they are in wizard world. Those floating things had gone right for them.

Smartypants, at least, has recognized the phone call gesture. She makes it back at him, saying something, then points at the passed out kid and makes some gestures that Ed interprets as we should all go. Smart girl: they have no idea if any more of those things are on the loose out here.

Ed considers the state of his knees, then the utterly limp state of this enormous fucking teenager. He considers transmuting a wheelbarrow. He considers transmuting the kid into a wheelbarrow. He growls, hauls the kid up into a fireman carry and manages not to stagger only by the grace of his automail. “Where fucking to?” he demands of Smartypants, who’s looking at him with her mouth open.

She seems to get it, at least, because she says something to Hairy and Hairy starts leading them out, sending a lot of glances back at Ed. Ed scowls back at him, which is helped quite naturally by the billion fucking kilos of teenager on his neck. Nobody’s producing any magic ghost sharks, so telephone it is. Do these kids care about the stupid law so fucking much that they won’t even use magic to call their parents when they’ve just been attacked by fucking fear ghost demon thingies?

Ed’s about to try and bully them into calling via sharkphone despite the language barrier when the chump on his back starts flailing, so Ed drops the guy on his feet and steps away smartly. This kid does not look happy to see any of them, eyes wild and spooked, and he immediately starts shouting. Hairy shouts back. The kids all start arguing again.

They’re in the road now, under streetlights and with no sign of that creeping aura of poisoned fear. Ed sighs hugely, cracks his back, neck and both sets of knuckles - that’ll never get old - and trudges to the street intersection to look for a telephone booth. He’ll probably have to go back to the tunnel later and see about cleanup, but right now he’s got to get these kids somewhere safe. Mustang’s gonna want a corpse, which is gonna be tough fucking shit for him given that what Ed did basically buried those things alive and then ground them down to powder at the nice toasty temperature of approximately five thousand degrees.

His stomach rolls. He swallows hard and ignores it. Those things weren’t human, and they were coming after kids. It’s a good thing he turned them into roasted charcoal ghost biscuits. But that unnatural fear had pushed Ed to the edge so fast and so hard it’s still making his head spin, and he went straight for the lethal option on the count of two, the second he saw his walls didn’t work. He never fucking does that.

There aren’t any phone booths in sight. Ed stomps back to the knot of kids, who are, surprise, still
yelling. Ed sticks two fingers in his mouth and whistles the way Teacher taught him.

“Can you all fucking cool it for five seconds?” he demands as they all cringe away from the noise. “We need to go. Gooo. Awaaaay. From heeere,” he enunciates, walking two fingers across his palm and waving demonstratively. “And call. Your. Parents.” Ed stabs a finger at Smartypants’ magic stick, then makes the hand-phone gesture again. “Or hell, one of you teleport back to that hell house and bring them back here, tell ‘em to bring a flowerpot -”

Something big and white swoops out of the darkness, going straight for the kids, and Ed nearly lunges for it before he realizes it’s a bird and it’s landing on Hairy’s arm. “Head wig!” he exclaims joyously at it - and it’s an owl, a giant fucking white one bigger than Hairy’s entire head.

This is apparently the last straw for the giant teenager Ed carried, because he yells a string of panicked syllables and takes off into the night. Hairy shouts after him, but doesn’t make any moves to follow. Or do much of anything besides pet his owl. Ed’s torn between leaving this pack of pubescent idiots alone and going after the running kid with who the fuck knows what still out there, but the departing running feet don’t go all that far before they end in the distinctive fumble and slam of a house door.

Ed decides that stranger kid just made his way home and is no longer his problem. “Okay, now we really need to get this freakshow out of here,” he grunts. “That kid’s probably calling the cops. Let’s go,” he orders, and without any better options starts pushing them towards the train station they came from what feels like ten years ago. God fucking help them if they don’t allow birds on the train.

Chapter End Notes

mrs figg and her spy cats on the other side of the tunnel, running around tryna figure out what the SHIT happened: o fuc o fuc o fuccc
Chapter 6

Hairy handles the question of “can owls be on the metro” by the subtle technique of hiding it under his shirt. Ed would’ve expected screaming, hooting, flying feathers and disembowelment, but the owl seems absolutely fuckin’ fine with being stuffed under the kid’s clothes, so he decides it’s not a problem until it becomes one. Smartypants gets them all tickets again and they get on the train, huddling in a corner again amidst the crowd of evening commuters.

The kids are all subdued, and while the whispering and staring is annoying it’s better than the yelling. Ed puts his back to the wall, hooks his automail foot in the corner seat rail and settles in for a long ride. There’s no way in fuck he’s falling asleep on this train, so he digs out his notebook and gets to writing up what happened even though his whole body feels like beaten lead.

Smartypants unsubtly, if timidly, tries to see what he’s writing, but it’s not like she can fucking read Amestrian, let alone Ed’s code. “Rude,” Ed tells her anyway, too tired for venom, but it’s not like she can understand that either. She shrinks back anyway, and Ed pinches his nose irritably and thinks all over again about how these kids need some real first aid. Nobody’s exhibiting signs of outright shock, but if Ed with all his practice is feeling the adrenaline backwash of the worst artificially induced prolonged panic attack of his life then these kids are arguably feeling worse. Nothing he can do right now, though. They disembark the train without incident, Hairy walking in the middle of the group with his hands awkwardly cupped at his waistline to keep his damn owl pregnancy supported. Ed would probably find it hilarious if he didn’t feel like a wet sock.

When they step out of the station they pass a food cart covered in pictures of rice and meat, and when the smell rolls over Ed his stomach reaches down directly into his legs and stops him dead in the street. “I need this,” Ed says, basically to himself since it’s not like either vendor or wizards can understand him, and turns to Smartypants.

“Money,” he asks, rubbing his fingers together in what is hopefully the universal sign of cash. “I’ll pay you back.” Or, realistically, Mustang will. “I can share or whatever, I just need to eat now or go totally bugfuck on you all in like eight seconds.”

The are you fucking serious? look she gives him isn’t exactly welcome, but it’s better than the shockiness and side-eyeing. “My calorie intake is insane, okay? I do alchemy with automail,” Ed says sourly anyway, turning to the vendor, smiling in a way he hopes looks at least twenty percent sane and sticking a finger at the nearest picture of meat platter. “Please.”

Vendor guy gets it, at least, and Smartypants has no choice but to dig out more money, and the guy’s just piling rice into a container when running footsteps come thundering towards them. “Gin ee! Ron!”

Everybody swings around, Hairy’s owl pregnancy flapping wildly and making him dance in place. Ed very nearly claps before he recognizes balding redhead guy from this morning, running at them with an unfamiliar pink-haired lady in tow. Ed’s pushed out of the way - and critically, away from the food - as they all stampede around the cart and into the lee of two buildings, and they all start gabbling at each other like they’d just crossed a warzone, not exited a metro tunnel.

Though it would be an appropriate reaction if a bunch of your kids had just had a run-in with fear-generating floating nightmare monsters.
Ed would really like to have a talk about that, but of course nobody bothers redoing any translation magic. He’s this close to transmuting all their shoes to the street so that he can at least push past and get his *fucking dinner* when the balding redhead guy says something at him, grabs his arm and *teleports*.

It is not any better than the flowerpot. Ed staggers out of the quantum inbetween *whatever* and immediately reverses Baldy’s grip on his arm, using it to snake up to his collar and bend him practically double, face to face with Ed. “Try that again,” Ed says, letting his tone do the translating for him, “and lose your fucking hand.”

He shoves Baldy back and lets go, leaving him making offended fish noises as Ed does his 360. They’re back outside the magic house, and Breakfast Lady is in the middle of barreling out of it, redhead ponytail guy on her heels. There’s a lot of screeching coming from that direction, and as balding redhead grabs both twins by the shoulders and starts using them as a moving blockade to push everyone inside Ed decides he’s had enough of being shoved around and skips on ahead of them.

There are more strangers in the doorway, but Ed just pushes past them with the single-minded goal of getting to the goddamn kitchen. Literally everyone is yelling, but Ed doesn’t give a shit because he can’t understand any of it and also Mustang’s just showed up at the end of the hallway, raising his eyebrows and smirking like a crocodile.

“Fucking *you*,” Ed growls, stalking over, hands flexing. “You just *ditched me here*, without no *translation rock, food, or money* -”

“*And the house is still standing!* Congratulations,” Mustang says warmly, the fucking asshole. “We’ve got those buns you wanted.”

Mustang is gonna die in the most painful way Ed can think of, just as soon as he’s finished eating. “*Where,*” Ed snarls, and Mustang laughs and leads the way to one of the sitting rooms. There are people in Amestrisan blue in there, but all Ed sees is the open wax paper package on the table and the glorious, glorious assortment of steamed dumplings, scallion cakes and buns.

He’s on dumpling number fifteen and bun number nine when external stimuli start registering again. “Eeeewwwwaaaaaarrrd,” a familiar voice carols, as if sensing this, and Ed blinks stupidly at the bun in his hand as though that’ll check it for hallucinogens. He could’ve just sworn he heard Hughes.

It’s not a hallucination. Hughes is very much here, in full uniform and grinning like a demon. Ed jabs a bun at him. “What are *you* doing here?”

Hughes drops down on the couch next to Ed, slinging a heavy arm around his shoulders. “I hear you made two of my darling analysts cry, Edward! All because of a gap in a background information dossier! How could I let such a devastating oversight stand? Of *course* I rushed to fix it.”

Oh, no. “I *said* I was sorry!” Ed says, trying not to cringe under the arm. “And they were probably crying because they had to research something as stupid as *wizards*, not ‘cause of me!”

“Oh, of course, of *course!* I’m sure it was all just a big misunderstanding.” Hughes’ eyes glint behind his glasses, his grin promising *days* of filing bitch work. “But now we *do* have good solid intel, right from a source on the ground - you’ve been here a whole day, haven’t you? Surely you’ve got the lay of the land. Why don’t you share with us?”
Ed glances around the room. Mustang’s shut the door, and Havoc and Hawkeye are here too, their own packs open and a makeshift command center arrayed on the furniture. Hughes didn’t come alone either: Ed recognizes Jones, whose relaxation hobby is roof running, and Arget, who probably dreams in coded radio frequency. No wonder Ed got dumplings and buns. Mustang is so much less of a bastard with Hughes around, except for when they team up to be extra double bastards together. Which, after several years Ed has learned Hawkeye is also in on, even if her involvement is merely sitting back, watching and doing nothing to stop them.

In this particular wolf chase, though, Ed has plenty of wizards to throw off the sled. “This fucking place,” he growls, throwing his chopsticks down, “is a shitshow. Teleporting flowerpots! Sentient paintings! Elf slavery! Oh, and they think I’m a werewolf.”

“Elves?” Havoc says.

“Werewolf?” Hughes says.

“Goodness,” Mustang says, mouth twitching. “All that in less than twelve hours.”

“This place is fucking cuckoo,” Ed snarls. “They fucking teleport and they don’t know how they teleport, they - straight up don’t know what the power source is! For anything! They don’t know where their energy comes from. And they’re all - just - crazy. Yes, elves - little fucking… fake chimera… non-human people are enslaved, for housework! And whatever the fuck attacked us in the park was a crime against nature.”

“Attacked?” Mustang says, entire face sharpening.

“I handled it,” Ed snaps. “I don’t know what they fuck they were, ask the wizards. I don’t have any bodies for you.” Abruptly exhaustion crashes over him in a wave, and he rakes his tangled hair out of his face, pushing away the plate of dumplings to stand up. “Fuck this shit. You’re getting your report tomorrow.” The room doesn’t have any other couches, but there are two matching overstuffed armchairs in the corner that can do.

Ed strides over, claps, grabs an armchair in either hand and forcibly drags the two together as they alchemize into one astonishingly ugly couch. He’s flopping onto it before the last of the transmutation discharge dissipates, then, anticipating the bitching, sits up, digs out his notebook and throws it at Mustang’s head.

Mustang, annoyingly, catches it. “Don’t wake me up even if the house is on fire,” Ed warns, settling back with his arms crossed and his eyes already closing. “‘Cause I know it’ll have been you who started it. ‘Night.”
Arrays are easy to read if you know what you’re doing, and Ed sure as fuck knows what he’s doing, only this one is just not fucking cooperating. He’s got to figure it out soon - he’s on a deadline, he’s too close to something, he thinks maybe he can hear a train whistle somewhere, coming on fast. He can do fast. “Al,” he says, come look at this, because when he doesn’t know Al knows, and Al’s there but Ed can’t make out what he’s saying. “What?” Ed tries to ask, only this array is unraveling as he looks at it, only his hands are on it and it’s lighting up anyway and he doesn’t know what it does, fuck that’s bad, that’s really bad, fuckfuckfuck Al’s gonna kill him.

“Fullmetal,” Al says, censorious, but his voice is all wrong. Ed turns to give him a weird look only he can’t seem to move right, his neck stuck, his head stuck, he can’t even see where Al is. A dry, ghostly rattling starts up all around. “Al,” Ed tries to say, teeth gritted, trying to get away. He has to move. He has to go, he has to get Al away from here. “Al,” he tries again, trying to push off, everything’s dark now, only his arm is - cold, so fucking cold, the way only metal can be, and when he looks down it’s bolts and plates and carbon fiber again. “Fullmetal.” And it’s unraveling. It’s dissolving straight into the Gate, blood sluicing from his open shoulder, he has to act now or he won’t be able to ever, why is it always his motherfucking arm -

“Fullmetal!”

Ed goes to clap only something grabs his wrists, hard, wrenching his hands apart, he’s flat on his back? What? What the fuck?

“Fullmetal,” Mustang grinds, and Ed realizes he’s staring at Mustang upside down. The bastard’s leaning over him. Mustang’s the one holding his hands apart, and his face is going red like that because Ed’s currently choking him with his legs.

“Shit,” Ed says, uncrossing his legs and unbending from where he’d kicked up over his own head to trap Mustang. “Reflex.”

“I figured,” Mustang says, letting go of his wrists in return and straightening up. “I apologize for startling you, but transmuting the house down in your sleep is something we can’t afford right now.”

“That wasn’t a startle,” Ed grumbles, sitting up and shaking his wrists out. How the fuck is he so sore.

“Oh, my mistake. I apologize for interrupting the rehearsal of your Wrestlers of Amestris All-Stars audition,” Mustang says, rolling his eyes as he fixes the crumpled collar of his uniform.

Ed tries, unsuccessfully, to rub the moldy upholstery feel off his face. He’s got the cold adrenaline jitters of a low-grade nightmare, and the way he’d woken up makes it pretty goddamn obvious that everyone in the room saw, but shit, they’re all soldiers and it’s not like Ed hasn’t done worse in public. Not the first time Mustang’s had to shake him out of a bad time on a couch either, only usually it’s the one in his office. It was weird for like the first three times and then just turned into another thing they bitch over.

Besides, these days Ed can appreciate the restorative powers of a joke. “Don’t pretend you wouldn’t pay to see me beat the shit out of guys in a leotard,” he mutters, smearing his palms down his face. Both flesh, great.
“I’m going to go ahead and refer that statement to my press office. Press?”

“No comment,” Hughes says promptly. “Unless, of course, Security has any input. Security?”

“Security can neither confirm nor deny any statements from the General’s office, nor comment on any investigations currently ongoing,” Hawkeye says, tone and expression totally dead inside. “On an unrelated note, Security would like it to be known that the color vote for the leotard came out black, not red, and urges the citizenry to remain calm in the face of this difficult decision. Citizens?”

“How did you do that with your legs?” Arget blurts, red to the roots of her hair.

“What? Oh.” Ed, distracted by alchemizing the gross couch dust off his jacket and shoving it back on again, takes a second to parse that. “It’s not that hard. Buy me dinner and I’ll demonstrate.”

“Seven thirty, Golden Butcher, next Friday,” Jones says instantly.

“Shit, you wanna know that bad?” Ed glances over in surprise and finds Jones sitting bolt upright and practically sparkling and Mustang and Hughes both staring at the ceiling with their fuckfuckfuck I can’t laugh mouth-biting eye-scrunching faces on, because they know that just ‘cause Ed lets them get away with talking shit these days doesn’t mean he won’t transmute their briefs to the outside of their pants if they cross a line.

“Congrats, my next three weeks of lunches are on you,” Ed informs them. Hawkeye dips her head like yeah, that’s fair while Mustang and Hughes keep on struggling with their garbage faces. Havoc alone is innocent in the corner, pointedly shaking his head. “All three of you. But make sure bastard pays more than some sleep choking.” Ed growls, stabbing a finger at a now unapologetically grinning Mustang. “And you know what? You can start paying now. C’mere, your men requested a live fuckin’ demo -”

“I’m going to have to refrain from participating in any demos until Jones also buys me dinner,” Mustang says. It’s Jones’ turn to go red. “And they happen to be Hughes’ men, so please direct all recreational choking to him. In the meantime - I need a debrief from you, Fullmetal.”

“I just woke the fuck up.”

“And we’ve all been working half the night and all of this morning,” Mustang says, sweet as arsenic. “At what point will you feel able to join us?”

Motherfucker. “Give a guy five fucking minutes to brush his teeth, damn,” Ed grumbles, trying to flip his braid out of where it’s stuck in his jacket collar and finding it a snarled mess. “Where’s the toilet in this shithole?”

“Third door down the hall, on your left,” Mustang says. “Do try to avoid the natives if you can. They’re very excited about your little field trip yesterday and I’d prefer you didn’t rile them up further with your diplomatic prowess.”

“They can’t fucking understand what I say anyway,” Ed says dismissively. “They did some magic about it yesterday morning but it wore out right after we got attacked.”

“Ah yes, that reminds me,” Mustang says, taking a rock out of his pocket and tossing it to Ed. “All yours. They’ve got a radius of about six meters but I’d operate under the assumption that anyone you’re speaking with has their own.”

Blah blah, don’t assume you can talk secrets just because the wizards don’t speak Amestrian.
“Yeah, whatever, I know the fuckin’ drill,” Ed says sourly, sticking it in his back pocket. “These fucking things are glitchy as hell. Are you also hearing that guy introduce himself as dumbell door?”

Mustang’s mouth twitches. “Yes. And… moody.”

“I assume ‘fuck’ translates directly, otherwise none of them would have understood anything Edward has said so far,” Hughes says brightly.

Ed has to bark a laugh as he imagines the wizards hearing something like *fornication!* every time he says fuck. The deeper implications are less funny, though. “Whatever it runs on is doing translation by affecting our brains, I’m pretty sure,” he tells Hughes and his Intel pair, who all exchange glances and then simultaneously pull out notebooks. “I don’t love that we have no idea how it works. Love even less that the wizards probably don’t either. Only upside is whatever it’s doing to us it’s doing to them too, because I can’t imagine it working differently to give them Amestrisan. Oh - it takes Xingese too, it honestly might translate whatever. Any language. Any *code*, maybe, if spoken verbally. Wild, huh?”

“That is *not* just a… that is a very complex underpinning system,” Hughes says, frowning at Ed. “That is… oh, I really don’t love that.”

“Welcome to wizards,” Ed tells him, having handed the problem off, and waves over his shoulder as he pushes out the door to find the crapper. A shower is probably out of the question, especially if the bathroom is as thoroughly fucking disgusting as the rest of this house, but he *really* hopes that they at least have working flush toilets.
Chapter 8

The bathroom - on this floor at least - is cleaner than anything else Ed’s seen so far, and the water runs clear out of the tap and doesn’t feel compositionally out of whack when he sticks his hand into it and pokes around for the elements. No metals leeching in from the pipes, at least. That’s objectively good, but it does mean the wizards don’t even have widespread lead poisoning to excuse their culture.

There’s just a sink and a toilet - not that Ed would trust a shower in this house in any case - so he has to make do with splashing his face clean and briefly transmuting a metal comb out of his left bracer. Al has expressly forbidden him from trying to shave with alchemy - “That’s practically human transmutation, brother” - and his pack is in whatever room he’d gotten dropped off in the first night, so he just has to deal with annoyingly patchy stubble and furry mouth feel until he can dig out his toothbrush and razor. He hates having stubble. He would already be rocking a beard just for the sheer convenience if not for the fact that any facial hair whatsoever would make him a dead ringer for Hohenheim.

Ed sighs and pushes out of the bathroom, heading upstairs as quietly as he can to retrieve his pack. It occurs to him for the first time that he might want to be concerned: he always seals and traps his pack alchemically when leaving it anywhere, but who knows what kind of shit wizards might have to bypass that. He can only hope nobody here is the snooping type.

Naturally, the second he enters the upstairs hallway he hears voices coming from the closed door of what had been his room. Judging by the sounds, it’s all the teenagers. “Are we sure he’s not a werewolf?” That’s Not A Twin.

“That’s Not A Twin. "Professor loop inn said he’s not,” comes Miss Redhead’s voice. “I figure he would know.”

“Who the hell is he, though,” says a twin. “He chucked a knife at that dementer. And then he did wandless magic like it was nothing.”

Ed scowls on automatic, because they’re talking about him and also just reminded him that he lost a knife to those fucking things. Teacher gave him those knives; he can’t just transmute a replacement for the set. She’d fucking know. He also probably shouldn’t fucking go in there, given Mustang’s warning. Ed does not want to deal with people freaking at him before coffee.

He fucking wants his razor, though. He scowls harder at the door. “I don’t think he even has a wand,” Miss Redhead is saying. “He just clapped, and the whole underpass did - that.”

“Is that what he meant about being a particle acceleration?” a twin says in fascination. “When we asked about alchemy?”

“I don’t know,” comes Smartypants’ voice, sounding frustrated. “There aren’t that many alchemy books available in the library, but what I read mentioned it’s a different kind of process than magic. It didn’t say anything about things like - what he did.”

“Yeah, I thought alchemy was all about rune circles and trying to make lead into gold and stuff. Did you hear loop inn and shackle bolt talking? They said he destroyed those dementers. They said they couldn’t even find a trace, and they had to pull that whole place apart to set it back to rights -”
“And the way he can feel us apparating when we’re close? Never heard of that. What the hell is vaccinated anyway?”

“He was talking about how magic could be powered by your life. Anybody else find that worrying?” Not A Twin says. “And the way he dresses - he’s elbow deep in the dark arts, bet you anything.”

Miss Redhead scoffs. “Just because someone’s good looking and wears leather pants doesn’t mean they’re dark, thick head, bill wears leather pants -”

“Yeah, but bill’s not violent.” One of the twins again. “When serious laughed at creature yesterday - mate, he looked like he was going to punch serious.”

“And you can’t say life-draining magic isn’t dark, gin. Whatever he did to that dementer, that sure as hell wasn’t a patron us -”

“He said he’s not a wizard! He’s an alchemist.”

“Yeah, and what’s that mean?”

“Alchemy can be used to make stable, unsupported constructs, that endure beyond the span of mortal man,” Smartypants’ voice comes, quieter, with a cadence like she’s repeating something she heard, or read. “Hairy… what if lor- what if you know who… is that how he brought himself back? Did he transmute… you said he made himself a body. You said it wasn’t a spell, it looked like a ritual -”

“He made a body?” Ed says sharply, shoving the door in, because that plus the way she’s talking makes it sound like eyewitness fucking testimony. “Someone saw it? Who was there?”

There’s a lot of sputtering and a couple of squeaks, all the kids jerking around like he beat the door in with a battering ram. Half of them are sitting on his goddamn bed, with their shoes on. They all stare at him with some impressively guilty faces, though again Miss Redhead recovers first. “Were you eavesdropping?”

“It’s my fucking room,” Ed informs her, taking the opportunity to stride over and drag his pack out from under the bed. No obvious signs of tampering, and the kids all look pretty surprised to even see it come out from under there. “Who saw the body being made?”

The twins and assorted redheads all exchange looks, but Hairy just glares and Smartypants lifts her chin. “Hairy did. He saw it all.”

“You saw it?” Ed says to him, looking him up and down. In daylight he looks even skinnier and grungier than before, absolutely drowning in his shirt. At least his pet owl is nowhere in sight to complete the crazy scarecrow look. He looks maybe fourteen.

He’s also scowling belligerently but not denying it, so Ed snaps his fingers at him and beckons to the door, shouldering his pack. “Downstairs, let’s go.”

“Why?” Hairy says suspiciously.

“Cause congrats, you just won yourself an interview with my CO.”

“The one you said is a cock?” Miss Redhead says instantly.

“Yeah, him.” The alarmed looks between the kids make Ed add, “Relax, he doesn’t bite unless you
can take it.” Mustang’s not gonna be an asshole to a teenage civilian witness, not without a reason. This does not seem to reassure anybody. “Why?” Hairy repeats, now even more suspicious.

Ed rolls his eyes. “Why do you think? You’re what we in the business call eyewitness testimony, pal. What the fuck were you even doing, to end up seeing that shit live?”

Hairy’s whole face shuts down. “You think I wanted to?”

“I don’t know your life,” Ed tells him frankly. “We met fucking yesterday.”

“I got kidnapped,” Hairy snaps. “Wasn’t exactly a party invite I could decline.”

Great, so this kid’s fourteen-year-old luck is just as bad as Ed’s was. “Well, all you have to do is tell us all about this party and then we can leave you the fuck alone. Come on.”

Hairy must see in Ed’s face that Ed is more than ready to drag him, because he hunches his shoulders belligerently and steps to. “We’re coming with you,” Smartypants says instantly, hopping off the bed, and once again Ed’s surrounded by wizard puberty. He resists the urge to bat them all away and stomps off back to the stairs.

Of course, some guy in a black dress and a face like a pickled lemon is in the hall down there, and Hairy stops dead behind Ed when he sees him. This causes a minor pileup, which makes the lemon guy turn and narrow his eyes at them in blatant distaste. “Who’s this guy?” Ed asks, not stopping his clomp down the stairs. He’s gotten every permutation and intensity of that look over the years and this guy is hitting like, maybe a 0.43.

“I could ask you the very same question,” Lemons asks him in a soft, I’m-a-big-scary voice, his eyes traveling up and down Ed’s body like he’s watching the dying moments of a thoroughly salted slug.

“Could you? Huh. Figured if you were important you’d have been introduced to me already,” Ed tells him. One of the kids makes a high-pitched hneek? noise up there. “Yo, Hairy, move your ass, we don’t have all day.”

Lemons doesn’t like that at all, but it gets the kids moving down the stairs again - and before Lemons can open his mouth again Mustache appears at the other end of the hallway, Psycho right behind him. “Elric,” Mustache says, spotting him, not sounding super happy about it.

Fucking likewise. “What?” Ed says. “Actually, it’ll have to wait, kinda in the middle of something here.”

“In the middle of what,” Psycho demands, breaking off his glare at Lemons to look all alarmed at Ed.

“A fucking beauty pageant, can’t you tell? Come on, Hairy.”

“Hairy?” Psycho says, looking nonplussed, then snaps his gaze to the kid. “Wait - Hairy? What the hell do you want with him?”

“He says he saw your lord alfredo person’s resurrection in real time,” Ed says, with patience he really does not have. “So we’re going to fucking talk to him. You know, talking? Why are all y’all acting like I’m waving the fucking thumbscrews?”

Mustache and Psycho, if anything, look even more alarmed. “We may not have time for that,”
Mustache says to Hairy in a *fuck, I gotta stall* voice, glancing between Lemons, Hairy and Ed. “You may have to be moved back to your aunt and uncle’s house -”

This makes Hairy turn on Mustache with a look of shocked betrayal and immediately sends the redhead kids up in arms. “Why?” Not A Twin demands. “He’s already here, why would we send him back -”

“*Dementers* came after him, mate,” a twin says, sounding genuinely shocked. “You can’t expect muggles to -”

“His cousin said they’d *lock him up,*” Miss Redhead cuts in venomously. “We all heard him. Does *nobody* care that they had bloody bars on his windows? And you want to sent him *back* there?”

Naturally this fucking brouhaha brings Mustang and Hawkeye both into the hallway, Mustang glancing at Lemons and then Mustache and Psycho before giving Ed a *you had one job, Fullmetal* look. “The kid fucking saw it!” Ed protests, waving his arm at Hairy, which at least gets the kids to shut up. “He said he saw the resurrection process, forgive *me* if I thought we might like to hear about that.”

Mustang and Hawkeye’s eyes snap to Hairy. “Is that so,” Mustang says. “We haven’t yet made your acquaintance, Mr…?”

It takes Hairy a second to realize Mustang is talking to *him,* then he goes all startled and suspicious again. Smart kid. “I’m Hairy potter,” he says tersely. Mustang, admirably, doesn’t so much as blink. “A pleasure,” he says, indistinguishable from someone who means it. “I’m General Roy Mustang of Amestris, and these are Colonel Hawkeye and Lieutenant Colonel Elric, whose charms I see you have already experienced firsthand.”

To Hairy’s credit, he doesn’t immediately fall at Mustang’s feet and offer up anything Mustang wants on a silver platter; Ed always finds it a relief to run across another person who’s immune to the charm. “Why do you need to know?”

Mustang smiles, unperturbed. “We were asked to lend our assistance to your… death eater problem. Right now we’re gathering information. We’d like to hear what you have to say about what it is you saw.”

Hairy glances back, at Mustache and Psycho, who immediately steps forward and puts a hand on Hairy’s shoulder. “We should wait until dumbell door arrives, Hairy.” Mustache tells him, and he’s talking to the kid but watching Ed. “Then we can all speak together. We don’t have enough information right now to make any decisions.”

Mustang doesn’t fail to notice how Mustache is eyeing them like they’re a bucket of nitroglycerin on a particularly wobbly skateboard. “I see,” he says. “We were to meet with Albus today in any case - why don’t we all have our discussion then?”

Ed opens his mouth to protest the total waste of time - if there was human transmutation going on then the sooner they get the whole story the better - but Mustang gives him a cooling look. “I still don’t have your report, Fullmetal,” he says, gesturing to the open door of the side room and doing the thing where he shuts off Mustache and Lemons and Psycho like they don’t even exist. “Colonel - why don’t your men set up in the dining room? There’s more table space there,” he adds to Hughes, leaning in and beckoning to Jones and Arget. “Captain Havoc can assist them with the equipment assembly while we take the report.”
“What an excellent idea,” Hughes says, waving Jones and Arget to dance to Mustang’s tune, and if they don’t hear the silent orders then at least Havoc knows to make sure nobody whisks their eyewitness away before they can talk to him. “It was getting too close in that room with so many people. Here, let me help you with the radios!”

Hughes ushers them off through the hall, giving everyone no choice but to scatter, and Mustang allows Mustache and the others back into existence long enough to smile and dismiss them. “Apologies for the confusion. Do let us know if we’re needed.” He jerks his head at Ed. “In, Fullmetal.”

Ed makes sure Mustang can read promised retribution off his face as he passes, because he only pulls this Sit, Stay, Roll Over shit when he wants to convince people that he’s got Ed firmly on a leash. Mustang gives him a just work with me, Fullmetal right back, which is better than a keep your mouth shut or a holy fucking gods, Edward but still won’t save him from Ed transmuting his fucking pants pink.

Chapter End Notes

Ed’s wrong about being a dead ringer for ol’ Hoho. Unfortunately for ed, tho, it’s because what he inherited from trisha were the massive dead anime mom eyes.
“Alright already.,” Ed snaps as Mustang heads back to the couch and Hughes slips back in, closing the door behind him. Ed stomps over to his couch, kicking it closer to the coffee table and flumping down; the faint smell of yesterday’s Xingese takes the time to inform him that he’s so ravenous the sensation has started to transmute into nausea. “Keep treating me like I’m rabid and they’ll decide I really am.”

“So! Why do they think you’re a werewolf?” Hughes asks brightly. “I really hope the answer is not ‘because I’ve been biting people’.”

Ed’s about to answer that exclusively in swear words when Mustang holds out a piled-high noodle box in his line of sight and immediately destabilizes all existing thought processes.

“You fuckin’ cheater,” Ed says to Mustang some moments later, muffled on account of a full mouth. The noodles are cold and clearly from yesterday but they taste like fucking paradise.

“Just saving us all some time,” Mustang says sweetly. “As much as we all love your tantrums we don’t quite have the room for a full performance today.”

Ed eyes Mustang, then Hughes, then Mustang again, chewing and absentely giving Mustang the middle finger as they settle on the couches. Through the lens of calories and sleep it’s pretty obvious what’s going on here. Mustang’s been given an opportunity to scope out a quantity wholly unknown to most of Amestris and evaluate it for potential - friend or foe, threat or tool or both. Hawkeye’s here because Mustang’s not allowed to take a shit without his handler, but Hughes is here on rare field assignment to ensure Mustang gets accurate, detailed and confidential field reports on the wizards in real time.

And to lay the groundwork for whatever Mustang decides to do with them, because it’s not like there’s anybody here to stop him. Certainly not the wizards themselves.

Ed narrows his eyes and wipes his mouth on the back of his wrist. “You meet with their cop lady yet?”

“We did,” Mustang says, watching him right back. “She defers to the schoolteacher, at least in regards to the alleged resurrection and subsequent terrorist activity. There isn’t much they can offer that isn’t fourteen years out of date. The official stance of the government is that the target is still dead and his followers in prison.”

“We requested access to records,” Hughes says lightly. “Which we’re very unlikely to get, and the vigilantes don’t keep written files. They’ve tailed some individuals who are either former terrorists since acquitted or suspected to be affiliates, but so far have nothing that they don’t see as part of their normal routines. Or at least, nothing they’ve chosen to share.”

“So we seriously don’t know what the fuck is going on,” Ed concludes.

“The director seems genuine, and believes there is a clear and present threat,” Mustang says. “And she and the vigilantes both are very concerned about the attack last night.” His mouth curls slightly, less a smile than a ghost of a sneer. “Though they seemed more concerned about what you did than the fact that five of their children nearly died.”
“I fucking noticed.” Ed’s right hand slowly curls and uncurls from its fist, his skin missing the leather of his black gloves. “What the fuck were those things?”

“I’d like your observations first, if you please. You’ll understand if I say I don’t find their intel the most reliable.”

Ed snorts despite himself. “Yeah, no fucking kidding. You want the whole day?”

Mustang inclines his head, crossing one leg over the other and stretching an arm along the couch back. “Why not. Take me through it.”

Ed takes him through it. “Those things showed up minutes after we met the hairy kid at the park,” he concludes. “Fucking… floating nightmare fear monsters. Everybody froze up, and then some other random kid showed up - I don’t know, just some civilian walking home or whatever - and I had to chase them all into an underpass to get them to get the fuck away from those things. They were definitely after us, though. Came on in a straight shot.”

Mustang does not look happy with this. “‘Floating nightmare fear monsters’?”

“If you see something like a tall rattling ghost in a black nightshirt, torch it,” Ed says, serious. “Don’t hesitate. I felt them across the entire park, nearly a hundred meters, and they were already messing with my head by the time I noticed. Those things are…” He has to stop, jaw working, examining the sensations on a fresh night’s sleep. “They felt like the Gate, almost. But. Wrong.”

“I spoke to one of wizards about them yesterday,” Hughes says, eyes serious. “The one who’s a professor. They’re called dementers. They do project fear, and the closer they get the more it affects you and the harder it is to get away. You get stuck reliving your worst memories and you can’t move. He also said they drain the… ‘magic’, and if they get close enough to touch you they can, and I quote, eat your soul.”

For a second Ed has a very clear picture of one of those fucking things bending down to Al - Al as he had been, all metal - and breaking his blood rune, sucking out his soul. Then he shakes himself. Al’s back in his body, and if any fucking two-bit floating zombie tried to eat his brother’s soul Ed would shove his arm down its throat to the shoulder and rip it right back out of whatever passed for its stomach.

“I see,” Mustang says, eyeing Hughes, then Ed. “Thermite works?”

“Thermite works,” Ed agrees, mouth pulling down. “After I dropped the underpass on ‘em and squeezed.”

“Temperature?”

“Like twenty-two hundred Kelvin. You can hit that with oxyhydro no problem.”

“You think heat alone sufficed?”

Ed rolls his shoulders, uncomfortable and scowling about it. “It was fucking thermite. Are we expecting shit to survive that?”

“The wizards believe these things to be unkillable,” Mustang informs him, just this side of bland.

Ed snorts. “Yeah, well, they also believe in prophecy, so, y’know, I’m not gonna worry real hard on that one.”
Mustang inclines his head like *yeah, true.* “What *do* we have to worry about?”

“They can all teleport.” Ed says instantly. “Not just with flowerpots, they can all do it. There’s an age restriction but that’s legal only.”

Hughes and Mustang stare at him. Hawkeye, across the room, stops cleaning her sidearm. “*All of them*?”

“Yeah. Independently. No equipment, no external catalyst or power source I can see,” Ed says. “Those twins do it all the fucking time. I’m working on how to track it but so far I can only do it up close. Like too close. I have *no* fucking clue what kind of sensory data I’m getting for that but it’s *something.*”

Mustang fishes out Ed’s notebook from his jacket and holds it up. “*Radiation*?”

“Gotta be,” Ed says. “There’s *some* kind of particle exchange going on - hey, about that.” Ed glances around the room, craning to look behind his alchemized couch, but there’s nothing in here with that telltale shimmer. “Never mind, remind me to make you hold a painting later. I asked the kids about it, but they don’t know what ‘magic’ is or where it comes from and couldn’t say if anybody was even looking into that shit. They’ve only heard of *one* university. Ever. *One.*”

Ed holds up one helpful finger to demonstrate. “So there isn’t even any existing research I can cop. *Wait.* Hughes! You said there’s a *professor*?”

“From the school those teenagers go to,” Hughes informs him. Ed droops. “Ages eleven to seventeen. Which is apparently the sole magical school in the entire country.” He holds up one single finger back at Ed, solemn.

Ed droops further. “That’s just not fuckin’ right. Fuck. So I gotta start from scratch, motherfucker, rip it open from there. Wish I had Al.”

Mustang looks vaguely sympathetic for a moment, which fulfills his quota for the rest of the year and doesn’t last longer than it takes for him to glance back down to Ed’s notebook. “If there’s visible emissions -”

“Then I can measure it, yeah, I know, I just can’t fucking get a lock on what’s being emitted, from what, and how. I mean, fucking *wood and paint* - ugh. Whatever. Some component of the magic emits *something* and once I crack that we can get lord carbonara pretty quick.”

“Oh?” Hughes says.

“Yes. They’ve got a slave here - that’s the fuckin’ elf shit I was talking about. They’ve all confirmed that if they free him he’s going to run straight to their death lord to sell them all out, and it sounds like the terrorists are gonna want to hear what he has to say. It’d be a straight tail job if it wasn’t for the fucking teleporting.”

“I assume that by writing ELF????, circling it twice and drawing an arrow linking it to TELEFUCKPORTATION you meant that the elf can do it too,” Mustang says, delicately turning a page in Ed’s notebook.

“Yuh-huh. Apparently they have a magic library in the house, but the psycho with the prison hair won’t let me in - hey, you know they’re segregated here? I was gonna go find a normal fucking library but apparently all the city ones don’t even *know* about magic because nobody in the city does either. The wizards are *hiding* . Mustang, this place is a fucking cult.”
“I can’t say I overly disagree with your assessment,” Mustang says. “How did you learn that the potter boy witnessed the alleged resurrection process?”

“Overheard ‘em,” Ed says. “When I went upstairs to get my pack. The kid says he was kidnapped and saw it all. Here’s hoping he saw anything fuckin’ useful.”

“You told the schoolteacher resurrection was not impossible,” Mustang says, closing Ed’s notebook and fixing him with a look. “Not impossible for you, not impossible for alchemists, or not impossible for anyone?”

Ed grimaces. “I got no fucking clue if wizards have to deal with the Gate. Since they apparently have enough raw available energy to teleport, I can’t rule out that they can do shit that’s only possible with, you know.” Ed gestures, meaning the philosopher’s stones, and Mustang and Hughes both nod. “If he had a soul - already attached to this plane the way, you know -” Ed gestures again, encapsulating how Al’s and the Slicer brothers’ souls had been bound to armor, and they nod again “- and then built a flesh body, and bound the soul to that…”

“And this lord of theirs sounds like a prime contender for someone who doesn’t care about using other people’s lives as fuel,” Mustang says.

Ed flexes his right hand. “So even if they do deal with the Gate, it might not even matter.” Which means that the resurrection thing has moved up a couple of pretty big percentage points in probability. Which means Ed can’t just discard Beardy’s babbling about lord macaroni splitting his soul as senile wizard horseshit.

If the prophecy turns out to also not be horseshit Ed’s giving it all up and going to live naked on top of a mountain with all the other nutty hermit monks in Xing.

“We don’t know anything for certain until we talk to the kid,” Ed says decisively. “If he can describe what they did - mentioned it looked like a ritual, for once in my life I hope to fuck that means religious shit and not an array - I can figure out what the fuck’s going on.”

“If the schoolteacher is correct about that particular soul having been… split,” Mustang says, like a housemaid picking up a dead mouse, “do we expect any significant change in our approach to resolving the situation?”

Ed looks up, meeting Mustang’s gaze head on. “This guy’s really not going to prison, is he. Or his dead eaters.”

There’s no sympathy this time in Mustang’s eyes, but there is understanding. “He ran unchecked for nearly thirty years in this society,” he says. “It took one of his own attacks backfiring to neutralize him. The authorities are either incompetent, corrupt or simply do not have the resources to cope. A successful incarceration under these circumstances… no, Fullmetal. He is not.”

“Then no. No, you can just fuckin’ torch ‘em,” Ed says, jaw tightening. He flexes his hands into fists. “If the soul’s anchored, breaking the anchor knocks him right outta here. If he’s some kinda homunculus style construct, well, you and me got a track record with that kind of problem. If the guy never died at all, well.” Ed feels his mouth twist bitterly. “Then he’s just a guy.”

Mustang looks over to Hawkeye, who raises an eyebrow back at him, hands not pausing in the reassembly of her third pistol. “No harm in trying the traditional methods first.”

“Yes sir.”

“What’s your range with what you have with you? I don’t want us getting any closer than we
absolutely must, with so many unknowns regarding their ‘magic’. With teleportation already involved our best chance is surprise from a distance.”

“Two to four hundred meters, sir.”

“Mm. It’ll be me on point, then.” Mustang sighs, flips Ed’s notebook shut and hands it back to Ed. “What was that about making me hold a painting?”

Chapter End Notes

I’ve decided amestris uses kelvin temp scale bc why not. Ignore that ed used fahrenheit like 2 chapters ago, im probs gonna go back in later and fix it
Ed leads the way to the room full of paintings, which opens onto the room Hughes and the Intel babies have set up in. They look up inquisitively as they enter, and Ed pauses in the doorway and turns to Hawkeye. “Don’t shoot.”

“How reassuring,” Mustang says dryly.

“Relax, I just need to control group test something. Havoc will be holding it next.”

“You once booby-trapped all of Havoc’s pens to spray fluorescent ink on contact,” Mustang points out. “He was mauve for weeks.”

“Yeah? And?”

“Saying you’ll do whatever it is to Havoc as well is not reassuring, Fullmetal.”

Ed grins nastily. “You’ll just have to take your chances, won’t you?” He goes straight for the original painting he’d picked up, and the dog lord guy is snoozing again under his tree but wakes up real quick when Ed reaches for the frame. A look of abject horror blooms on the guy’s face as he scrambles up, his dogs going nuts instantly. “You! Back, you wretch, you crossbred moor!”

All the other freaky paintings wake up and go wild at this, shouting about unclean peasants and demon-worshipping heresy. Ed grins even more nastily at Dog Guy as he unhooks the painting from the wall. “You just sit tight, sweet cheeks,” Ed tells him, turning back to Mustang and Hawkeye - who does in fact have her pistol out, even if it’s pointed at the ground. “It’s cool, I figure if they could do anything bad they would’ve done it the first time I did this,” Ed tells her. He hands the painting to Mustang. “Here - fucking hold it, bastard, it’s for science. Describe it. Physical observations only.”

“Dung-hearted mongrel! Dishonorable cur!”

Mustang’s eyebrows are in danger of crawling so high they end up on the back of his head. “Well, my ears are telling me I’m being yelled at by a painting.”

“Yo, shut the fuck up for a second,” Ed tells the goddamn dogs guy. “You think I’m bad, this bastard’s worse, you piss him off too bad he’ll light your ass up.”

Mustang narrows his eyes all scary-like at the painting, which isn’t his actual targeting face but does make people think it is. The painted people seem no different. “I must protest this most unseemly handling of my person,” Dog Guy declares, but at a much more cautious volume.

“Yeah, yeah, just shut up for a second. Mustang, physical observation. Tell me.”

Mustang weighs the canvas in his hands, eyeing the little painted figures warily. The dogs have
quieted from yaps to whines. “I’m assuming I’m looking for anything that doesn’t signify this is an ordinary painting.” His frown grows slowly. “There’s... a sensation similar to weak electrical current.”

“Yes!” Ed nearly punches the air. “What else?”

“These are the emissions you noticed,” Mustang realizes, then pauses. “Edward. Am I holding a man’s bound soul?”

“They swear up and down it isn’t, but again, what the fuck do they know,” Ed says. “I don’t see a binding rune, the guy seems thrilled to be a paint chunk, and somehow they got two fucking dogs in there with him. I’m going with a solid maybe. Finish the observation.”

Mustang sighs all put-upon, but he peels off one glove and sets his bare hand to the frame. “No heat,” he notes, just as Psycho skids into the room and nearly gets himself perforated by Hawkeye, on edge from the noise with sidearm still in hand. “Will you stop fucking with the house!” Psycho bellows at Ed, not even noticing Hawkeye lowering her gun again.

“Why? Scared what else we’ll find out, slaver?” Ed shoots back.

“For the love of - I didn’t want creature! I’d free him if I could!”

“But in the meantime you’ll just make his life miserable, huh?”

“Serious,” Mustache says warningly, turning up in the doorway behind Psycho.

“What! They’re riling everything up, is it too much to ask for some god damned peace and quiet -”

Mustang sighs again and hands the painting back to Ed. “Nothing else out of the ordinary,” he tells him, then turns to the arguing wizards, pulling his glove back on. “Gentlemen, is there a problem?”

“Many things in this house are not safe to handle,” Mustache says swiftly. “You’ve had good luck so far, but even some of the paintings are cursed -”

“You’ll get your damned hands burned off if you go around touching whatever takes your fancy,” Psycho says rudely. “And that’s if you’re lucky. And when you bother the damned portraits, they wake up and start yelling -”

“We haven’t been able to go through and secure everything,” Mustache says. “Some of these curses are very dark. If you get hurt we can’t guarantee we’ll be able to help you.”

“So put up a fucking warning sign on what is dangerous,” Ed says, incredulous. “If it’s all so fucking ‘cursed’ you need to warn people. You have kids in this house.”

“They know not to touch anything,” Psycho snaps, “unlike some people -”

“We’re conducting some noninvasive testing that will help us more effectively locate your terrorists,” Mustang says coolly. “Is anything in these two rooms unsafe to touch?”

“No,” Psycho admits grudgingly, glaring daggers at Ed.

“Then for the time being we will confine our testing to here. Is there anything further we can help you with, gentlemen?”

“No,” Mustache says, taking Psycho’s shoulder and firmly pushing them along. “No, thank you for
understanding. We’ll be right down the hall if you need us.”

“Making warning stickers, I hope,” Ed says under his breath, glaring at Psycho right back until he’s dragged out of view.

“For us or for them?” Havoc says from behind them.

“Havoc! Hold this,” Ed says, turning and thrusting out the painting.

“Passed from swine to swine like a barnyard wench,” huffs Dogs Guy from the canvas.

Havoc’s eyes go wide. “Boss?”

“Just hold it,” Ed says coaxingly, sticking the painting into Havoc’s chest. "It doesn't hurt a bit."

“Boss, I say this with all due respect, no fucking way,” Havoc says nervously.

“You know, technically I outrank you,” Ed points out, advancing as Havoc backs up. “This can be an ‘order from your superior officer’ type of thing.”

Havoc looks desperately to Mustang. “Chief?”

“Hold the painting, soldier,” Mustang says, not bothering to look. “You are interviewing the boy as soon as the schoolteacher arrives. Be here,” he warns Ed.

“Sure, uh huh,” Ed says, forcing the painting into Havoc’s protesting grip. “Stop being a big baby and tell me what you feel.”

“Disturbed,” Havoc says weakly, clutching the frame by its very edges and holding it as far from himself as possible. “And in real bad need of a smoke.”

“You just went for a cig break,” Ed tells him mercilessly as Mustang and Hawkeye waft off to go be annoying and inscrutable somewhere else. “You were out for like twenty minutes.”

“I feel like this warrants another one,” Havoc says miserably. “What am I supposed to be feeling?”


Havoc looks down at the painting, cringing slightly when Dogs Guy glares back. “Bad.”

“Havoc.”

“...wood-y?”

“It’ll do. Anything else?”

“Please let me put this down, boss.”

Ed grins and slaps Havoc’s shoulder as he takes back the painting. “You’ll never be a man of science with that attitude, Jean.”

“A fact I thank my luck stars for every day, boss.”

“Wimp,” Ed says cheerfully as he hefts the painting, notes the presence of both shimmer and tingle and then turns to the rest of the room. “Who’s next?”

He makes Hughes hold it, then Jones and Arget, though since they were in the room when Ed
explained his expected outcome they don’t strictly qualify as control groups. None of them feel anything, or see anything, which is about what Ed expected, but it’s good to have loose confirmation anyway; if only they had an alchemist who’d never seen the Gate, he’d have all he needs for a working theory.

“Now I just need to measure it,” Ed says, recording the results in his notebook, rough as they are. “Anyone got a radio they don’t need?”

“Oh, that reminds me. Maybe this will help,” Hughes says, waving for Jones to drag over one of their giant overstuffed field packs and open it to show Ed the path to paradise.

“Alphonse made some alterations to our spare radio equipment when we stopped by in Guangshi,” Hughes says. “He said you might find it helpful.”

“Oh my god, we do have telepathy,” Ed whispers, lifting out a voltmeter. “It just only activates for science. I fucking love you, Al.”

“I’ll leave you to it, then,” Hughes says, sounding pleased.

“Uh huh,” Ed says absently. Along with the voltmeter Al made him a bolometer, a magnetometer, and a triaxial EMF reader with a matching spectrum analyzer. He was pretty obviously thinking about about how they might analyze the grey shimmering wall of the border crossing anomaly, which translates fantastically to the measurements Ed needs to take for the magic emissions. The experiments are gonna be more quick and dirty shit by necessity, but it’s not like he’s looking for super exact data right now - so long as it’s accurate it doesn’t have to be precise.

Al’s alchemized a little raised smiling kitty face on the side of the spectrum analyzer casing, with good luck!! written in Xingese glyphs underneath it. Ed grins to himself, fistbumps the cat face and sets to work.

He’s only just laid everything out, decided on experimental conditions and set Jones to drafting tables to record the results - Hughes took Arget and left, saying something about padding their dossiers - when he sees Smartypants lurking in the doorway. “What?” Ed says. “Is doorbell guy here already?”

“Um… I don’t think so,” she says cautiously, entering. “What are you doing?”

Ed snorts. “Figuring your shit out for you.”

“Is that a voltmeter?”

Ed pauses and gives her another look. Maybe they’re not so backward if they at least know of voltmeters, but then that begs the question of why then haven’t they used them. “Yeah.”

“You’re measuring… oh. Magic makes most muggle technology short out,” Smartypants says, looking up from the table of tools apologetically.


Smartypants looks deeply unhappy with this question. “Nobody really knows.”

“Lucky for you that I’m here, then,” Ed says decisively. If it does short anything out that’ll be a strong indicator of a fluctuating electromagnetic field, and Ed can just fix the equipment, set up a Faraday cage and run it all again. “None of the radios have shorted out yet, so the field must be pretty weak anyway.”
Jones glances at Smartypants and holds up a sheet of ruler-straight tables for Ed. “What next, boss?”

“Thanks. Can you hook these up to the batteries? Don’t turn anything on yet.” Ed takes the sheet and starts labeling, starting with the EM spectrum in ascending order of frequency; might as well be thorough and start testing with radio waves.

Smartypants drifts closer, once again unsubtly trying to see what Ed’s writing, like maybe overnight Ed might’ve started writing in her language instead of his. “Your name’s Edward?”

“Oh boy,” Jones says.

“What?” Ed says, glancing up at him.

“Nothing. Nothing. Hand cramp.” Jones rubs his hand theatrically and bends back over the wires, studiously not looking at Smartypants.

Ed frowns at him before giving a mental shrug. “Yeah, I’m Ed,” he tells Smartypants; at least with one syllable the annoying Ehhddwoooord accent can’t get much of a purchase, and he won’t have to hear Elric pronounced Eric anymore.

“Why does your commanding officer call you all metal?”

“What?” Ed says, writing out FAR-FIELD: E (electric) B (magnetic). “Oh. Fullmetal’s my alchemist title.” As an afterthought, “And he’s an ass.”

Jones stifles a noise but doesn’t look up. Smartypants glances over at him in concern, then goes back to staring at Ed. “You don’t seem to like him very much.”

Hah. “I don’t like anyone very much,” Ed says distractedly, picking up the magnetometer to double-check the increments. “Mustang’s an ass but he has his uses.”

“Oh.” She shifts quietly from one foot to the other. “You said anyone can learn alchemy. Is that… can you just go to school for it?”

Ed pauses in writing for just a second, but doesn’t look up. “You know what chemistry is?”

“Yes?”

“You any good at it?”

“I -” Smartypants hesitates, but then her voice firms. “Yes. I will be.”

“What about physics?”

“Yes. I’m also very good at maths.”

“Great. You wanna know about alchemy? Come to Amestris, apply to a university and find out. Central U’s got a decent program, if they take you.” The civilian programs aren’t really doing anything beyond basic construction alchemy in the practicals right now, but the theoretical departments get pretty wild and Mustang’s crusade to get the military to direct alchemy to more civic projects is getting traction. “You’re gonna have to figure out your visa shit on your own, though, I don’t know how your government talks to Xing.”

“They don’t,” Jones says. “The Divide isn’t even in this country - that’s why they had us use that port key device. We traveled something like eight thousand five hundred kilometers, if I did the
Ed snorts. “Was yours a flowerpot too?”

Jones grins at him, teeth gleaming white against his skin. “I really thought they were playing a joke on us dumb foreigners until it yanked us out of there.”

“Still not convinced it’s not a joke,” Ed says, finishing writing out the last formula, then, as it occurs to him, “Yo, your friend who saw the whole resurrection thing - what’d he tell you? And why the fuck don’t they want him talking to us? They’re the ones who fucking invited us here.”

Smartypants looks a little startled when he fully turns in his chair to face her, but her face settles in frustration pretty quick. “I don’t know. Dementers are evil, and that you got rid of them is a good thing. But we were forbidden from writing to Hairy all summer, and now even professor loop in is saying he should get sent back to his aunt and uncle… I don’t know what’s going on and nobody’s telling us. They say we’re too young.” Her mouth twists bitterly. “As if we haven’t been dealing with Voldemort since we were eleven.”

Ed’s eyebrows bounce up at that. “Dealing how, exactly?”

Smartypants gives a grimly amused little shrug, looking definitely older than her sixteen or so in that moment. “We’re Hairy’s friends, and Voldemort’s been after Hairy since he was born. Gin ee even got possessed by him two years ago.”

Ed frowns. “Which one’s that?” They’ll have to talk to them as well, if only to verify whether it was actual possession, Pride-style, or just carbon monoxide poisoning or something.

“What?”

“Which one’s ‘gin ee’?”

Smartypants looks taken aback for a second, like she honestly expected Ed to be keeping track of all their names and birthdays and fucking horoscopes. “She’s the one with red hair,” she says. “The girl, I mean.”

Miss Redhead, then, unless there’s another one running around that he missed. “We’ll interview her too,” Ed says, then adds, because maybe she can let slip what the fuck they don’t want the kid telling him, “Is she also gonna need a trusted fuckin’ adult to be able to talk to me? Do I seriously look that fuckin’ scary?”

Jones makes another stifled noise. Smartypants is only a shade darker than Ed, so it’s kinda hard to tell, but he’s pretty sure that’s a blush that makes her cheeks shade like that. “Um. No. You - uh, no.” She clears her throat. “I’m not sure why professor loop in doesn’t want Hairy to talk to you without dumbell door. Dumbell door certainly hasn’t wanted to talk to Hairy, but… I don’t know. There’s got to be a good reason.” Her hands make fists, and now for a second she looks all of maybe eight, like she wants nothing more than to stamp her foot. “I just wish they’d tell us something. Anything.”

Well, that’s a bust. Ed does feel vaguely bad for her, because he remembers being fifteen and nobody fucking telling him shit unless he pried, tricked, beat and begged it out of them; he remembers the dull, creeping horror of realizing just how surrounded by secrets he’d been and how fucking dangerous they were, how deep the rot went, how far. And Smartypants might be a wizard but she’s asking questions, and she’s clearly learned that being deemed “too young” isn’t going to help one fucking cent when the shit hits the wind turbine. Besides, honestly, so far all the best intel
he’s gotten has been from the damn wizard kids.

_How_ is he getting better intel from a bunch of fifteen year olds. Then again, when _he_ was fifteen he’d been pretty much the only person ever to know what the hell was going on. Well, him and Al. And Al was _fourteen_ then, so, really, this shit is par for the course across the board, apparently.

“Fucking sucks,” Ed shares with Smartypants, feeling magnanimous with the science care package from Al. “Have you tried blackmail?”

The noise Jones makes this time is not nearly stifled enough. Smartypants’s eyes widen and she opens her mouth, then hesitates, looking conflicted. “I don’t - I mean. I’ve had some - ideas, but…”

“Try ‘em. What’ve you got to lose? You can get away with way more right now anyway,” Ed advises. “Plus if people think you’re a little kid they’re more likely to let you off easy if they catch you. Or at least it’ll look bad on them if they do retaliate.”

“Oh my god,” Jones says, then, “I would try - having an honest conversation, first? Talk to your mom and dad, tell them how it makes you feel to be left in the dark about a situation that closely affects you -”

“Jones, you’re in _Intel,_” Ed says incredulously, twisting back to face him. “ _Honest conversation?_ What the hell is Hughes teaching you guys these days?”

Jones waves his hands hurriedly. “No, no, it’s about escalation - start with no-cost guilt tripping first, if that doesn’t work _then_ move on to techniques that could damage the relationship -”

There’s a _crack_ somewhere in the hallway, and Ed and Jones are both on their feet before Smartypants begins to turn around. A second later Beardy shows up in the doorway, though, so Jones takes his hand off his sidearm and Ed loosens his shoulders, exhaling in a huff. “Fucking finally,” he says as Beardy gives them an assessing look over his spectacles. “Yo, Jones, go get Mustang. Party’s finally getting started in here.”

**Chapter End Notes**

Ed: when i was fifteen i knew everything
Narrator: he didn’t know fuck shit
Also: Faraday was in Amestris??? What????? When??? Shhh don’t look too hard
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

“Miss Granger,” Beardy says, watching Ed as Jones slides around him and out the door. “Would you go and fetch Remus for us?”

Smartypants glances back at Ed, then at Beardy, then back at Ed before she bites her lip, nods and goes. “Edward,” Beardy greets. “How are you?”

“Fuckin’ aces,” Ed says shortly, turning to the table to pack up all the equipment and stow it in the bag with his notebook and tables. “Never fuckin’ better.”

“I understand you had something of an adventure yesterday.”

“Oh, is that what happened?” Ed sticks the pack in the corner as far as possible from any dumbass wizard that might accidentally give it a kick, magically or otherwise. “Here I thought we just got lost on our way to a tea party.”

“I suppose that could also be seen as an adventure,” Beady says in a conceding voice. Ed can’t tell if he’s being crazy on purpose or if he’s just so old that he can’t help the senility breaking through at this point. “Ah. Here we are.” Mustache shows up in the doorway, and Pirate’s here too, the Lemons guy in the corridor behind him. “Albus,” Mustache greets, glancing at Ed, and he looks like he’s gonna say more only Mustang shows up with Hughes at his back and Hairy herded in front of them. The kid looks shocked to see Beardy, though the expression immediately settles into mule-headed hostility. “Hello Roy, and Maes, was it?” Beardy says, by all appearances not noticing the kid’s betrayed glare as he goes and closes the door behind them, taking his magic stick out and waving it around to no noticeable effect. “Why don’t we all sit down.”

They end up arranged on either side of the dining table, Hughes and Ed on either side of Mustang and Lemons and Pirate flanking Beardy with Mustache on the end. Hairy slowly sits down at the corner next to Mustache, ending up mostly on the non-wizard side beside Hughes, which may be because he likes Mustache, because Hughes has been working him as a witness or because the only other options are sitting next to Lemons or sitting next to Ed. Man, if Hughes got the resurrection story out of the kid while everybody was distracted eyeballing Ed - well, that’ll be a good thing, and it’s not like Hughes doesn’t know how to get a full story, but he’s also not an alchemist and Ed wants to hear what there is to hear firsthand.

Ed’s about to open his mouth, but Hairy beats him to it and decides to open the meeting with his own agenda. “Why do I have to go back to the Dursleys?” he says immediately. “Why can’t I stay here?”

“You’re not fuckin’ going anywhere until we talk,” Ed informs him sharply, which makes Hairy flicker a glance at him with something weirdly like relief.

“You’re not fuckin’ going anywhere until we talk,” Ed informs him sharply, which makes Hairy flicker a glance at him with something weirdly like relief.

“Use of underage magic was detected by the trace on your wand, Hairy,” Beardy tells the kid. “The ministry was alerted immediately and you would have received a summons to court, but since you were immediately thereafter on the London underground and then here, the owls have not been able to locate you. We cannot delay the inquiries as to where you are for much longer; defying the ministry so openly at this stage is not, I’m afraid, something we can afford. Returning you to where you are expected to be is a necessary if regrettable move, given the circumstances.”
Ed understood basically none of that except for how it was all about Beardy wanting to get the kid away from them. “You will be safe at your relatives’ until the school term starts,” Mustache tells Hairy, who’s having none of it.

“I got attacked by dementers,” he says mutinously. “I don’t think that’s very safe, is it?”

“I’ve spoken to mun dung us,” Pirate growls. “He won’t be skipping out again.”

Hairy does not like he’s following that sentence any more than Ed is. “What?”

Beardy looks like he wants to sigh really hard but doesn’t. “Mun dung us fletcher was tasked with watching over you while you stayed with your relatives. Unfortunately, he decided to step away at just the wrong moment -”

“Gentlemen.”

There’s this thing Mustang does sometimes where, without any real change in expression, posture, or tone, some inscrutable internal switch gets flipped and abruptly everyone is reminded that he’s a localized fucking extinction event when he wants to be and that he has to flex, like, maybe four muscles to make it happen. Whenever Ed sees it he’s always simultaneously fascinated, envious, exasperated and repulsed, because okay, it would be really useful to be able to broadcast Don’t Fuck With Me in literal fifty foot letters of fire, but he’s also seen Mustang asleep at his desk with a solid quart of drool all down his shirt and over his paperwork, and, well. Ed suspects that Mustang didn’t deliberately cultivate this switch so much as had it installed as a side effect of having been a state-sanctioned mass murderer. Ed’s pretty goddamn grateful he doesn’t have that, actually.

It is, however, extremely effective in getting people to shut the fuck up no matter the size of the conference room. None of the wizards are immune to it, either. Beardy stops talking and looks at him; even Lemons leaves off lizard-staring at Ed to give Mustang a wary look.

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There’s a quiet moment as Mustache looks taken aback and Beardy and Pirate return Mustang’s stare with their own poker faces. Lemon’s back to watching Ed. “AWOL?” Hairy says confusedly.

“From what I understand of yesterday’s incident,” Mustang says, in his pleasant interrupt-me-and-fry voice, “at his relatives’ house, you had a guard placed on Hairy specifically in case of an attack. That guard was AWOL when the attack occurred. Hairy and the other children survived unscathed thanks to the prompt action taken by Lieutenant Colonel Elric, who was with them at the time entirely by chance.”

It’s so weird to be referred to by rank and surname. Ed wonders if ranks even translate correctly - though with how Mustang’s sat back in his chair, one leg slung over the other, the picture of casual indifference, he could be calling Ed a cadet on probation and his tone would still be telling the wizards higher than you. “And now you want to return Hairy to the same unsecured location, with the exact same guard? Hairy, who is an eyewitness - as far as I know, the only eyewitness - to the alleged resurrection process? Please, correct me if I am wrong.”

There’s a quiet moment as Mustache looks taken aback and Beardy and Pirate return Mustang’s stare with their own poker faces. Lemon’s back to watching Ed. “AWOL?” Hairy says confusedly.

Mustang glances at him. “An acronym for ‘absent without leave’. Dereliction of duty is not a punishable offense when you’re a civilian, but this guard knowingly and willingly left his post and left you, a minor, to fend for yourself against an enemy he knew to be lethal. A soldier could be executed for such.”

Ed graciously refrains from snorting, because while Mustang had certainly left him to ‘fend for himself’ in way more lethal situations, Ed hadn’t exactly been some wet behind the ears baby

“Before we further discuss potter’s... situation,” Lemons speaks up, and really makes a production of his whole staring-at-Ed thing when everyone looks at him. “We must address the matter of the dementers, and how they came to be... destroyed.”

“Yes, thank you, sever us,” Beardy says, like he’s admitting it’s time to put down the doddering favorite family dog. “I must admit that takes priority.” He turns to Hairy. “I apologize, but I’m afraid I must ask you to step outside for the time being. Molly mentioned tea in the kitchen, if you’d like to wait there for a moment.”

Oh, these motherfuckers seriously don’t want the kid telling them what he knows. Ed’s ready to mutiny, but Mustang is sitting back in that this is gonna be good way so Ed has to grit his teeth and sit back too because either that look is for the wizards, which means Ed’ll want to see what happens next, or it’s for Ed’s impending aneurysm, which means he won’t fucking give Mustang the satisfaction. “Secure our interviewee, will you, Fullmetal?” Mustang says negligently, so Ed shoves up, stomps to the door, smacks it open and bellows, “Havoc!”

There’s a crash from down the hall. “What!”

“Babysit.” Ed goes around the table, seizes Hairy by the shoulder - “Hey!” - and drags him out, down the hall to the Amestrisan base room. Hawkeye, Havoc, Jones and Arget all look curiously at Hairy, who balks and scowls furiously at all of them. “This is our witness,” Ed growls, propelling the kid forward and into a chair, too easily; gods, he weighs basically nothing and clearly has no idea how to brace his stance at all. Al could brace himself better when he’d been a forty-kilo bag of Gate-starved calcium-deficient bones. “They keep trying to shunt him off to some other shithole before we can talk to him. Havoc, meet your new best friend. He disappears, I disappear you.”

With that Ed stomps back, making sure Mustang gets an eyeful of his quit cutting inches off my fuse glare. Mustang just gestures serenely at Ed’s vacated seat in a parody of pulling out his chair for him. “I assume you have more information for us regarding yesterday’s attack,” he comments at the wizards. “And that it is time-sensitive, to interrupt our main investigation.”

“You bet it is,” Pirate says unpleasantly. “We need to know what the hell we’re going to tell the ministry. There’s only so long Bones can stall.”

“Have we determined where the dementers came from?” Mustache asks, leaning forward slightly to address Beardy down the table.

“Those two were confirmed to have departed from the reserve at Azkaban,” Beardy says in a careful tone. Mustache sucks in a breath. “Amelia is trying to determine who gave the order, if it even originated from the ministry at all. There is no official record of it, but that means little under the -”

“Are you telling me the government sent those things after me?” Ed interrupts, because that’s sure as hell what it sounds like. “Shit, is that what happens if you show up in wizard land without getting your passport stamped by border control?”

“Not you, boy,” Pirate says irritably. “Potter. He’s got enemies in more than just the death eaters.”

“There is... political pressure to discredit Hairy, and by proxy myself,” Beardy tells Mustang. “We are inconvenient in our insistence that Voldemort has returned. This incident has given certain factions opportunity to advance their position. So far talk has been confined to the ministry, but there Hairy has already been painted as wilfully violating the statute of secrecy, with the kindest
rumors portraying him as a misguided youth making a characteristically misguided adolescent bid for more attention.”

“Worst case scenario?” Mustache asks quietly.

“Snapping his wand, expulsion from hog warts, a fine of up to five hundred galley ons and six months of supervised parole,” Pirate grunts. “If he’s tried as a minor. If not - prison. There’s no set sentence for this.”

By the grim looks exchanged around the table this is some serious shit, even if it doesn’t sound it to Ed. “All this ‘cause you think the damn kid offed those fucking things without permission? He didn’t do jack shit,” he says flatly. That’s not quite true - someone had tried whatever that silvery mist was - but he’s not a fucking snitch. “I never saw any magic.”

“There are spells that’ll tell whether a wand was used, and what was cast. They’ll be used at the trial,” Pirate says, his pervert eyeball flicking over Ed with a nice try undertone to the words.

Ed narrows his eyes right back. “Sounds like none of your wands can do what I did. If your fucked up courts need me to take five minutes out of my day to prove it wasn’t some kid that got rid of those fuckers, then shit, I’ll do my good fuckin’ deed for the year.”

“If it is discovered that you destroyed two dementors,” Beardy says quietly, “you will be arrested for compromising national security assets and taken to prison without trial.”

That sentence is definitely Mustang’s problem. Ed looks over at him, and he graces Beardy with a miniscule raise of the eyebrows. “These dementors,” he says. “They are agents of the ministry?”

“Weapons,” Beardy says gravely. “They take orders, to an extent. They guard wizarding prisons for those most dangerous, and in extreme circumstances they are tools of war.”

“Mm. Which makes destroying one treason,” Mustang concludes. “And for an agent of a foreign state, grounds for declaration of war?”

Beardy raises both hands briefly in a placating half-shrug. “Not war, no. We cannot afford it. But imposing the harshest punishments they can - yes. They would sentence young Edward to either death or life in prison.”

Ed doesn’t bristle too much at young fuckin’ Ehhhhddwoooord, because Mustang’s got his I’m about to dogwalk your ass look on and it’s pointed straight at Beardy. “Anyone familiar with Amestris’ foreign policy would consider that a very... brave decision,” Mustang says mildly. We’ve started wars over less, and won them. “I understand that you and Madam Bones would prefer if our presence here remained informal, and so far we have been able to accommodate. If state assets are attacking my subordinate, however, then we have a state problem.”

“There is every chance that the dementers were sent by Voldemort,” Beardy says.

“But the incident is being treated as though they are agents of the state, is it not?” Mustang gestures languidly. “War weapons. Which tells us that this assassination attempt on Hairy is coming either through the state or from the state itself. Your government is compromised. Though you knew that, of course. The existence of this vigilante group is proof of such. The only mystery here is why you are still cooperating with them.”

Beardy is now watching Mustang with a version of that look people get when they realize he’s not just a pretty face on a one-trick pony. “The fact remains that we are still subject to the law,” Beardy says. “We do not have the resources to openly defy it. Amelia cannot simply refuse a direct order
from the minister - and if she did, she would be immediately replaced by someone actively antagonistic to our cause. Any show of power from us is grounds for the minister to give such an order.” He looked very old then, face lined and worn. “With two dementers vanished, they now have such grounds.”

“Potter goes to trial, we can defend him in court,” Pirate grunts. “It’s a case of self defense with an underage wizard, we can carry the vote. For a foreigner? Not a chance.”

“You are that sure the boy will be safe if he goes to be tried?” Mustang says, sounding only vaguely interested. “They’ve already moved openly to kill him. Handing him right back into their control is not going to keep him alive just because you do it through official channels. There are an astonishing number of ways an individual can die in custody.”

“They do not know it was Hairy who destroyed the dementers,” Beardy says wearily. “They are certain to question him first, to try and understand what occurred. And he is known enough that his trial will be a matter of interest amongst all the court factions that he will not be allowed to vanish before appearing before the Wizengamot.”

“By obscuring Elric’s involvement you force the opposing presence to assume it was him,” Mustang says. “You said so yourself. Regardless of specific information, that presence now knows for certain your faction can destroy what they previously thought indestructible. That is not something I, in their shoes, would allow to get as far as a public trial. Would you really prefer to paint that particular target on the back of a child?”

Beardy watches Mustang over the rims of his spectacles. “You would prefer to spend your time here dealing with the arrest of your subordinate?”

If it’s him or the kid getting arrested, then shit, Ed’ll burn down a wizard jail or two. He looks over at Mustang. “What the hell. Been a while since we overthrew a government.”

Mustang sighs. “And what do you propose we do with it afterward, Fullmetal? Take it home and name it Fluffles?”

“They have slavery,” Ed points out. “That’s just fucking asking for it. C’mon. Bet you it’d take us like, a week, tops.”

“Terrorists come first, Fullmetal.”

Ed throws up his hands. “They’re already in the government, you just said so.”

“Then getting rid of them will kill two chimeras with one alchemist, won’t it?”

“Ugh, you’re the worst. Just fake the fucking kid’s death already,” Ed snaps at Beardy, turning away from Mustang. “Or shit, they don’t even know what I look like, fake my death and tell them I did it. Tell them it was a heroic sacrifice, blah blah, those things totally sucked my soul out. The kid’s super traumatized and ran away and you don’t know where he is. They can chase their tails looking for him while we track down the goddamn macaroni guy and end the whole fucking problem.”

“Why don’t we use him as bait? The kid, I mean,” Hughes says. Ed and Mustang both glance at him, and he shrugs. “If they want a fifteen year old dead bad enough that they’d send two state-sanctioned weapons after him in a public park, I’d be willing to bet they’ll try again.”

Ed considers that. If they use the kid as bait, he’s not going to be sent out alone, and if he’s not sent alone then it’ll be Ed who’s sent with him. “Those things come my way again, I’m doing the exact
Hughes shrugs again. “If they send more dementers and you get rid of those, too, that forces them to send something else. If I didn’t know how my supposedly undying assets kept getting dead, I’d send someone to find out in person - and I wouldn’t send a grunt. I’d send someone who knows things worth knowing.”

Someone they can catch and interrogate and actually get useful intel from. “I like that better than teleporting elves,” Ed admits.

Hughes nods. “I’d rather a cooperating asset laying a trap than a total unknown leading us off who knows where in any case, especially with so many other unknowns in the mix.”

Even Lemons is watching Hughes now, who looks straight back at them with what Ed thinks of as just because my office in Intel is wallpapered in toothrotting photos of my wife and daughter face. “He’s a fifteen year old boy,” Beardy says after a moment, which isn’t outright refusal, at the very least. “Even if we ask this of him, he has every right - and he will be counseled such by many - to refuse.”

“You were ready to put him in prison,” Mustang says, sounding amused. “Whether he refused it or not.”

“We told you, we could have swung the vote,” Pirate growls. “Either way the Aurors will be after him. The trace is still on his wand. The moment he steps outside the Fidelius they’ll send a squad to take him in.”

“They’ve shown they’d prefer to kill him outright,” Mustang points out. “Otherwise he would’ve been called in for some minor violation long before now and imprisoned that way. And killing him outside of their custody rids them of any need to do any kind of coverup.”

“He’s going to be a target no matter what,” Hughes says reasonably. “This way he’ll be protected, and we’ll be able to directly address the threat. Whoever or whatever gets sent after him will give us information on who’s directing the attacks and how. And if the police are only tracking Hairy via his… wand, then we don’t even necessarily have to involve him at all - we put the wand in a controlled location and see whatever turns up.”

A nice straightforward ambush. Ed likes that best of all, with no kid in the line of fire, nobody to babysit, just springing a trap and hopefully getting a few punches in.

Beardy, however, does not look sold on this. He looks pretty bleak, in fact. “Albus,” Pirate growls warningly.

“Using Hairy may be not be an option available to us, in the end,” Beardy murmurs, gaze distant as he looks out at the table, no longer focused on Mustang. “There is evidence that suggests a piece of Riddle’s soul is bound to Hairy, giving Riddle access to his mind, and that connection is very likely - exploitable.”

Ed sits upright, hard, mouth dropping open. “Your head terrorist has a fucking hotline to this kid’s head? And you brought him to your secret hideout?”

“You brought him here, Elric,” Pirate snarls. “Thank Merlin the Fidelius needs a direct information transfer or we’d all have been dead yesterday. The boy was supposed to be parked out with his muggle relatives, under watch, until he could be moved safely back to hogwarts.”

“The boy who is wandering through this house, unsupervised, right now? The one who’s seen all
our faces, and personally witnessed firsthand how Ed subdued your dementers?” Hughes has his elbows propped on the table and his fingertips massaging his temples like the barometric pressure of ambient stupidity in the room is giving him a migraine; when he reopens his eyes they’re as sharp as his tone. “How long have you known about this leak?”

“And what kind of evidence are we talking here?” Ed demands, because hello, these people think prophecy is a useful source of intel. “Like, did you trace the leak to the kid, is he acting possessed, what?”

“Voldemort marked him, on the night he murdered Hairy’s parents and attempted to kill Hairy as well,” Beardy says heavily. “The mark reacts when Voldemort is near, and Hairy has experienced true dreams of Voldemort’s actions.”

Hughes puts it together faster than Ed does. “So you’ve known about this for fourteen years?”

“Closer to one year or so,” Beardy says, tone all good-natured again with what Ed can only assume is self-deprecating gallows humor. “There’s no way to test for such a thing, you see, and the dreams Hairy reported to me only recently. Voldemort has not used this connection so far, to our knowledge, and he may not even know it exists. To create a whore crux requires deliberate action - but this one I believe was a magical accident, as it was made with the death of his original body.”

Ed cannot have heard that right. “A fuckin’ what?”

“An object that houses a piece of a soul,” Beardy says, despite the fact that Pirate is pissed enough to actually hiss through his teeth at that one. “It acts as an anchor to keep the soul in the mortal realm.”

Like Ed had done with the rune on Al’s armor. Not that it makes it any better for him to have drawn that parallel to what the wizards call a whore’s anything. “That’s what you were talking about?” Ed says. “About the macaroni guy splitting his soul?”

“It may be more accurate to say he made copies,” Beardy says.

Ed throws up his hands again. “That’s a little different from splitting a soul -”

“If there’s no immediate danger of this location being raided,” Mustang cuts in, “and that you have known about this problem for an entire year, what steps have you taken to address it?”

“Given Hairy met Edward and witnessed his dealing with the dementors by chance, it seemed a matter of the cat already being out of the bag in regards to your party,” Beardy says, glancing at Mustang. “We haven’t told or shown him anything sensitive, and as Alastor said the location of this house is magically protected. None of you could lead another to this house unless I had informed them of the location beforehand. Voldemort was only resurrected in July; to our knowledge, he has not acted with any information gleaned from Hairy before or since.”

“We do not know if Voldemort is even aware of the connection,” Mustache says quietly. “He did not intend to bind part of his soul to Hairy, and Hairy’s dreams show a connection to the mind of Voldemort’s snake - another living whore crux - rather than Voldemort himself.”

“So the kid is having snake dreams and on the basis of that you’re assuming lord volleyball stapled on a chunk and-or copy of his soul?” Ed demands, trying to get the facts straight, if they can even be called facts.

“It is no ordinary snake,” Beardy says.
“Wow, that makes it so much better,” Ed says disgustedly. “You have no hard evidence of a leak either way, and even if you did I’m not hearing that you took any action about it beyond ‘send the kid out of the room when the grownups are talking’. Fucking - whatever. Hughes, an ambush still looks workable to me, what do you think?”

“If it’s just the wand that’s being tracked, the question of the leak is a separate issue,” Hughes says. “Is it just the wand?”

“There are other ways to find people,” Pirate says grudgingly, after a moment. “But they’ll go for his wand first.”

“We may be able to lure Aurors alone with the wand, but Voldemort knows I am the one most likely to decide Hairy’s movements,” Beardy says. “If Voldemort is truly so entrenched in the ministry as to send dementers, he will have access to the Auror’s information. If Hairy suddenly appears to be somewhere remote, unprotected, alone, I believe he will take the time to ascertain whether it is a trap.”

“So we have to make it believable,” Hughes concludes. “That most likely means using the kid. You said there’s no way to test for the… His nose wrinkles in his usual You Freak Alchemists expression. “… piece of soul? Or, presumably, any way to remove it?”

Mustang looks at Ed. Ed grunts. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Mustache looks a little bit alarmed, though he buries it quick. “What, exactly…”

“Lieutenant Colonel Elric is a master alchemist with extensive experience in dealing with precisely this kind of problem,” Mustang says blandly, which at least sounds better than Elric keeps surviving human transmutation. “In any case it seems you’ve exhausted all your own efforts to undo the binding on the boy. There can’t be any harm in letting Elric try.”

“With alchemy,” Mustache says skeptically.

“Yeah, because I’m an alchemist,” Ed stresses, just about ready to start beating heads against the table, probably starting with his own.

“Yes,” Lemons says coolly. “What did happen to those dementers?”

“Alchemy happened,” Ed says sarcastically. Mustang makes a minute flick of gesture with one hand, because making Ed suffer is his passion and calling and he apparently hasn’t yet hit his fill of idiocy today. Ed turns a sour look on Lemons. “Ever heard of thermite?”

Beardy blinks serenely at him; Mustache looks politely uncomprehending and Pirate looks like those officers who absolutely hate dealing with alchemists because they can’t balance an equation to save their lives.

“I have,” Lemons says.

“I made like maybe two kilos of that - wasn’t much more to pull from the ground - and set it off in a compressing asphalt chamber.”

Mustache looks interested. “This… substance - it’s found in the earth?”

“Not really.”

“Then…”

“He made a bomb,” Lemons concludes.

“No, I fucking didn’t,” Ed says sharply. “Thermite’s not an explosive. That reaction’s most commonly used for welding.”

“So you… welded… the dementers?” Mustache says carefully.

“I actively compressed a local earth and asphalt chamber containing a thermite reaction of around two thousand two hundred degrees for approximately ten minutes until the chamber closed,” Ed rattles off, toneless. Mustang wouldn’t have made him explain this shit if they’d been debriefing to the brass in Amestris. Everyone knows any halfway decent metals and earths alchemist can make thermite - hell, any chemist can, with the right materials - but if the military knew Ed could make so much, so fast, pulling from such a wide radius underground, he’d be transferred to an assault or demolitions squad so fast his head would spin. Mustang would’ve just told them Ed had started an electrical fire or something; Mustang would’ve told Ed to keep his mouth shut and lied for him through his fucking teeth.

“What’s that fucking mean, boy,” Pirate snaps, apparently totally at the end of his already obviously puddle-deep understanding of any kind of science.

Ed plants his right elbow on the table, sticks his hand out over the table palm up and clenches it into a fist. “It means I trapped them, turned the heat up and fucking squeezed, wizard,” he hisses. “How do you deal with them when they come after kids?”

“A patronus is the standard approach,” Beardy says, by all appearances unbothered by Ed’s moment of hostility.

“Fiend fire has been known to halt dementers for a time,” Mustache murmurs, whatever that means.

“Even curses have their uses,” Beardy says, in a way that sounds like he’s speaking directly to Pirate without looking at him.

Pirate grunts. “We’re not sorry to see the dementors go, boy,” he says directly to Ed, pervert eye fixed in the same direction as his real one for once. “But it’s dark bloody arts indeed that can kill the darkest of creatures, and unforgiveables are unforgiveable for a reason. Killing with magic is not something we take lightly, even if you call it alchemy.”

Is that why they’re all so fucked off about it? Not because he cooked a couple of arguably sentient things alive, but because they think he used dark magic? “Pal,” Ed says, speaking slowly and clearly to get through to this fucking alien, “you don’t need alchemy to make thermite. The alchemy is just a fucking shortcut. Killing someone with a rock isn’t any different from killing them with a knife or a gun or a fucking magic wish from your magic stick. You’re fucking killing someone, and they’re fucking dead either way.” He exhales hard from his nose, leaning back in his seat with both hands braced on the edge of the table. “Are we faking my goddamn death or what?”

Chapter End Notes
ed, who grew up literally surrounded by violent, aggressive, and/or outright militarized people who treat verbal assault as a morning pick-me-up and give as good as they get in every interaction: sometimes i have moments of hostility

wizards: ok i don't care what the fuck y'all say that one IS a werewolf and he IS rabid
“I don’t think we necessarily have to fake yours,” Hughes says to Ed. “If we’re vanishing the kid anyway and nobody even knows you were there, there’s no point doing you as well.”

“Are we vanishing the kid?” Ed asks pointedly, looking at the wizards, because they’re almost certainly gonna need their help to convincingly pull it off.

“That depends on whether you plan to cooperate,” Mustang says, not making it clear at all whether he means cooperate with us or cooperate with your government. “Right now it wouldn’t be more than lying to the police, if by staying here Hairy is unfindable by any means save deliberate exposure. Establishing an explicit disappearance will make our ambush much more convincing, however. If we place his wand somewhere remote after the boy is known to have been taken by unknown but obviously hostile parties, it will seem much less likely to be an ambush to our enemies while also giving us the freedom to choose our setting.”

“If you are assumed to be controlling Hairy’s movements, you should be publicly calling for an official search for his whereabouts,” Hughes tells Beardy. “Make it look like you have no clue where he is and that you’re desperate to find him. Our window for making that look convincing is closing - and depends on what you’ve already told the authorities.”

“Only that we do not know his whereabouts, and that we are looking for him,” Beardy says after a short pause.

“Decent groundwork,” Hughes permits. “Gradually step that up into controlled alarm and that should be pretty much all you need, so long as you keep the kid inside until we need him. You said there’ll be other methods to track him - what exactly are we looking at here?”

“There are scrying spells, as well as investigative work,” Beardy says. “The ministry may decide to openly declare a manhunt as well, especially given many believe Hairy to be - rebelling, and liable to make unsafe choices. Hairy is something of a celebrity, you see, due to his surviving Voldemort, and the ministry will want to be seen taking prompt and thorough action which will appease both supporters and naysayers. Under those circumstances he would publicly be declared missing and wanted for questioning, with his image circulated and information requested in exchange for reward.”

“What if we take him to trial anyway,” Pirate says, like he wants Mustang to bite back. Not that that’d work: when it comes to provocation Mustang operates on a scale that Armstrong, Hughes, the entire Amestrian military, Mustang’s entire family and Ed have been personally calibrating for years. Pirate’s gonna have to spit ammonia in Mustang’s eye or something to even register.

Mustang himself looks like he kind of wants to tell Pirate to try harder as he sighs. “I was asked to resolve this situation by a colleague who I personally trust and respect, and as such we are going to see this through regardless of the circumstances,” he says, totally failing to explain that this colleague is General Olivier Armstrong and will personally ram her sword up his dick if he comes back without having fixed her friend’s problem or died trying. “Take him to court or don’t; whether the boy lives or dies is ultimately of much more concern to you, I think, than to me. We can track down the terrorists in other ways, though I think you’ll agree that we would all prefer it didn’t come down to sending Lieutenant Colonel Elric out into the street to shout ‘Voldemort sucks
baboon cock’ or some such through a megaphone and letting things play out naturally from there.”

There’s a stifled noise from Mustache. “If you think he wouldn’t,” Ed says flatly, looking Beardy in the eye, “he really, really would.” He’d deck points for mispronouncing voldemort, too.

“He’s made you do worse,” Hughes agrees, faux-lightly.

Mustang doesn’t even deny it, just shrugs casually. “If you prefer, we can interview the boy, find out what he knows and then leave him to you to hand over to the authorities. From there the op will be in Elric’s hands.”

And that shuts Ed up, because like hell is he gonna let a kid go to jail for what he did. Mustang might as well have added “And when Elric’s hand slips and accidentally razes your prison and disappears the kid anyway, I’ll make some very convincing shocked faces and do some very stern finger wagging.”

It’s probably less obvious to the wizards than it is to him and Hughes, though.

Then again, maybe not. All four wizards give Ed long, long looks, then glance at each other. “I fear you may be right,” Beardy says finally. “Hairy’s safety is paramount, and a trial… may be too great a chance to take, when we have other options to exhaust first.”

“Ambush is a go, then,” Ed says. “We take the wand, set it all up and in the meantime I’ll take a look at the kid and see if he really is haunted or if he just needs antipsychotics.”

“Haunted,” Hughes repeats, amused.

Ed shrugs. “Medically speaking.”

“He’s not haunted,” Pirate says derisively. “Voldy’s no ghost.”

“And if no death eaters take the bait?” Lemons speaks up, before Ed can get sucked into the stupidest terminology argument of his life. “What if you set your ambush and no ones comes? Even if you do avoid the Aurors, the dark lord may simply decide to wait, or determine it is a trap and strike at a better opportunity.”

“We get that elf to sell us out after all,” Ed says. “Grab whoever he meets with instead of whoever would come for the wand.”

“And if that doesn’t work?” Pirate says.

Ed shrugs again. “How much plausible deniability do you want?”

“For what.”

“For all the illegal shit I’m gonna start doing. Your ministry won’t give us access to case files? Fine. We’ll take a look anyway.”

“Fullmetal,” Mustang sighs.

“What? I told him to tap out if he wanted deniability.” Ed scowls at Pirate. “If your lord vermicelli really is fucking around with human transmutation and genocide you want that shit shut down quick. Mustang fucking told you. I’m the expedited option.”

“What about… longer term?” Mustache asks. “Hairy will need to return to hog warts eventually, and term starts soon. If he’s not acquitted at trial, how are we going to manage that? Are we going
to disguise him indefinitely?”

“That was our thought behind allowing him to trial, as well,” Beardy says. “We cannot put Hairy’s life on hold forever.”

“Magic terrorists are trying to kill him,” Ed feels it important to point out. “They’ll put his life on hold a lot more permanently if we just toss him out to have his necessary teen fuckin’ life experiences or whatever.”

“You know, we could use him at hog warts,” Pirate says critically, eyeballing Ed in a distinctly appraising way this time. “Even if he’s acquitted potter needs a closer watch than you can give him with professors, Albus. You could send this one along with him when classes start.”

It takes Ed a second to understand what he’s suggesting, but when he does he feels his blood straight up freeze in his veins. He’s about to open his mouth and tell Pirate how hard he can stuff it when Mustang does it for him. “When does the school start?”

Ed slowly swivels his head to stare at Mustang in total horror. He wouldn’t. He wouldn’t. Oh fucking gods and atoms, he wouldn’t.

“In two weeks’ time,” Beardy says.

Mustang flashes a smile. “I don’t expect this will take that long.”

Ed tries not to visibly slump in relief, but holy hell, that had been a close one. That was exactly the kind of humiliating bullshit Mustang would consider worth the consequences of both whatever Ed would to the fucking high school on top of his personal revenge.

“The fact remains that there is no guarantee your trap will succeed,” Lemons says. “And we are on a time limit.”

Mustang shrugs again. “We’ll give it three days. After that, Elric can… expedite.”

“We’d appreciate suggestions on where to stage the ambush,” Hughes allows. “Someplace with no civilians, ideally, and lots of cover.”

Mustache sends a questioning glance down the table, but Beardy looks thoughtful. “Hog warts has such places,” he says. “Voldemort is unlikely to venture on the grounds themselves, but there are places nearby… yes, I can think of a place that could prove ideal.”

Ed squints. “Hold up. Are you still talking about the school?”

“Yes,” Beardy says. “It is where several members of the order live and work, including Remus, sever us and myself. Should the need arise we will be able to retreat behind its defenses quickly.”

“Your proposed ambush site,” Hughes says, very slowly, “is a school?”

“It is the most fortified location in great Britain, with centuries of layered wards, including those laid down by the founders themselves,” Beardy says, with nerve enough to have a thread of reproach in his tone.

“Does it have any kids?” Ed demands. They said term hasn’t started yet, but images flick past in Ed’s mind, of Risembool’s one schoolhouse being repurposed every summer as a place to stick the kids you can’t leave at home but too young to join the field work, of the Central city schoolyards full of summer soccer leagues and daycare programs and nature camp classes; schools are never
empty. “We’re not doing this at a school. No fucking way.”

“There are no students at the castle until term starts,” Beardy says. “On this you have my word as head master.”

“I don’t care if you’re prince of the goddamn pig farts, you’re not gonna be able to guarantee no kids, not anywhere near it, not under any circumstances, not even in the neighborhood it’s in,” Ed says unequivocally. “We’re not running a goddamn drop raid in some white picket fence hood. You can’t clear that.”

“Did you say castle?” Hughes says.

“Indeed. Hog warts is a castle in Scotland,” Beardy says, twinkling a little and by all appearances completely insensate to anything Ed just said. “There is a village nearby, a few miles’ distance. We would not be able to stage the ambush at the school in any case, as it would be far too obvious a trap. The area is remote, rural, with little opportunities for hostage taking,” he adds, this time directly to Ed; probably because the glare Ed’s sending him is gonna make his beard smolder if he keeps ignoring him. “There is, however, a bar in the village frequented by, shall we say, those less lawfully inclined, and the owner is a close friend of mine, though not directly involved in any faction, and our connection not well known as a result. He would agree to have us, for this.”

“That definitely sounds like an option,” Mustang says noncommittally. “We would have to evaluate it in person beforehand, of course. Should it not suit, can we rely on you to provide other locations? Say, three or so.”

“I can look into it,” Mustache volunteers, glancing down the table again to check with Beardy.

Pirate grunts. “Say it all goes right. Say they take the bait. Say Voldy himself shows up, not taking any chances, with everything he can throw at dumbell door, and aims it at you. What are you going to do?”

“That brings us to what I initially wished to meet about, actually,” Mustang says smoothly. “As you know, we are only beginning to explore what exactly magic is capable of. Some examples of common combat techniques would be very useful, as well as what we might expect specifically from the terrorists, if you could arrange a demonstration. We’ll need an idea of what to prepare for in terms of offensive capabilities.”

“Yeah, we’re not going live without a demo of this shit,” Ed says. “Also, whatever you’ve got on your soul copying, splitting, whatever, I need all of that. The more info we have the better we can understand what’s going on with the kid.” Because if there’s anything like a human transmutation array there Ed will recognize it, and that’ll at least be some hard evidence to work with.

“I’m afraid the particulars of those spells are very highly restricted,” Beardy says all lying apologetic. “Additionally, it was my understanding that you requested translation assistance to read…?”

“Well you clearly know all about them,” Ed says sourly, not appreciating the reminder that around here he’s functionally illiterate. “Why don’t you run us through what you know.”

“I know only the shape of what Riddle must have done, not the substance. I’m afraid much of our own knowledge is conjecture… I have not made as much a study of the dark arts as perhaps I should, and in truth few have. Fewer still who know the secrets of creating a whore crux.” Beardy sighs. “All the same, I will tell you - it would merely be most sensible, I believe, to discuss it when Hairy explains to you what he saw,” he adds, then slides his gaze to Mustang. “As for
demonstrations… yes, I believe we can accommodate. Provided, of course, we get an idea of your capabilities in turn. It will allow us to make sure you know what to be prepared for, and what may prove to be a specific danger to you.”

“Certainly,” Mustang says in his of course, Fuhrer, I would never dream of leading a coup against you voice. “I assume the yard space attached to this house will be suitable for this purpose.”

Pirate grunts. “Bones should be there,” he says. “You too, Snape.”

“This evening, then,” Beardy says. “Amelia gets out of court at six. In the meantime, we can make a start on our very convincing inquiries as to where Hairy potter has gone.”

Ed sits back slightly now that it looks like the wizards are at least nominally going along with the plan. “Any chance at all of laying hands on some case files?” Hughes asks. “Since we’re defying your ministry after all.”

“I will see what I can do,” Beardy says, which probably means he’s not even gonna try. “When do you plan to examine Hairy?”

“Right fuckin’ now,” Ed says, pushing back from the table. “Not like we can use him without capping your shitty alleged ghost leak. Come if you’re coming.”

“It’s not a ghost,” Pirate growls aggrievedly under his breath, but Ed ignores him.

Chapter End Notes

The trace as is explained in hp canon is wildly inconsistent and frankly horseshit. I posit it’s placed on wands at time of manufacture (since wands are registered like cars are) & deactivated if sold to an adult.

Moody, thinking he should remind this arrogant little swot that however hardcore he thinks he is he's still minimum twenty years younger than everyone else at the table, and utterly unaware of the fact that mustang is exactly petty enough to throw all caution to the wind and make it happen: lol u should go back to school kid

Mustang: HA! Keep pissing me off and i’ll see what i can do

Aberforth: you volunteered my bar for WHAT
“He’s really not that bad.”

Harry tries not to twitch. It’s the first thing anyone’s said since the really tall blond man introduced himself as Chaos and pointed out the others as Hawkeye, Arget and Jones, after Elric had pushed Harry into a sofa and slammed back out. Back to the meeting with Dumbledore, where Harry had been brought in for all of two seconds and then unceremoniously kicked out again. He’d thought he would finally be getting some answers, but Dumbledore had barely glanced at him, again, and told him he’d explain later, again.

It occurs to him that someone said something. “What?”

It’s the Chaos bloke again. He’s the one looking over at Harry, absently shuffling a deck of cards with his elbows braced on his knees. “The boss. Lieutenant Colonel Elric, I mean.” He opens his mouth to say more, then pulls a face. “I was gonna say his bark is worse than his bite, but that’s wrong in pretty much every conceivable way.”

The Hawkeye woman gives a very tiny snort. She doesn’t look up from the book she’s reading. The cover features two crossed battle axes over an illustrated splatter of blood.

“Don’t worry,” pipes up the girl Chaos had pointed out as Arget. “I know things are difficult for your people right now, but they sent you all metal and flame. You’ll be alright.”

“They boss is a good guy,” Chaos agrees. “Don’t let the yelling scare you, he’s just like that. Volume dial got stuck at birth or something.”

“Right,” Harry says, eyeing the multiple gun holsters on everyone’s waist. They don’t look much like the soldiers he’s seen on the telly and occasionally on the tube; their uniforms are bright blue and old-fashioned-looking and practically everybody has the kind of hairstyle Aunt Petunia would aggressively disapprove of, but they’re still unmistakably soldiers. They’re also all sharp-faced, white and blond - minus the one introduced as Jones, who’s black with long dreads in a neat bun - and it’s kind of making Harry feel like he somehow ended up in a room full of Malfoy cousins. Nobody’s been a berk to him or anything - yet - and they all seem pretty relaxed, actually, but something about the way they hold themselves reminds him of Malfoy’s father.

Harry thought that was just how you stood when you were thoroughly posh, but maybe not. Maybe it’s just the way you stand if you think you’re better than everybody else in the room. Or maybe it’s just if you’ve probably killed someone.

Harry feels vaguely guilty to make such an unfair judgment about people who’ve really only just sat there and kind of apologized for their colleague - Elric did kill two dementors - but on the other hand that Mustang officer is some kind of horrifying Snape-Lockhart hybrid and Elric makes no secret of how he thinks everybody besides him is about as bright as a concussed troll.

These four seem… not like that, but it’s not like Harry’s known them longer than five minutes. None of them are staring at him, at least. Chaos fishes a packet of cigarettes out of his uniform jacket; the Hawkeye woman calmly keeps reading her axe book. The other two keep doing… whatever they’re doing at the table on the other side of the room. Harry considers trying to get up
with an excuse that he’s just going to the toilet, but he can still feel Elric’s grip on his shoulder as he’d effortlessly planted Harry into the sofa cushions. His hand felt like a sock full of walnuts.

There’s no guarantee Chaos wouldn’t just follow him to the bathroom, either. He’d seemed pretty cowed by Elric, even if he is defending him to Harry now.

Well, if they don’t call him back in to the meeting in five minutes, Harry’s going to try anyway.

Chaos shuffles the cards again, then does a complicated move to fold them into one neat stack and waggles it at Harry. “You wanna play cards?”

Chapter End Notes

me trying to write british person pov: OY MISTA, YOU ME WIZARD?
Ed snags the bag of equipment before he shoves back into Camp Amestris ahead of Mustang, Hughes and the wizards, where Hawkeye and Havoc are sitting opposite Hairy on the couches and Jones and Arget are on either side of one of the end tables, fiddling with a comms radio and writing. Havoc has an unlit cigarette in his mouth and is paused in the middle of a hand of cards with the kid.

“Yo,” Ed says as they all look up at his entrance, dropping the pack next to Hawkeye and then pushing three fingers against Havoc’s cards to show them flat. “Deadman right off the bat? Havoc, we’re representing all of goddamn Amestris here. Have the decency to at least teach him how to cheat.”

“I showed him the deck was marked!”

“You told him not to pay attention to the little scratches on the backs of the cards,” Hawkeye says dryly, putting away her book.

“It was a skill evaluation! You need to see where people are at before you start teaching them -”

“Yeah, yeah, save it for the court martial. You, stand up,” Ed adds to Hairy, snapping his fingers. “We gotta check for that extra soul piece. Show me the mark.”

“What?” Hairy says intelligently.

“How the ‘dark lord’ fuckin’ ‘marked you’ or whatever,” Ed says, rolling his eyes and scrunching bunny quotes with his fingers. “If you even have one.”

“You want to see my scar?” Hairy says, sounding annoyed, glancing between Ed and everybody else filing in behind him.

“Sure,” Ed says, because that’s as good a contender as any. “Let’s start there. Where is it?”

Hairy hesitates, casting hostile looks at Ed and Lemons and more uncertain ones at Mustache and Beardy. Mustache nods at him with what might be meant as an encouraging look on his face, so Hairy puts his hand to his forehead and lifts his wild hair out of the way.

There is a scar there - small, jagged, reddened. “That’s convenient,” Ed says, pushing the coffee table aside with his foot so he can get close and lean in. “Least it’s not somewhere embarrassing.”

“Did you say soul piece?” Havoc asks, like he already knows he’s gonna hate the answer.

“Yeah, it’s a whole damn clown show,” Ed tells him distractedly, examining the scar from a dozen centimeters away; Hairy’s going a little cross eyed trying to stare him down. “They think when lord rigatoni blew himself up he accidentally stapled his soul onto the kid here. Or something. And now they have telepathy.”

“What?” Hairy yelps, jerking back.

“Hold still,” Ed growls, pinning the kid by one shoulder.

“What do you mean, Voldemort’s soul?” Hairy demands, fists clenched, muscles bunching under Ed’s grip. “Is that why I - I’m -”
“I don’t know, you tell me,” Ed says impatiently, still trying to get a look at the kid’s scar even though he’s not holding his hair away anymore. “What are your symptoms?”

“Symptoms of what?” Hairy says hotly. “Being possessed by Voldemort?”

“Okay, make up your fucking minds here,” Ed snaps, throwing up his hands and stepping away; the kid’s clearly freaking about being pinned and they need to clear this up regardless. “You say he’s thinks he’s possessed, he thinks he’s not, what’s the fucking deal?”

“I never said I was possessed!” Hairy says hotly.

“Well *they* sure as shit think you are,” Ed says frankly, jerking his thumb at Beardy & Co. “Said you were having weird snake dreams and how apparently that qualifies. Hey - bring what’s her face, Miss Redhead, get her in here,” he adds, abruptly recalling what Smartypants told him. “She thinks she got possessed too, right?”

Hairy gapes slightly, going from hostility to guppy-faced shock in no time flat. “She did,” he says, in tones of bewildered acknowledgment.

“Two years ago, right? And if she’s not possessed *now*, what changed,” Ed says, half thinking out loud. If she’d even been possessed at all, or had just been living somewhere with hallucinogenic mold at the time or something. Given the state of this house, Ed would not at all be surprised.

Beardy coughs. “Her experience was somewhat different to yours, Hairy. She was possessed by a piece of Voldemort’s soul, yes, but it was not bound to her.”

Hairy’s face slowly creases in confusion. Mustang sighs. “Havoc, go get… who are we looking for, Fullmetal?”

“One of the kids. Redhead girl, ‘bout this tall.”

“Her name’s gin ee,” Hairy says, though he’s still looking at Beardy and sounding subdued.

“Gin ee Weasely,” Mustache says. “I can fetch her.”

“Please do,” Beardy says politely. Mustang lets it stand, waving Havoc down. Ed turns back to Hairy; might as well get this out of the way. “Are you gonna let me check you over?” he asks bluntly.

That ends his moment of guppification. “Do I have a choice?” he shoots back.

“No really, no,” Ed says.

Hairy scowls. “Fine.”

Ed leans back in, matching scowl for scowl, squinting through the hair. There’s no rune that he can see, and the scar itself isn’t even remotely rune-shaped. No air shimmer either, even when he waves the kid to tilt his head to the side and up to see it from different angles. Nothing is ever easy, is it. “I’m gonna touch you,” Ed warns, tugging the glove off his left hand.

“You already touched me.”

“I mean your scar. Hold still,” Ed growls when Hairy flinches back. “This isn’t gonna hurt.”

Saying it like that never reassures people, Fullmetal,” Mustang sighs again. “At least try for some bedside manner. What would your brother do?”
“Al handcuffs uncooperative patients to the gurney,” Ed says incredulously. “Have you met Al? You want me to do it his way, I can, and I’ll even sound sorry when I apologize just like he does.”

“You’re a doctor?” Hairy says, like the idea of Ed holding an MD is a horror too great to fully comprehend.

“No, I’m one of three living experts on soul transmutation,” Ed says, exasperated. “It’s why the fuck I got sent on this goddamn op. It’s also why I’m trying to get a look at your special fucking forehead, because if you do have some extra soul stuck in there, we might be able to remove it.”

“Oh,” Hairy says.

“Next time lead with that one,” Mustang says.

“Y’all can shut up in the peanut gallery,” Ed says tartly, then tells Hairy, “I’m gonna put my hand on your head. Don’t move.”

Hairy scowls again, but less than before and obligingly doesn’t move. Ed puts his palm to the kid’s forehead. Doing the composition trick on living things is always kind of yucky, though ever since Al figured out qi he’s been insisting Ed’s doing it wrong; Ed maintains that he’s just better at the non-biological sciences, thanks, and that feeling sap gushing and blood pumping and organs organing is plain fucking disgusting no matter how good you are at it. It’s why Al’s the one in medicine.

Ed focuses on pure composition first, reducing the info to base elements, and yep, that’s a human body all right. Actual amounts vary but the ratios stay more or less the same, carbon water salt salt salt salt, and with some effort he redirects to shape, doing his best to ignore the unpleasant… squelchiness…. of feeling. Knowing the sensation is entirely in his head does not help: of course it’s in his fucking head, that’s where all his experiences are.

Nothing weird in the elements, structure, shape. Well, not like Ed was expecting much different. He had to try to rule out unknowns, but there’s no material aspect to a soul. A blood rune works by creating an energy field that traps the soul in place, linking and binding it to whatever it’s attached to; Ed knows how it works, but for him to quantify exactly what energy that field is he suspects he’d have to feed a couple more organs or something to the Gate. Maybe not even then. The most infuriating aspect of Gate-given knowledge is that while you can understand, so much of it you just straight up can’t fucking explain. The information does not get transferred, it does not get shared, it just fucking sits in you like a bloody stone. God’s funniest motherfucking joke.

Then again, the Truth isn’t for helping people. It’s not for anything. The truth just is.

There’s nothing odd that Ed can pick out about the composition of the kid’s physical body, and there doesn’t appear to be any kind of rune, at least on his forehead. Al could probably get more, between his qi-sensing and his medical training; if there is something here, though, Ed’s not likely to find it. Not this way, anyway.

He opens his eyes and peels his hand off the kid’s forehead. “Well, you’re definitely alive,” Ed says, more to Hairy’s dreading look than to impart any useful information. Hairy rubs at his forehead like Ed’s touch is gonna give him acne and looks resentful.

“Oh all the peanut gallery,” Ed says tartly, then tells Hairy, “I’m gonna put my hand on your head. Don’t move.”

Hairy scowls again, but less than before and obligingly doesn’t move. Ed puts his palm to the kid’s forehead. Doing the composition trick on living things is always kind of yucky, though ever since Al figured out qi he’s been insisting Ed’s doing it wrong; Ed maintains that he’s just better at the non-biological sciences, thanks, and that feeling sap gushing and blood pumping and organs organing is plain fucking disgusting no matter how good you are at it. It’s why Al’s the one in medicine.

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expecting fireworks you’re gonna stay disappointed.”

Hughes and Havoc snort in tandem somewhere behind them. Assholes. “No rune?” Mustang says, wandering up to not quite hover at Ed’s shoulder.

“Not sure.”

Mustang peers at Hairy; Hairy transfers his glare to him. “Could the scar be part of a rune? The shape…”

Ed shrugs, digging out the tiny emergency flashlight from his jacket. “Could be one third of the Middle Xerxean glyph for ‘sewage’.”

“Cute,” Mustang says dryly, shifting back again. “What else?”

“Well, there’s no magic in it. Not right there, anyway. Probably.” Ed sticks the flashlight between his teeth and goes to clap - only to have Mustang grab his wrist for the second time today, mother fucker. Ed spits out the flashlight. “Oh my god, fucking what?”

Mustang gives him a serious look, his gaze flickering to Ed’s hands for a second. “Fullmetal -”

“What? The fuck are you - are you serious? How stupid do you fucking think I am, you bastard? Seriously?”

“You have a history with making rash decisions in certain circumstances,” Mustang says, letting go of Ed’s arm.

“Oh sure, let me just transmute it the fuck off him, ram my ass headfirst into the Gate, lose a couple fingers and toes when Truth shows up like “the fuck is this, bring your kid to work day?” and kicks me the fuck back out - fuck alone knows what he’ll lose - and if we’re lucky we’ll come out the other end with him missing only half his skull,” Ed says sarcastically. “Or maybe his skull intact but missing the entire fuckin’ brain, though around here maybe that’ll just make him a better wizard. No, dumbass, I want to look at it in UV.”

“By all means,” Mustang says grandly, like Ed was asking for permission or something.

“Is there a problem?” Beardy says mildly, now standing closer than he was before.

“No, I was mistaken,” Mustang says casually, like he didn’t just go for Ed’s arm like he thought he was gonna stab the kid. “Carry on.”

“Looking at me like I just fell off the turnip truck, the fucking nerve of some people,” Ed mutters, tossing the flashlight into the air to clap and catch it in the transmutation on the way down. The mercury and silica he pulls from his left bracer - Al’s idea, to keep a little bit of the compounds he commonly uses to modify equipment on him to keep him from cannibalizing whatever’s nearby for his necessary elements - and this particular flashlight he’s transmuted into a UV bulb so often that the aluminum casing never loses the sloppy transmutation marks anymore.

At least this time he’s not using it to look at gross bodily fluids around horribly murdered people. Ed scowls to see Hairy now pressed back against the couch as far away as he can get. “Seriously? We just went over this.”

“What are you doing to my skull exactly,” Hairy says tersely.

“Shining a light on it,” Ed says impatiently. “Some stuff shows up under blacklight that doesn’t in
the normal spectrum. For fuck’s sake, everything I do right now is gonna be by necessity non-

invasive, o-kay? That means we’re not doing anything to it, we’re just looking. Nobody’s fucking
around with your soul or your head until we know exactly what we’re dealing with.” Then, as an
afterthought, “And not until you tell us what you saw at the resurrection process.”

“Pardon me for getting a bit concerned, with all your talk of handcuffing and missing brains and
cutting my skull in half,” Hairy says acidly.

Ed grins at him. “That’s the spirit. Here, close your eyes, this is gonna be bright.”

Hairy chooses to squint heavily instead, so Ed holds his palm flat with the edge near the kid’s

So far, fucking nada. “Blacklight ink is the go-to trick for ‘invisible’ writing,” Ed says, doing
another pass just to make sure before clicking the flashlight off. “You can use other shit, but this is
the go-to for a lot of people and it’s always worth checking just in case. You got nothing,” he
informs the kid, pulling up his sleeve a bit, clapping again and pressing the flashlight to the bracer
to return everything back to how it was.

“In conclusion?” Mustang says, now on the other side of the coffee table, arms folded.

“No conclusion,” Ed says. “Physically, anyway. If it really is a soul, our best bet is getting a qi
sensor to take a look at him.” They might have to bring Al over after all.

“And if it is a soul. How are you getting it off him?”

Ed shrugs. “Al,” he says simply. “Or take him to Xing, maybe, after we clean up here. The
Imperial alkahestrists have a whole, y’know, spiritualism thing, and they can do some pretty wild
shit, apparently.”

“Have I got Voldemort in my head or not,” Hairy says crossly.

“We just told you, it’s inconclusive,” Ed says. “You need specialist testing to get a hard answer on
the physical. We can get you one later. Talk about your symptoms now, your snake dreams,
whatever. That might give us more to go on.” And let Ed know if he should look up the specifics
of, like, silver poisoning or local recreational youth hallucinogenic substances of choice or
something.

Hairy’s scowl is back to being more upset than mutinous. Shame; Ed was starting to like the little
bastard when he’d stopped being all panicky. Hairy glances what could be a question at Beardy,
who’s looking at Ed but answers anyway. “You may as well start at the beginning, Hairy.”

Hairy sucks in a breath slowly. “Alright,” he says, rubbing one wrist and now staring fixedly into
hideous varnish of the coffee table. “In… first year, when I was eleven…”
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

the sheer amount of hp wiki synopses and googling i had to do to get details of wtf even happened..... this is what i get for writing in fandoms where i am only glancing familiar with canon

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“When I was eleven,” Hairy repeats haltingly, then stops and frowns at Beardy like he’s just remembered something. “Wait. Wasn’t Quirrell possessed too?”

Ed has to throw up his hands again. “Another one?”

“He had Voldemort’s face growing out of the back of his head,” Hairy says, gesturing vaguely like that explains anything. “Under his turban.”

“What the whole-ass fuck,” Ed says blankly.

“He was indeed possessed,” Beardy says. “What other magics Voldemort may have used to bind himself so to a willing host, we do not know, but his drinking of unicorn blood suggests his tie was particularly strong to that body, which is what I suspect allowed for certain… physical manifestation.”


“Dead,” Hairy says, back to staring through the coffee table. “I - killed him.”

Ed’s eyebrows bounce up briefly. He may have fucked up a lot by the time he was fourteen or so, but he hadn’t managed to outright kill anyone. On the other hand, this kid could probably only kill by accident, and he looks pretty bent out of shape about it regardless. “What happened?”

Hairy’s face twists further. “He attacked me. Touching me burned him, so I - grabbed on, and. Yeah.”

Ed’s eyebrows climb further. “Is ‘burning magic death touch’ like the teleporting, or are you just an extra special link in this daisy chain?”

That gets Hairy back to scowling at Ed all belligerent and confused. “What?”

“His mother cast formidable protective magic on him shortly before she died, specifically against Voldemort,” Beardy says quietly. “She sank her life force into it and tied it in blood. Up until very recently, this meant that Voldemort - or whoever he possessed - could not touch Hairy without coming to harm themselves.”

Well that sounds like a lot of holy shit for later. “Up until recently? What, magic burning death touch expired?”

“No,” Hairy says flatly. “Voldemort used my blood to bring himself back. He touched me to prove
it. Made a point of it,” he adds, bitter.

Right. Kidnappee. Ugh, this is why Al handles the traumatized ones. At least this kid’s only flinching occasionally and not crying; he’s mostly just angry. Angry, Ed can do. Ed’s great with angry.

On the other hand, it’s not like they have the timeline for Ed to tell the kid to suck it up, get dangerous and get his own back. “That blows,” he says instead. What’s Al always saying about building a rapport? Put yourself in their shoes, demonstrate sympathy or whatever. “You should get counseling about it, that shit can fuck you up if you don’t deal with it head on.” Ed pauses to reflect on what would make him feel better. He can’t invite the kid to be raid muscle when he has to be the bait, though. Plus Ed would have to provide one hell of a set of training wheels, given the kid’s obvious total lack of combat training.

Whatever, what they need right now is for him to talk more. “The more we know about what happened, the faster we can drop this fuck. You wanna tell me about the resurrection?”

Hairy’s giving him another confused look, but this one’s more wall-eyed than belligerent. He opens his mouth and is immediately interrupted by Mustache re-entering, with Miss Redhead behind him. Oh, and Psycho too. How super. Hairy looks relieved as hell, though, twisting around to give them a oh thank fuck it’s the cavalry look.

“Hairy,” Psycho says, immediately going over and sitting down next to him on the couch and shooting Ed a hostile look along the way. Parent? Not much resemblance. “You should’ve come and fetched me.”

“I don’t think they would’ve let me leave the room,” Hairy mutters.

“Is that so,” Psycho says frostily, hostility ramping in Ed’s direction.

“You were all so fuckin’ hype to disappear him before we could chat, we figured we better make our own guarantees,” Ed says sweetly, sending Psycho his glare right back before turning to Miss Redhead and waving her over. “You got possessed, yeah?”

“Yeah,” she says, no hesitation, coming over to stand by the other end of the couch with her arms folded. “Why?”

“They’re trying to find out if I’m possessed by Voldemort,” Hairy says wearily.

Miss Redhead’s eyebrows bounce up. “You blacking out?”

“No.”

“Waking up in places with no idea how you got there? Doing things you don’t remember? Sleepwalking?”

“No?”

“All that shit is pretty normal in cases of carbon monoxide poisoning,” Ed has to point out.

“I spoke parcel mouth, slaughtered thirty chickens with my bare hands in an hour and opened the chamber of secrets,” Miss Redhead says, rolling her eyes. “That wasn’t exactly my normal eleven year old skillset.”

Ed is briefly distracted from the rest of the nonsense by the staggering incompetence rousing his
inner ex-farmhand and ex-butcher’s apprentice both. “It took you an hour to kill thirty chickens? What, did you chase each one three times around the yard first?”

“How should I know? I was possessed,” Miss Redhead says incredulously.

“Your ghost was a shit farmer,” Ed informs her.

“What do ghosts have to do with it?” she says exasperatedly.

“Uh, were you possessed or weren’t you?”

“We told you, it was Voldemort.”

“Ghosts can’t possess people,” Hairy says, frowning. “Right? They just go right through.”

Ed pauses. “The way you keep talking about ghosts like they’re real is starting to concern me.”

Miss Redhead gives him a prize idiot look. “Ghosts are real.”

None of the adult wizards in the room are disputing this. Pirate is grinning, in fact, and Lemons looks like he might be trying to figure out how to smile.

Ed turns to Mustang. “I quit.”

“And only for the third time this month,” Mustang says, pretty calmly for a guy who also just heard the wizards confidently assert ghost realdom. Maybe he’s just decided to treat anything they say as bat guano right from the start. “Do I need to start carrying around a copy of your contract with me?”

Mustache coughs slightly. “Ghosts are stable, sentient impressions of witches and wizards who have died in circumstances that left them feeling unable to move on,” he says. “They cannot possess anyone or anything, and they cannot perform any magic. Actual possession is very rare - things that can manage it have sentience but no stable or rather unsupported form of existence without a host.”

“Magical parasites,” Beardy says. “They absorb the life force of their host, and in worst cases subsume them entirely.”

“You know what, fine, whatever,” Ed says, waving a hand to shelve all that away from his mental workspace for a second. “You said what happened to her -” he points - “is not what happened to him.” His finger swings to Hairy. “And also not what happened to the squirrel guy. Explain.”

Beardy sighs and moves over to one of the unoccupied armchairs in the corner, pulling out his stick and waving it; the air around the armchair bursts into shimmers as the armchair itself bursts into a larger, more flowery, aggressively lime green armchair and scoots closer to the couches. Ed controls his reflexive jerk only through the knowledge of how stupid he’ll look if he’s spooked by a floral armchair. “As I told Hairy, I fear we may have to start from the beginning to give you a comprehensive picture,” Beardy says, sitting down in his crime against nature.

“Well shit, we got time,” Ed says, planting his ass on the coffee table and gesturing grandly. “Your claim is he got his chunk of soul glued on when he was a baby, right? What happened to her?”

“Hold on,” Hughes says; when Ed glances over he’s staring hard at Beardy. “Is this classified?

Beardy stares back, and it looks like something at least gets communicated; thank fuck Hughes
figured out how to get *something* through wizard skulls. “The details of Miss Weasely’s possession are common knowledge,” Beardy says finally, which probably means *the Hairy kid knows what happened there already*. “As are what happened with Quirrell, at least among those in this room. Hairy himself was involved in resolving both.”

“*Really,*” Ed says, turning back to the kids. “What happened?”

Miss Redhead and Hairy glance at each other. “Well, I got possessed second year,” the girl says.

“Malfoy gave her a book, only it turned out to be Voldemort’s,” Hairy says.

“He’d put a piece of his soul in it,” Miss Redhead says. “It was meant to open the chamber of secrets.”

“The what,” Ed says. He can feel a headache coming on.

“You may want to start from the beginning,” Beardy repeats, with a remarkably straight face.

“Okay,” Miss Redhead says, glancing at Beardy and taking a deep breath in, “so hog warts has this room, under the dungeons -”

“You can only get in if you speak parcel mouth,” Hairy puts in.

“- right, and it’s hidden - but anyway, everybody thought it was a myth until people started getting attacked .”

Things do not appreciably improve in coherence from there. Ed would almost suspect them of tangling the narrative on purpose, except the girl’s putting on her tough face and Hairy’s clearly deeply worried. The adult wizards not stepping in, though… it could be them not wanting to interfere with the firsthand retelling, but somehow Ed doubts it.

The two kids wander their way through killing chickens (why?) talking to spiders (what?) and hearing voices in the walls while everybody was petrified (another potential point to the carbon monoxide option?), and when they start talking about somebody moaning in some bathroom Ed has to wave them into silence.

“There was an object, a book, that the soul was bound to,” Ed tries to distill. “And by reading the book, you got possessed?”

“By writing in it.”

“Sure, whatever. By *interacting* with it, you got possessed?” She nods. “So how did you get *un* possessed? Did you just stop touching it?”

“No, we had to… Hairy had to stab it. With a fang.”

That can’t be translating right. “A what?”

“The Basilisk,” Hairy says. “Slither ins monster. It was in the chamber of secrets. I used one of its fangs.”

Ed pauses, then pulls the translation rock from his back pocket and shakes it slightly. “Say again?”

“Giant snake,” Miss Redhead says, in the tone of one realizing she has to use small words. “Venom melts through anything, kills people with its eyes. Hairy killed it with a sword.”
“No shit?” Beardy, Mustache, Psycho and Miss Redhead all nod. Ed glances over at Hairy in surprise. The little beanstring doesn’t look like he has the muscle to do a pushup, let alone swing a sword, but appearances can be deceiving. Maybe he’s one of the berserker types. “Nice.”

“I had help,” Hairy mutters, looking massively uncomfortable.

“I would’ve died if it wasn’t for Hairy,” Miss Redhead says matter-of-factly. “He killed the Basilisk, then he took its fang and stabbed the diary.”

“Diary?”

“The book. It was Voldemort’s diary from when he was in school,” Hairy says, grimacing. Psycho rubs his shoulder. “Malfy must have got it straight from him.”

“Who’s this Malfy guy?”

“Lucius Malfy,” Hairy says bitterly. “He’s a death eater.”

“Hold on,” Hughes cuts in; Ed twists to look at him. He’s staring hard at Beardy. “You didn’t mention you’ve confirmed the identity of an active cell member.”

Beardy shakes his head slowly. “Lucius Malfy was acquitted -”

“He was there,” Hairy interrupts, as close to a real snarl as Ed’s heard from him so far. “Voldemort named him. I know what his bloody voice sounds like.”

“He was where?” Ed says, suspecting he already knows.

“When Voldemort brought himself back,” Hairy says tightly, still staring at Beardy.

“And do we know where this Lucius Malfy lives?” Hughes says, very evenly.

“Malfy is a discussion for later,” Lemons says, eyes briefly flicking to Hairy. Right, he might be broadcasting all this to Terrorist HQ. “You said you wished to hear the details of the resurrection?”

“Yeah, we do,” Ed says, turning back to Hairy; the kid looks ready to spit nails and determined to aim at least one through Lemons’ eyeball. Psycho looks pretty much the same, actually. “Yo, cool it,” Ed tells them both. “Your Malfy asshole’s a dead man walking, don’t worry about him right now. Tell me about what you saw.”

Psycho looks kind of surprised, but Hairy immediately turns to Hughes, which is another pleasant surprise pointing towards him not being as much of a wet blanket as he first appears. Hughes’ look goes from stone cold murder (relaxed eyes, friendly smile) to genuine amusement (vaguely deranged eyes, psychotic smirk) when he notices. “Don’t worry, I don’t forget,” he chirps. “You go ahead and tell the nice Lieutenant Colonel all about it! I’ll just wait right here and think my thinky thoughts to myself.”

“Holy fuck, he’s like fourteen, Hughes, not four,” Ed says disgustedly. Hughes gasps and mimes being stabbed to gruesome death as Ed turns back to Hairy. “Seriously, chill. He’s an idiot but when he paints a target he hits it. Tell me about the resurrection.”

“I’m fifteen,” Hairy mutters, sounding it.

“Wow, amazing,” Ed says impatiently. Does he need to prompt the kid? Maybe he really is four,
it’s usually younger witnesses that need to be led around like this. “You said you got kidnapped, yeah? Did they grab you from home, from school, what?”

“From the try wizard tournament,” Hairy says. “At hog warts. I - there was a port key. When we touched it, me and Cedric -”

He cuts off there, jaw tight, and Mustache leans forward slightly. “Cedric Diggory was another competitor,” he tells Ed, like he expects him to know what the hell kind of wizard sportsball they’re talking about. “Another student of hog warts. He and Hairy were transported together to the site of Voldemort’s resurrection.”


Underage kidnappee whose kidnapping upgraded him to murder witness right off the bat, fucking amazing. Ed resists the urge to rub his face. “Where did you get taken?”

“Graveyard,” Hairy says shortly. “Voldemort’s family was buried there. He used his dad’s bones in the ritual.”

Oh boy. Digging up remains for human transmutation, pretty standard as far as trespasses against the laws of life and death go, but using your loved one’s corpse to make a body for yourself? That’s a level of fucked up even Ed hasn’t seen yet. “What was around you? Was the ritual already in progress?”

“No,” Hairy says. “I - whenever Voldemort’s around, my scar hurts. This one was so bad I couldn’t move. And - my leg was hurt, in the tournament. I couldn’t really see until worm tail tied me to a headstone.”

Hughes raises a hand briefly in a *hold up* gesture. “Worm tail?”

“A death eater,” Mustache says quietly. “Peter petty grew. He was the one to betray the potters to Voldemort, leading him to their door.”

Miss Redhead unfolds and refolds her arms like she wants to do something, and Psycho clasps Hairy’s shoulder in a kind of awkward sympathy rub. They don’t look at each other - well, Psycho’s still busy growling at Ed with his eyes and Hairy’s staring at his own knees - but Hairy slumps slightly under the hand. “Worm tail had a cauldron ready,” he says dully. “It already had a potion in it. He put in bones from Voldemort’s dad, then his own hand, then some of my blood.”

It’s Ed’s turn to pause with one palm up. “His hand?”

“Yeah. He cut his own hand off,” Hairy says. “Voldemort made him a new one.”

Ed’s never heard of any array requiring a base ingredient like *that*. What was it *for*? Biological material from three different people - two living, one dead - was this guy trying to make himself into some kind of human chimera? Three sets of human genetic code into one? *Why?* Though supposedly incorporating the kid’s blood *had* made him immune to the kid’s dead-mom-powered burny magic death hands.

“What was the worm guy for?” Ed says aloud. “Your blood to negate the protective magic, his dad’s bones to base his body construct off of… unless he’s basing it on the worm guy? Did he come out looking similar?”

Hairy makes a plainly disgusted face at that, which is at least an improvement on all the trauma
staring. “No, uh. Worm tail is short, and Voldemort came out of the cauldron really tall.” His face
scrunches in distaste. “He looked like a snake.”

“No?” Miss Redhead says, grimacing. “Like… scales?”

“Kind of,” Hairy says, grimacing back. “His skin looked all waxy and his eyes were red. And he
had no nose.”

Yikes. That sure as shit sounds like chimerism, though this is sounding like the most complicated
staggered recombination Ed’s ever heard of. When the fuck did they add the animal genes, if those
were even added at all? Though if there was a - potion, whatever the fuck - already prepared, who
the fuck knew what could be in it.

“How did they get the soul into the body?” Ed says aloud. “Was Wally whatever possessing the
worm guy? Was there anything inscribed on the ground, any lights, what?”

A really sick baby. Worm tail put it in the cauldron after he put my blood in and there was white
light and then Voldemort came out.” He gives Ed another of those confused looks he’s real good
at. “I don’t think there was anything on the ground. Just grass.”

And grass is a shit medium to draw arrays on, ask Ed how he fuckin’ knows. Though apparently
there was a fucking… cauldron… and there might have been arrays on the inside of that. Or no
arrays at all, who the fuck knows. “And that was it? What about - the other kid who died. Did they
involve him in it at all?”

Hairy’s jaw clenches. “No. They just killed him and left him lying there.”

“Nobody else was killed?”

“No,” Hairy says, now glaring up at Ed with just as much narrow-eyed hostility as Psycho. “I got
tortured a bit, though, that was fun.”

Ed grins back at him, friendly, showing teeth. “That right there, keep that up,” he says. “It’s gonna
get you a lot farther than moping. Nobody else dead, that’s something, at least.” He turns Beardy
and the adults. “What do we know about the technicals of the process?”

Nobody says anything for a second, Mustache, Psycho and Miss Redhead all looking at him like
they want to say something but aren’t sure what the hell it even is. Lemons is back to the extra sour
but Pirate is grinning again, this time looking much less like it’s at Ed’s expense. Ed scowls back
on principle.

“What I have been able to find on the topic is scant, but it is purported to be a very old ritual, used
by dark wizards to restore their bodies after grievous injury,” Beardy says after a second, glancing
briefly at the others. “It requires the bones of a relative, the flesh of a servant and the blood of an
enemy.”

Restore their bodies. Where’s Ed heard that one before, hah. Light emissions from philosopher’s
stones or red water are pretty much always red, and it doesn’t sound like anyone was outright
sacrificed during this ritual, even if some body parts got chopped off: a hand isn’t a soul, and
doesn’t contain any energy on its own, just genetic information. Though if the… cauldron… had
been full of red water, treated with whatever modifications a crazy wizard could cook up, who
knows what the fuck lights it could give off. Or this could be another case like the teleporting:
whatever energy they’re pulling from doesn’t require tapping the energy of human life.
So they’re right back to a solid question mark. Fucking amazing. At least it doesn’t sound like they’re doing it the philosopher’s stone way. Otherwise why leave Hairy alive at all? If Ed was an evil bastard and already had the kid right there and harvested all the bits he needed he’d have just fed him right into the array. Not to mention the other kid - you don’t just kill off extra juice for the batteries, you chase him into the array and drain him there.

“Did he… did Voldemort possess a baby?” Miss Redhead asks, like it’s what she’s been thinking about this whole time. She looks kind of nauseated.

Ed snorts. “If he could possess grown ass adults I don’t see why the hell he’d possess a baby. Those things can barely even move.”

“He may have found it easier to occupy a host with no developed will of its own, in his weakened state,” Beardy says soberly.

Gross. “So. Your connection to lord fuckin’ wahoonie,” Ed says, turning back to Hairy. “Your scar hurts when he’s close?” That’s evidence that there’s something stuck in there, even if it’s not necessarily a soul.

“Yeah,” Hairy mutters. “It hurt when Quirrell was close by, too.”

“That other possessed guy?” Hairy nods. “What else?”

Hairy shifts uncomfortably. “Last year, I started having these - dreams.”

“About snakes,” Ed says, partly to clarify but mostly because he can’t help it.

“I dreamed I was a snake,” Hairy snaps. “Voldemort’s snake. And that I killed someone, when he told me to. As the snake.”

“Frank Bryce,” Beardy says. “He was a gardener at a manor that belonged to Voldemort’s relatives, where Voldemort must have hidden prior to his resurrection; the manor was supposed to be empty and Bryce must have gone to investigate when he saw something unusual. The location was just as Hairy described it, and we confirmed Bryce’s disappearance was on the same day Hairy had the dream.”

Ed frowns. “No body found?”

Hairy swallows. “The snake ate him.” Then he looks all horrified, shoots a glance at Miss Redhead and quickly stares back at his lap again.

That is, objectively, pretty disgusting, but judging by the aura of shame the kid could stand to meet Darius and Heinkel and experience Heinkel coughing up a hairball or two. Besides, as disturbing and gross as eating a person via telepathic snake possession undisputedly is, the linked disappearance - name, date, location - is decent evidence that the kid’s got something going on with the whole non-consensual brain-broadcasting thing.

Ed glances back at Hughes, and Hughes nods. “Alright, I think we’re good for now,” Ed says, turning back to the two kids. “We gotta talk about some other shit but you two stick around in the kitchen or something, okay? Yo - Havoc, go teach them deadman for real this time. If they can’t count cards by the time we’re done here I’m demoting you back down to corporal.”

“That’s not fair, boss, you’re the only one who can even do that,” Havoc complains, standing up. “At least let me teach ’em to hide aces or something.”

“What,” Hairy says warily, Miss Redhead lingering at his shoulder, as Mustang glares tangibly at the back of Ed’s head while trying to placate Havoc without losing his dignity. Psycho looks torn between following the kids like a protective sheepdog and staying to glare at Ed some more.

“I got homework for you,” Ed informs Hairy, pulling out his notebook, ripping a couple pages out and digging for one of his expendable ballpoints. “Write down all the names of people you recognized at the resurrection, with any associated details - what they look like, what they said or did, anything you remember. When you’re done we give it to Intelligence -” Ed jerks a thumb at Hughes, who waves merrily - “and they do their shit and spit us out everything we need to nail the bastards. Got it? Good. Now go, get the fuck outta here.”

Chapter End Notes

ed: when i was a traumatized double amputee eleven year old, what worked for ME was being bodily shaken out of my wheelchair and yelled at to stop being a pussy by a military officer twice my age

mustang: please stop telling people how we met

ed: no :)
Harry’s a little too dazed by the abruptness of Elric’s… everything to properly protest being kicked out again, but the sheets of paper in his hands keep him from complaining entirely. He should have written down all the names he heard in the graveyard, back in July; it’s information that could help the Order. It’s at the very least a guarantee that he’s not going to get shipped back to the Dursleys the minute this meeting ends.

Sirius walks them to the door, glancing back over his shoulder to where Chaos is still grumbling at Mustang over something to do with cards. “Stay in the kitchen, alright? Have a snack, sit tight. I’ll tell you about it when it’s over,” he adds under his breath, which has Harry and Ginny both shooting him surprised and grateful looks. Harry hasn’t had a chance to really talk to Sirius since he came to Grimmauld Place, not alone, and he resolves to remedy that as soon as possible: even if Professor Lupin wants him to go back to the Dursleys, he’s sure Sirius doesn’t. If not, at the very least Harry might be able to talk him around.

Chaos detaches himself from the other foreigners - what had Hermione called them? Unplottables? - and heads over to Harry and Ginny, rubbing the back of his head and scowling good-naturedly. He’s still got an unlit cigarette in his mouth. “Can’t believe my own see-oh cheats at cards,” he complains. “With his loyal subordinates, no less. Might as well dock our damn paychecks and cut out the middleman.” He nods companionably at Sirius. “I can take them from here.”

“Right,” Sirius says coolly. “Off you go, then,” he adds to Harry, squeezing his shoulder one last time before showing them into the hall and closing the door.

“So,” Chaos says. “Show me to the kitchen?”

They show him to the kitchen. Ginny sits down at the table; Chaos moves past them and mumbles vaguely to himself as he pokes at the kettle on the ancient stove. Harry tentatively takes the seat across from Ginny, putting his papers and Elric’s pen down in front of him. He should probably say something to her, but he has no idea what; she’s not even looking at him, just gazing down at her clasped hands on the table instead.

It’s probably not a good idea to just sit and say nothing. Harry tries opening his mouth. “Er…”

“Is it weird that we’ve both been possessed by Voldemort?” Ginny says, sounding more thoughtful than anything.

“No! No, I mean… I dunno,” Harry fumbles, through the wave of relief that she doesn’t seem repulsed at all by the fact that he had confessed to killing and eating someone as a snake. “They… they think I’m still possessed. I think.”

“Well, you’re not acting very possessed,” Ginny says briskly, looking at him. Her eyes are clear and steady and not at all afraid. “If all you’re having is the dreams then it’s probably just because of your scar.”

“I think they think there’s something in my scar,” Harry says, the relief giving way to the frustration, always waiting underneath. He can’t even say they’re wrong; normal scars don’t give people true dreams about Voldemort. “It’s all Elric was poking at, anyway.”
Ginny gives his forehead a curious glance. “Did he find anything?”

“No. He said I need to get a specialist to look at it.”

“A specialist in what?”

Chaos coughs slightly from beside the stove, making Harry jump and twist to look at him. “That’ll be Alphonse,” he says. “He’s a good kid. Training to be a doctor. He’s an alchemist too, good enough to be state level if he wanted to.”

“Training to be a doctor?” Ginny says suspiciously. “Why can’t Harry get someone who’s already a doctor? How old even is he?”

Chaos waves a hand hurriedly. “No, no, he’s really good, he’s just getting his formal certification now. He’s got loads of experience. Al specializes in this stuff, and we can bring him over on short notice, so… and he’s twenty, I’m just used to calling him kid.”

Harry feels a freshly looming sense of dread coming on. “Al? Is that the person Elric was talking about? The one who handcuffs people?”

Chaos coughs again, looking like he’s trying to stifle a pretty big laugh. “That - may have been exaggeration. Alphonse is very nice. Very polite.”

The looming dread hatches into horrified recollection. “Didn’t Mustang say brother?”

Chaos grins fondly, unlit cigarette bobbing. “Yep, Ed’s younger brother.”

“Great. So Elric but smaller,” Ginny says sarcastically, clearly not believing a word out of Chaos’s mouth about how nice and qualified this person is.

Chaos makes a small choking noise. “No, uh. He’s - Alphonse is bigger, actually. Physically. Kind of a lot bigger.”

Harry is momentarily arrested by imagining a bigger Elric, which arrives in his brain as a Hagrid-sized behemoth only instead of Hagrid’s genial roundness it’s Elric’s aggressively triangular torso and acres of studded black leather. It seems very natural for this image to be baring teeth like a piranha’s and holding Hagrid’s enormous crossbow. “Right,” Harry says faintly.

“He really is nice, though,” Chaos says hastily. “You’ll see. Ed’s - well, they’re both great guys, it’s just Ed is just…”

“A prat?” Ginny suggests.

“You were thinking he was pretty fit a couple hours ago,” Harry can’t help but say, then immediately snaps his mouth shut.

Ginny sniffs, tossing her hair. “I can think he’s fit and still acknowledge that he’s a prat. Killed thirty chickens with my bare hands and he’s worried about how fast I did it? What a twat. I was possessed.”

When Harry glances at Chaos he sees the man’s grinning enormously. “I don’t know what a prat is but by your tone, I fully agree with you,” he says happily. “Don’t worry. I can’t say they aren’t similar in some ways, but Alphonse is a lot, well -”

“What?” interrupts a muffled bellow from down the hall, in what’s unmistakably Elric’s voice.
They all startle and look down the corridor to the closed drawing room door, but nobody emerges and Harry can pick out the faint murmur of conversation resuming.

“Should we… go over there?” Ginny says, glancing between Harry and Chaos in a way that lets Harry know the two of them would’ve already been pressing their ears to the door if Chaos wasn’t with them.

“Nah. They’ll come get us.” Chaos shakes his head, grinning ruefully. “Well, if nothing else, Al’s quieter.”

Chapter End Notes

Havoc, if he knew the lexicon to explain Al to Ginny and Harry in a way they’d understand: ok so imagine a hufflepuff. Like the most hufflepuff ever to huff and/or puff. Now imagine him peeling his skin off to reveal a slytherin god damn nightmare underneath.

Ginny and harry: wh -

havoc: he’s great! SUPER nice
Chapter 17

Psycho chooses to stay, taking Hairy’s place on the couch, and Ed props one foot on the coffee table and shifts so that he’s sitting facing both wizards and Amestrisans. “So,” he says. “Middling evidence that there is something stuck to the kid, so sure, let’s go with the working theory and say it’s one of the soul… chunks, copies, whatever. How many even are there, anyway? Do you know?”

“We suspect there are… seven,” Beardy says, after a pause.

Maybe it’s Beardy’s expression, maybe it’s just plain old paranoia, but something unpleasant begins to tickle at Ed. “Seven?”

“Voldemort has undoubtedly made more than one, as he clearly meant for his diary to be used as a weapon,” Beardy says. “He would not have treated his failsafe for death as expendable unless he was certain his survival would be guaranteed by others. We are almost certain his snake a whore crux, as well as his family ring; there is also evidence he hunted down famed items of three of hogwarts’ founders in his early years. Given the nature of his… personal philosophy, it is very likely he sought them to use as containers for his soul.”

“A weapon,” Ed repeats, still poking at that awful little tickle.

“They’re pieces of Voldie’s soul, boy,” Pirate grunts. “If they get near enough to someone or get enough power to manifest then you bet your arse they’re going to do as much damage as they can. What do you think happened with the chamber of secrets? One whore crux set a Basilisk on a castle full of children. It’s a miracle nobody bloody died, and that was a damned close one.”

The tickle is now a full-fledged itch, and now Ed knows exactly where it’s coming from. “Seven pieces,” he repeats flatly. “And they can act independently, and possess people.” When he’d compared the whole soul-splitting thing to Father and his sin-munculi, he hadn’t known that this lord whackadoodle had also split into the same exact number and the offshoots were fucking weaponized. Hadn’t Beardy said something about them being hidden? And not people?

“It is a magically potent number in itself, as well,” Beardy says, though something in his eyes is too heavy for what he’s saying.

Something about that pings a different but no less unpleasant bell. Ed narrows his eyes. “Diary, ring, snake, three other things,” he says, looking hard at Beardy as he counts off. “Plus the kid. Who you haven’t been able to un-possess.”

Beardy smiles sadly. “You have hit upon the crux of the matter, as it were. The diary has been destroyed, but as for the others… we have suspicions only as to where they may be, and Voldemort has proven that he will only rise again unless all are destroyed.”

Including the kid, he doesn’t say. Ed stares at him. Beardy is looking back all tragic and woeful, like this is just too bad so sad and they don’t have a choice about it, and it’s so pathetic that Ed finds he doesn’t even want to waste the breath to yell: this guy’s totally fucking convinced and totally fucking crazy. His nutbar grandpa schoolteacher ass is getting booted off the op the second they close this meeting.

They managed to leave Selim Bradley alive; they can fuckin’ pry this chunk of soul out without killing Hairy too. Ed’s lip curls. “Why don’t you leave that one to us.”
Beardy inclines his head all depressed, because he’s 100% fucking resigned to murdering this kid just because he’s maybe a little bit possessed sometimes. Ed makes a mental note to assign Havoc more bodyguard-babysitting duty, because while Beardy doesn’t seem like he’s tried to off Hairy yet - though what the hell, putting only one guard on a target that’s apparently important enough to send war weapons after? That’s not fucking shady at all. Mustang was the only person to say shit when he brought it up in the other room - do none of the other wizards think that’s off?

They can't freeze everybody out - they've got precious little information as it is, and it feels like every three minutes they get served another shit sundae curveball surprise. Ed can only dearly hope that it's just that the other wizards are stupid and blindly deferent instead of actively aware that their fuckin’ fifteen year old resurrection witness has a pre-order place on the casualty list.

And everybody treats the bearded coot like their fearless leader. This is a fucking garbage parfait of crap with extra whipped shit on top. Ed would tell Mustang to peel Beardy with a can opener, only judging by the totally expressionless way he’s already looking at Beardy, he already knows.

Good. His problem now. Ed turns to Hughes. “Try with the wand first, or are we still using the kid?”

Hughes shrugs. “Sure, if we’re willing to work around the leak.”

Ed grimaces. “Fuck. That’s… ugh. And we can’t just say ‘surprise! You’re bait! Get in the car!’”

“What do you mean, bait?” Psycho interrupts.

“For your lord tortelloni. Keep up.”

“We are merely discussing options at the moment, serious,” Beardy says, which at least gets Psycho back to glaring if not settling. Ed narrows his eyes; the way everyone keeps fucking deferring to the guy is gonna be a problem when it comes to freezing him out, but then again, that’s why they have Mustang.

“When you say work around the leak,” Mustache says, glancing at Psycho and then Beardy. “What exactly…”

“If he has been broadcasting this entire time, then the enemy knows our faces, and presumably everything we’ve said to him,” Hughes says. “It would be safest for us to deal with his… soul issue... entirely, since we don’t know what exactly is being transmitted or how, but if it turns out we can’t, we use it instead.”

“Stage a kidnapping,” Mustang clarifies.

“Masks, hoods, the works,” Hughes agrees. “If right now the enemy knows, through Hairy, that he’s with you, we need to make him - and thus them - believe that he is no longer here, or with allies. That’ll mean Hairy can’t know it’s us, though, and I imagine that’ll be, oh, incredibly traumatizing.”

Ed grimaces. They really need Al here. “Let’s just cap it.”

Hughes shrugs again. “Either way Hairy will be bait, since you don’t think the wand alone will be believable,” he says with a pointed glance to Beardy and Pirate, then lasers in on Psycho. “Unless you feel like freeing your slave?”

“I’d love to, but you see, the little bastard is just dying to get us all murdered,” Psycho grits. “And not even a team of Aurors can catch a house elf once the little blighters get going, so I’m not
exactly eager to do the deed. You understand.”

“You can free him after we get rid of lord calamari,” Ed says shortly, then turns to Mustang.
“Using the kid is still the best go, probably. We’ll just have to wait for Al. He said he’d stay in
Guangshi until we got back.”

Mustang briefly raises the fingers of one his clasped hands in acknowledgment. “We’ll see about
fetching him today.” Then, addressing the wizards more than Ed, “I would prefer that we see the
proposed site for the operation first, however, to determine whether we need to retrieve any
specialized equipment as well.”

Beardy glances at Lemons, who uncrosses his arms. “I will take you,” he says, looking deeply
pessimistic about this prospect. “There are preparations for us to make as well, in case the dark
lord decides to resolve this matter… personally.”

“If he shows up himself and it all goes to shit, we retreat to the castle,” Pirate says brusquely.
“Even he’ll have to slow down a bit to get through the wards.”

Lemons pinches his mouth. “He has breached the castle before, at a fraction of his strength. When
he went after the philosopher’s stone -”

“The WHAT?”
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Even Pirate looks a little taken aback at Ed’s bellow. “The philosopher’s stone,” Lemons repeats, looking mildly disturbed at how Ed, Mustang, Hawkeye and Hughes are now giving him what are probably some pretty unhinged looks. “I take it you’ve heard of it.”

“Heard of it,” Ed snarls, vaguely aware that he’s standing again, hands flexing. No, calm down, things are different here, it’s magic not alchemy. Don’t jump to conclusions. Investigate, then act. “Do you know how it’s made?” Is it too much to hope that this version isn’t dead people?

Beardy frowns reprovingly while everybody else just keeps looking at Ed like he’s started to froth at the mouth. “There is only one alchemist who has succeeded in making the stone, and he has sworn to take the secrets of the process to the grave. He has since destroyed it along with all of his research in order to prevent those such as Voldemort from obtaining them.”

“Right.” It’s definitely dead people. Ed inhales, pressing his hands palm to palm in front of his face, no array active but only through serious effort. “Okay. Let me recap real quick. You’ve got a supposedly immortal, extremely powerful individual who has separated himself into seven pieces, at least one of which has been known to act independently and maliciously against you? And he’s after philosopher’s stones?”

Beardy looks slightly pained, but nods. “More or less.”

Ed twists in place to point his still-joined palms at Mustang and the rest. “Anyone else getting a really shit case of deja vu over here?”

“Yes,” the Mustang-Hawkeye-Hughes trifecta answers in chorus, in one deeply unamused tone.


“Is this like what was happening that time we all got our souls sucked out, sir?”

“Exactly like.”

“Yessir. Thank you sir.”

The wizards are now looking like it’s less of a rabies and more of a gentle straightjacket and softly padded room situation. “All of you got your souls sucked out?” Psycho says skeptically.

“Yeah, our whole country nearly got murdered in one night, it fucking sucked,” Ed says flatly. “The Hairy kid’s dad wouldn’t happen to be immortal, would he?”

“His father is dead,” Mustache says, sounding too weirded out to be pointedly flat about it.

“Like dead dead, or faked his death to go on the run and set up a counterattack dead?” Ed asks, on the off chance that this really is some kind of impossible running parallel to Ed’s own teenage years, like evil immortality-obsessed genocidal bastards with a thing for the number seven are a kind of rail laid down in the fabric of the universe.

“If he weren’t dead I imagine we’d have found out by now,” Mustache says with a bit more bite.
“You’d be surprised,” Ed tells him. “No? Really for sure dead?”

“I saw their bodies,” Psycho says through his teeth.

“Shame,” Ed says. “Anyone else got an immortal and-or supernaturally endowed relative on their side? Mine really helped us out last time, even if he was a collossal fucking dick.”

“Why don’t you go and get yours to help you again, then,” Psycho says irritably.

“He’s dead too,” Ed informs him, unimpressed. “You’re shit outta luck for a replay. Nobody? Doesn’t have to be a dad, we’re not picky. No? Well great. Has this lord wingding got a way to shut your magic off?”

That got them all turning horrified looks on each other. “Turn magic off?” Psycho says incredulously.

“No,” Beardy says firmly. “No, he relies too heavily on it himself. I doubt he would even conceive of such a thing… he has always been about subjugating others through stronger magic, proving his superiority over them and demonstrating his mastery over what he considers the ultimate power. He is a half-blood, you see.”

“Uh huh, sure,” Ed says, turning enough to make eye contact with Mustang. “So. We got a problem.”

“Yes, we have been telling you,” Lemons says in the tonal equivalent of rolling your eyes.

“You opened with ‘there’s a mother fuckin’ prophecy’, okay, shut up,” Ed says distractedly. A homunculus like Lust or even Gluttony is manageable; even something like Sloth or Pride they can do with coordination and planning. But something like Father, that is… not fucking good. “So. Forget resurrection for a second. Immortal or not, he’s still pulling strings in the government, deploying war weapons, he’s orchestrating a genocide and he’s got bits of himself that he can send out to possess and kill people - am I missing anything?”

“The teleportation,” Mustang says, utterly without humor.

“Yeah, right, that. The bitch can teleport.”

“And fly,” Lemons remarks.

Fucking fly? “Are you enjoying this?” Ed snaps, twisting again to glare at him.

“Somewhat, yes,” Lemons says unashamedly. “For your information, I witnessed the prophecy as it was foretold, and can personally verify both its existence and influence.”

“Any other fun facts you want to share with us?” Ed demands. “Something useful, maybe? Names and pictures of all these so-called acquitted terrorists? Any more magic no-nos that’ll fuck up our ambush?” It occurs to Ed that there is a very pressing question they haven’t asked yet. “Does he have any alchemists?”

Pirate snorts. “Our alchemists sit around dreaming about how to turn dragon dung into gold, boy. Voldie doesn’t need them. It’s one in a hundred that has the brains to do anything useful, and they all end up going into potions work anyway because drawing useless rune circles all day doesn’t pay.”

“Someone made at least one philosopher’s stone,” Ed says pointedly. “That’s pretty goddamn far
“No one else has had the successes Flamel had,” Lemons says.

“That you know of,” Ed says sharply.

“I believe what you call alchemy may be different from what we know it as,” Beardy says, conciliatory. “It is very much a scholar’s art, here, and much of it theories only of interest to researchers of history. I have never heard of alchemy performed with a touch, or being used in any form of combat.”

“Magic’s faster, see,” Pirate says unpleasantly.

Ed gets a brief flash of how Mustang smirked his too slow a split second before everything around him fucking exploded and has to hold in a derisive snort. Mustang gives Pirate a measured look. “A smart alchemist,” he says, “does not freely advertise everything that they can do.”

And making philosopher’s stones has nothing whatsoever to do with combat ability. Not when you’ve got muscle to round up the people you’re sacrificing, anyway, and by all accounts lord wackydoo has no shortage of that. “So let’s assume they have fucking alchemists, too,” Ed says, pinching the bridge of his nose briefly. “Anything else anyone wants to add to this shit sandwich?”

“This Lucius Malfoy character,” Hughes says, arms folded. “We should pay him a visit, have a little chat. If we can’t access any case files, we may as well get our information firsthand.”

“It wouldn’t do you any good,” Lemons speaks up again, sounding impressively bored. “The dark lord’s inner circle is magically bound to reveal none of his secrets. Even if you managed to take him, interrogating him would give you nothing of use.”

Hughes’ eyebrows rise; Ed, Jones, Havoc and Arget simultaneously lean back in place. When Hughes looks pleasantly surprised like that it means he is seriously, seriously fucking pissed. “You didn’t think to mention this when we outlined our plan of action?”

Lemons raises his eyebrows right back. “My understanding was that you would compel those you captured to return to their lord, and thus follow them,” he says. “They would have a set meeting point to return to, and following them would circumvent the magic that binds their tongues. Otherwise I would have led you to him myself.”

Mustang, Hughes and Hawkeye all swivel to narrow their eyes at him. Ed doesn’t have to swivel. “You were in with the terrorists?”

“You were,” Beardy says in a warning tone.

Lemons looks extra lemony even as he pushes up his sleeve and shows off a skull tattoo with a snake in its mouth on his inner forearm. “The dark mark,” he says. “Voldemort brands his followers with such. It contains magic that prevents us from revealing secrets, even under verity serum.”

For fuck’s sake. “Shit, it’s even down to the tats,” Ed marvels, caught halfway between laughing until he screams and pinching himself somewhere painful to make sure he isn’t dreaming. “First the ouroboros, now this thing. Is every immortality obsessed freakshow just totally kinked out on snakes? Shit.”

“The skull is an inspired touch,” Mustang says sardonically, pissed enough to openly bitch. “Nice of him to make his followers identifiable only by the complicated and highly involved test of
“It’s not like they need to care about stealth either, when their government’s already hanging off their dicks and doing such a great PR job for them,” Ed says in disgust. Lust didn’t have it smack-damn in the middle of her tits because it was a fashion statement. The homunculi didn’t care who saw it: anyone who did and knew what it meant was dead meat anyway. Even Greed was cocky about it, though that was just Greed being Greed and not giving a shit.

“What do you mean by verity serum,” Hughes says to Lemons. “It’s used in interrogations?”

“It’s how Malfoy was acquitted,” Pirate grunts. “Three drops of verity serum will have you singing the truth no matter what defenses you have in place - unless you have an active dark mark and Voldie’s protecting you.”

“Malfoy was able to lie, in essence because he was magically prohibited from telling the truth,” Lemons says. “He is very wealthy, very well connected, and very politically active. Even if he weren’t critical to the dark lord’s operations and thus protected, we cannot move directly against him. He has spent fourteen years establishing a reputation as a victim of the dark lord, forced to do what he did under imperius, and his personal security is excessive and spares no expense.”

Rich, connected, political: this is one of lord fuckaroo’s generals, then. Taking out the boss while leaving this guy to walk free is not an option, and somehow Ed doubts that his excessively expensive security is going to do much against, say, his entire house burning down due to a sudden and explosive influx of alchemically ignited oxygen. “Why don’t you give us his address anyway,” Hughes says, clearly on the same train of thought. “We can talk more about this… truth serum and the properties of the tattoo when we have a subject to interrogate. Right now we need to speak with Bones ASAP. Any raids the police has planned, any executions, any disappearances since the resurrection - she needs to examine that very, very closely, and determine exactly where the orders are coming from. We may be able to determine their next move or even potentially the location of the base depending on what they’re using the government for.”

Because if you’re making philosopher’s stones you’re gonna be killing people, and if there is some kind of mass array in the works - fuck this shit with a rail spike - then it’ll show in the pattern of attacks the terrorists have carried out already. Maybe. Hopefully. Ed wants a fucking drink.

“I will inform her,” Beardy says, just as there’s a knock on the door.

Pirate’s closest, and when he stumps over and opens it it’s Breakfast Lady. “Lunch,” she says, her gaze traveling around the range of expressions around the room - disturbed to deliberately poker-faced to disgusted as hell - and adding her own tension to the spectrum. “Is this a bad time?”

“No, we were just about done,” Mustang says, standing and sweeping his uniform straight. “Lunch sounds perfect. We’ll join you shortly; I need to speak with my team.”

The way he says it makes it clear the dismissal isn’t optional, and Beardy’s at least smart enough not to put up a fight. “Lunch indeed,” he says, standing as well and muttering his armchair back into its original grody mess with a rush of shimmering air and a wave of his stick. “Thank you, Molly. Roy - I must depart for the ministry to lay the groundwork you have requested for Hairy, and to pass on your requests to Amelia. We will return here this evening and give you what information we can. Alastor can contact me for you if there is any pressing matter.”

Looks like they’re still going to cooperate with the disappear the kid plan, though frankly they’ve got no way to know exactly what the hell Beardy will be telling who, or what it’ll lead to. At least the kid will be here with Havoc, so nobody can “accidentally” fake Hairy’s death so hard he

“Why yes. Mr. Malfoy’s home address,” Hughes says brightly.

Pirate snorts. “It’s a sodding great mansion with a yard full of peacocks and a gate that says MALFOY in solid silver letters. It’s a little hard to miss.”

“So you’ll take us then? Excellent,” Hughes says. “We’ll let you know when we’re ready to make our visit.”

That’s not great, but since the wizards all travel by fucking teleportation it’s probably the best they’re gonna get. Fuck, they’re seriously at a disadvantage with the teleporting; Ed needs to get someone to spell Havoc so he can see about going out and getting them some of the local cars.

Pirate looks about as happy to be pressganged as field trip chaperone as they are to need him. “And much good may it do you. The bastard’s slippery as a greased eel. You’re better off targeting Voldy first.”

“We’ll keep that in mind,” Mustang says, smiling his get the fuck out of my office smile. “Thank you, we’ll be joining you shortly.”

“Until later, then,” Beardy says, inclining his head and sweeping out the door, and the rest of the wizards follow him, Psycho and Mustache both sending a couple of last glances over their shoulders.

The door shuts behind them. Mustang folds his arms and moves to stand on the other side of Ed so that they can all see each other in a grim little circle. “So,” Hughes says.

“Reinforcements,” Hawkeye says.

“Fifth Company East is deployment-ready and closest to the border,” Mustang says. “But anything from Amestris will take a week to get here on physical distance alone -”

“- and never on bureaucracy,” Hughes finishes. “They’ll have to go through Xing. The Emperor will never allow it, not even as a personal favor.”

“If we inform his Imperial Highness of the growing threat at his border via a request for medical aid for a child,” Mustang says, thoughtful, “we may get Xingese troops instead.”

“And then owe Ling Yao anyway for the rest of your days,” Hughes says.

Mustang shoots him a look. “After we do him the favor of alerting him to the threat practically on his doorstep? He helped us against the homunculi before.”

“Because he wanted a stone, and then because Bradley ripped his girlfriend’s goddamn arm off,” Hughes says bluntly. “And he was just Ling Yao then. Right now even if we send Edward to bat his eyelashes and ask pretty please we’re still dealing with the entire Dragon Throne, and do you want to play that game? Because I don’t.”

“I’m going to be playing that game regardless, Maes,” Mustang growls, then adds, to prop up the pathetic veneer of deniability re: whose ass is landing in the Fuhrer’s seat next in front of Jones and Arget, “Reinforcements have to come through Xing no matter what. We’ll be talking to Emperor Yao anyway.”

“State Alchemists,” Hawkeye suggests. “Through the intelligence courier routes. Strong Arm,
“We can maybe get you those three, but any more and we’re sightseeing the inside of a Xingese border prison,” Hughes says. “Not that we can afford more combat alchemists anyway. We’d be pulling Strong Arm and Electric Storm from Ishval as it is.”

And Ishval needs Armstrong and Kendra both, seeing as they can set up buildings and electric systems in a third of the time it takes four different sets of construction and engineering crews; the earthquake last month set back the reconstruction efforts by nearly half a year and the province is still essentially in a state of emergency due to ruptured water supply. Kozlova’s in Mustang’s pocket too, but she’s on the Drachman border and will take four times as long to get here. Ed doesn’t trust any of the other combat-certified alchemists as far as he can throw them, and Mustang doesn’t trust them as far as he can throw them, which is a lot less further than Ed can.

Mustang must be having the same thought, because he turns to Ed. “Do we need reinforcements?”

Give me a solution, Fullmetal. Ed exhales hard and presses both sets of fingertips into the pressure points around his sinuses. He’s got a pack of soul bits that might be homunculi with various unknown powers, a kid who may or may not have a piece of the head terrorist’s soul bound to his brain, a handful of allies who are either okay with killing the kid or too dumb to see their leader is going to let it happen through deliberate negligence, a totally corrupt government that sends fear monsters after kids or at least covers for people who do, and it’s all adding up to a brewing genocide at the behest of an alchemically powerful madman pulling the strings of an entire society. It’s the goddamn Promised Day all over again.

So, all firepower to the table, then.

Only it’s all on the other side of Xing, or comes with an imperial price tag attached. Hughes was right - if it comes to it Ed will hit up Ling and tell him to come help them kick ass, but while Ling and Emperor Yao might wear the same underpants they aren’t exactly the same person. Not anymore. And Emperor Yao might decide that the way to pacify his fractious outer provinces is to organize his country into a nice unifying invasion of the wizard lands. Even if Ling doesn’t decide that, he knows it’ll be Mustang in the Central Office sometime in the next five years, and he is not a guy dumb enough to let that opportunity go - and with Ed’s luck, he’s just as likely to demand Ed on loan for a year in imperial service as he is to demand more favorable tarriffs from Amestrisan trade.


Well, if what they’re dealing with is a homunculus like Father, what they need is a fucking airstrike.

Ed exhales again and shuts his eyes. What the wizards consider unkillable isn’t what they consider unkillable. Those two dementers were dangerous, sure, but they died, objectively, without too much of a fuss. That’s their big bad war weapons: That was what got sent to assassinate Hairy; it’s what might get sent again.

If something killed your unkillable weapons, what you’d send after would be something worse.

Okay, enough with the catastrophizing. Assume, just for now, that lord whoopsie-doodle is not like Father. Dangerous assumption, but one, this guy’s not quietly biding his time until shit’s too late to stop him, he’s parading around calling himself Lord Etcetera and naming his terrorist group death eaters. Two, he did get KO’d by magic rebound or backfire or whatever and that apparently
took him out for fourteen years. Three, the fact that he was trying to get philosopher’s stones assumes that he didn’t have philosopher’s stones, and though that’s very likely changed now - bodily restoration is pretty fuckin’ strong evidence - if that only happened a few months ago, he’s going to be nowhere near as well established as Father was.

The basic plan of action stays the same. They need to raid the base. To raid the base they need to find it, and for that they’ll need to capture and interrogate whoever - what ever - gets sent to murder and-or kidnap Hairy. Or when they raid the Malfoy guy’s house, whichever they end up doing first. Interrogation is up to Hughes; capture, Ed can do. He’ll ram up some asphalt again, Mustang can pull the oxygen, whatever’s trapped inside will pass out, whoopty-hoo.

If that doesn’t work they’ll try something else. They’ll get an idea of capabilities and defenses through all that; catastrophize then.

Lord whatsit. Mustang thinks a kill from a distance is the best bet and he’s not wrong. Hawkeye doesn’t have her rifle with her so it’ll be Mustang, so long as Ed can get him line of sight. And so long as there isn’t any magic armor or shielding or whatever. That’s a big question mark and Ed doesn’t fucking like it, doesn’t like that they know basically jack shit - when Ed finds their base they’ll have to go in, Mustang won’t just torch the building without making sure there aren’t any hostages or anything inside, and if they’re going in they need to know what they’re getting into. If Ed was a magic terrorist with a secret base he’d not only have every single thing booby trapped down to the toilet flushers, there’d be a damn moat full of crocodiles and a motherfucking drawbridge, too, and he’s not about to assume the terrorists are any less nasty or inventive with their defenses than he’d be, not with lives on the line.

If they get the terrorists out in the open, away from their grounded defenses, that’s better odds but still fucking ass because even if they ambush the group in convoy, Ed has to assume that even if none of them is a homunculus, all of them can still fucking teleport. And that’s on top of whatever goddamn combat magic they’ll be shown this evening. Mustang would have to obliterate everything in the kill zone wall to fuckin’ wall to make sure nobody would be popping up behind them, and that might not even be possible, depending on the terrain. No, long-range sniper fire really is their best bet. Ed needs to get Hawkeye a rifle. Possible homunculi; Ed needs to get Hawkeye explosive rounds.

But even then she might only get the one shot. There’s only one of her, more’s the pity, and even if lord ravioli is only human and she takes his head off right from the word go, what’s stopping one of his pals from teleporting right behind her and firing back? Mustang’s range is half of Hawkeye’s with her fuckoff-huge Kerchatka 82, so attackers would have to get closer for Mustang to be able to back her up. Hawkeye’s survival would depend on the wizards not being able to track where the bullet came from, because even if Ed, Mustang and Havoc were all covering her on high alert, teleporting is real fuckin’ hard to defend against. Any defense would have to be area-effect, centered on themselves, and anything that would drop a teleporting surprise attacker would affect them, too.

There’s just too many unknowns, on top of an already dangerous wizard ability that’s freely available to anyone down to random seventeen year olds. Smartypants talked about wards that prevented teleporting, but Ed’s not about to trust his team’s lives to strangers using strange magic that they don’t even understand. He needs his own guarantees here. And if what they’re up against does turn out to be a Promised Day-scale problem, then he can’t afford to not kick with everything he has.

He needs magic out of the picture.
“You know what? Fuck this,” Ed says out loud, dropping his hands and opening his eyes. “If we have to do things the hard way, so do they. Just get me Al.”

Mustang’s eyebrows rise very slightly, just commentary, no surprise. “Not that Alphonse isn’t formidable, but is that all the reinforcements you were imagining?”

“If we do it right, yeah,” Ed retorts. “Do you want this done in half the time or not? Get me Al. We’re gonna turn their magic off.”

And oh, Ed fucking *hates* that one of his favorite looks on Mustang is the goddamn Good Dog, Fullmetal: deeply approving, mildly impressed. “Can you?”

“You fucking said it. Radiation means measurable emissions,” Ed says. “Identify the type and I can negate it, shield against it, whatever. All I need to know is what it is. We got our alchemy turned off that one time. No reason we can’t do the same.”

“I doubt we have time to establish an array around the entire country,” Mustang says, but he sounds thoughtful.

“We don’t need to. We just set it in our ambush ground.” Ed rubs his nose tiredly. “If we’re dealing with a homunculus I’m not taking chances.”

“And with our allies here having things so very well in hand,” Mustang says dryly. “I wonder why exactly no one saw fit to mention earlier that their Snape gentleman used to be one of the ‘dark lord’s inner circle’.”

“And the fucking… you heard what the fuck Beardy was saying, right? They’re gonna kill that kid,” Ed says. “Or at least stand by while he gets killed. No way was posting one loser guard an accident. I’m keeping Havoc on him until we can figure out whatever’s going on with his soul.”

“We may have to move on the Malfoy individual first,” Mustang says. “Given their descriptions he would be a primary target anyway. Raiding a civilian’s private residence will eliminate any element of surprise we had, of course, and may destroy any chance of presenting ourselves formally to their head of state as anything other than the advance guard of an Amestrisian war delegation.” He sighs. “Just to be clear, our goal is *not* to start another war. If only because requesting to move troops through Xing will get us laughed out of the embassy, if not give us two wars outright.”

“Yeah, I’d rather quietly take some terrorists prisoners instead, too,” Hughes says. “We need the intel, we’re nearly flying blind here as it is. That reminds me - Arget, remember that little thought experiment you did about information theory and troubleshooting compromised systems?”

“Yessir.”

“Congratulations, it’s going live. Make me one of your little matrices for a wizard who can’t tell the truth about where their evil terrorist boss is.”

“Yessir.”

“We’re not telling the wizards the truth about what me and Al will be working on either,” Ed warns the room. “Their opsec is like, fucking zero. If they ask tell ’em it’s for Al to give Hairy an exorcism or whatever.”

“And if your proposed array doesn’t work, Fullmetal?” Mustang says.
Ed shoots Mustang a dirty look. He knows they have to plan for worst case scenario here, but his arrays *fucking work*, thanks. “Then I tell Mei to tell Ling to invade fuckin’ wizard world if she doesn’t want her prince charming to end up partying like it’s the Promised Day all over again.”

Mustang nods, expression distinctly satisfied. “Hawkeye?”

Hawkeye stands. “I’ll see which of our hosts is available to play escort to the Divide.”

Chapter End Notes

team amestris: ya ok lol u guys have terrorists we get it, it’s not like u guys have a super powerful immortal whackjob who split his soul into seven weaponized pieces and is pulling the strings of your government to organize genocide while using philosopher’s stones

Wizards: we have exactly that, actually

team amestris: .....RECALIBRATING
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It’s good Mustang dispatches Hawkeye to get Al, because Ed’s not sure he would handle anyone else going to get him and Mustang has to stay here. Jones and Arget are great and all but Ed doesn’t know them like he does Mustang’s team, and with Havoc babysitting and Hughes limited in physical scope ever since his coma it’s basically Ed or Hawkeye.

Mustache is the one who volunteers to escort her, when Ed sticks his head in the kitchen and tells the wizards they need a teleporter; Beardy, Lemons and Pirate are already gone, and he’s the only other adult in there besides Breakfast Lady, Psycho and Havoc, wedged in the corner surrounded by the kids. Ed takes a second to eye the food - lots of mushy brown stuff, potatoes heavily involved judging by the smell - before ducking back out to see Hawkeye to the door.

Given she’ll be teleporting out of here with Mustache it’s a pointless gesture more than anything, but still. “We’ll try to return within eight hours, barring any specific preparations Alphonse may want to make,” Hawkeye tells Ed while Mustang finishes writing his handoff letters. “Is there anything you’d like me to pass on to him, Edward?”

“Yeah, tell him to bring his biggest asskicking stick,” Ed says. Hawkeye would fill Al in on everything they knew; anything Ed could add he’d say in person when they got here. “Oh, and his medical stuff, I guess. Whatever they might have for, I dunno, qi problems.”

Hawkeye’s mouth quirks slightly. “I’ll let him know.”

Mustang comes out of their base room and holds out several folded sheets of paper. “Guangshi magistrate and garrison commander, Maes’ contact at that fish market, Mei Chang,” he counts off, handing them over to Hawkeye. “You may want to deliver to Maes’ person first. And leave town before the magistrate reads through and has any bright ideas about detaining you to ask questions.”

Hawkeye’s eyes narrow slightly. “What the fuck did you write in there?” Ed demands.

“Just appraising the Emperor of the situation,” Mustang says innocently. “Simply letting him know that we’ve got everything under control here and that in the wildly unlikely event that we do not return, he should brick up his boundary crossing and treat anything that tries to come through as a problem solvable only by firebomb. Though not in so many words, of course.”

Hawkeye narrows her eyes further and Ed opens his mouth, but Mustache takes that moment to show up at the end of the hall. “Whatever you tell Mei, she’s gonna act on it,” Ed warns instead of saying she’ll either show up with Al or book it back to the capital and put Ling in a headlock until he starts some Imperial problem-solving. Which, not that Ed’s gonna complain. One alkahestrist is great but two alkahestrists is better, and Mei is one hell of an alkahestrist to have on your side.

“I fully depend upon it,” Mustang replies, nodding in greeting at Mustache and then smiling at Hawkeye. “Safe travels, Colonel.”

She salutes him in her crisp I better not have to bail your ass out, bitch way as she tucks the letters in her jacket. “Yes sir.”

“See ya,” Ed says, saluting her too - correctly, even, since she’s technically his actual CO and it’s
always fun to salute other people in front of Mustang and watch him suppress a sigh, glare or twitch - and getting out of Mustache’s way.

Mustache nods at them both, only eyeballing them a little as he goes to stand by Hawkeye and offers her… an empty coffee mug. “It’s a port key,” he explains to their collective blank stares.

“Like the flowerpot was?” Ed says sourly.

“Likely, yes. Port keys are generally made out of innocuous objects to keep them disguised - often trash, actually, to keep muggles from picking them up.”

“From picking them… do you just leave them lying around?” Ed demands. “Holy fuck, you do. Pirate got the flowerpot out of some shed.”

Mustache looks kind of uncomfortable. “From what I understand that checkpoint is in a very remote area.”

“Some kid is gonna go playing explorer and accidentally teleport himself into your bathroom,” Ed says flatly.

“The office of port key affairs in the department of magical transportation does handle a few of those cases every year,” Mustache admits. “I suppose it’s part of why port keys are so closely regulated.”

Everybody’s eyes go back to the coffee mug. “When you say regulated,” Ed says, “do you mean, you need an ID to buy one, or is it more ‘everything about it is monitored and tracked’?”

“Ah… no, no, we don’t have to be worried about anything like that. This one is,” Mustache coughs slightly, “technically illegal.”

“Well at least there’s that,” Ed says, only half-sarcastically. Thank fuck the wizards are starting to get the hang of “government trying to kill you = stop doing what the government tells you to do”.

“It functions the same?” Hawkeye says, eyeing the mug.

“Yes, when you touch it we’ll be taken to the checkpoint by the barrier.”

“Good,” Hawkeye says, nodding at Mustang and Ed, and when she touches the mug they disappear with a tingle and a crack.

Mustang and Ed both stand there for a second, arms folded, looking at the place where Hawkeye and Mustache now aren’t. “Armstrong’s gonna owe you big for this,” Ed says aloud. “Shit, Armstrong’s gonna owe me for this, that’s how big.”

“You’d better believe I’m going to collect,” Mustang mutters, then, “I need Havoc to evaluate the ambush site with me.”

Ed makes a face. “Yeah, fine, I’ll watch the fucking kid. I’m gonna be taking readings the rest of the day anyway, see what I can have ready by the time Al shows up.”

“Best of luck.” Mustang sighs. “Lunch?”

Ed makes another, more eloquent face as they start back down the hall. “I’d say go out and get our own food but Hughes wants to talk to them more. Not sure what the fuck we’ll get with a kitchen fulla kids and only one adult left who was even in the meeting. Who the fuck is Psycho anyway?
Did he even get introduced to you?”

“Psycho?” Mustang says, then, when Ed makes hair gestures and a theatrical scowl, “Ah. Yes, one Serious Black. It’s his house we’re staying in.”

“This apparently super cursed, shoulda been condemned fucking house? Guess I can’t say I’m shocked.”

“He’s also apparently an escaped convict.”

“What! Oh my god, I thought that was prison hair. Fuckin’ called it.”

“He does seem to care about the child, at least,” Mustang says clinically. “Though perhaps it’s only pity, given we didn’t exactly hear any complaints about ‘destroying’ him.”

“Parents dead,” Ed observes. “Really doesn’t want to go back to his relatives. State’s compromised, not that calling child services is ever a great fuckin’ choice.” Ed cannot fucking imagine what the hell these people consider a working foster care system, let alone an orphanage.

“He’ll age out soon. Seventeen, yes?”

“Yeah. Guess two years’s not that bad. Could be worse.”

“Yes, he could be twelve and have a little brother,” Mustang says, corner of his mouth lifting.

“Ha! We should be so fuckin’ lucky. These daffodils could use another me running around,” Ed mutters.

“Yes, then surely we’d be able to just leave it all to him and go home,” Mustang says dryly. “If you’re going to be running experiments you may want to hand off babysitting to one of Hughes’ people, by the way. If the boy really is a leak we don’t want to tip off the enemy in any capacity, and even if he doesn’t understand what you’re working on someone else looking through his eyes might.”

Ed frowns as they reenter the base camp room. Arget’s going to be busy formulating an interrogation strategy for Hughes - she’s already writing busily at the small side table - and Ed assumed Jones would be helping with fleecing the wizards of whatever passed for intel in their little vigilante daycare operation. Hairy’s old enough that Ed can theoretically plant him in a corner with a book or something and not have to construct a baby gate enclosure, but Mustang’s right, him seeing anything is a security risk.

Well, maybe Ed will just make him face the wall or whatever.

Hughes is standing over the coffee table with a couple of disappointingly thin dossiers open on top of it, eyes narrowed at the papers inside, tapping a pen on his chin. “Well, boys and girls, we are in the real deep shit,” he says thoughtfully. “Our resources are limited and likely to stay that way, and what we know is a whole lot of fuckall. Our hosts control most if not all of our flow of information, and the bad news is, they’re a pack of galloping idiots.”

Mustang sighs, crossing his arms on the other side of the coffee table. “What are we starting with?”

“A map,” Hughes says, still tapping. “Because if we do happen to be standing in the middle of a nationwide array that could go off and kill us at any time, I want to know. And figure out what the safe zone is, if there even is one. Without official records we’ll have to start plotting any incidents
based off what these wizards can remember, though ideally we’ll at least be able to have some newspapers.” He pauses. “Though that’ll need a wizard to read for us. Damn.”

Jones, on one of the couches, glances briefly at Ed before looking back to Hughes. “One of the kids would probably be happy to help,” he offers. “She seemed pretty interested in what we were doing, with the readings. If we asked her to read from some newspapers for us she’d probably do it.”

Hughes caught the glance and is now also looking at Ed. “Hmm,” he says critically. Ed narrows his eyes right back. “Well, we do want them to want to tell us things. Roy, do your thing, will you? And Ed, take your jacket off.”

“Why?” Ed says suspiciously.

“Because you’re more approachable without it,” Mustang says as he starts undoing his own uniform jacket. “We need information. They’re civilians and we’re foreigners; we have very little authority or social capital here and scaring people makes them more likely to clam up. You catch more flies with honey, and so on.”

“Gross,” Ed complains, but he pulls off his jacket. Mustang and Hughes have been right about this kind of thing enough times that it’s better to do what they say when it comes to asskissing. “I don’t fuckin’ do honey, I hope you know.”

“We’re aware,” Mustang says dryly, draping his own jacket over his shoulders in that stupid cape thing he does and now on to rolling up his sleeves.

“You just go ahead and continue to be your inimitable self,” Hughes says brightly, twirling his pen like it’s one of his daggers. “Just with your jacket off.”

“And do something about those,” Mustang adds, nodding at Ed’s bracers. “They stand out too much and they don’t look like anything else you’re wearing.”

Ed glances down at his bracers, which are a dull steel grey with some brown leather padding underneath, then at the rest of what he’s wearing, which is, as always, black on black on black, minus the white gloves. “You’re making me take them off because they don’t match my outfit?”

“They’re weapons, Fullmetal, and they look it. Take ‘em off.”

“Oh, but the knives can stay?” Ed says sarcastically, tapping his fingers together to transmute his bracers open enough to tug them off, jerking pointedly at a strap of his shoulder harness with one hand. “Pretty sure they’re a lot more likely to recognize all the sharp pointy shit as a fuckin’ weapon than some arm guards.”

Jones coughs. “No, they - the knives work. They’re, ah. Part of the look.”

“Edward,” Hughes says, going over to put both hands on Ed’s shoulders and look him sincerely in the eyes, “we’re trying to make you look cool. Just let it happen.”

Ed stares at him for what’s maybe too long a moment. “This is why I’m never ever ever joining Intel.”

“And we’re all very sad about that,” Hughes informs him solemnly, turning him around by the shoulders and presenting him to Jones, Mustang and Arget. “Well? What do we think?”
Argent is entirely red in the face again. Ed can’t blame her; Hughes distributes embarrassment the way parades throw out confetti and Ed doesn’t even have to work in his department. Jones gives a double thumbs up.

“It’ll do,” Mustang says critically.

Ed scowls. “Not cool enough for you?”

“You could stand to do something about the hair,” Mustang allows, like he expects a fuckin’ generosity award for the statement.

“Touch my hair and die screaming,” Ed suggests to Hughes, whose hands had worryingly lifted up off Ed’s shoulders at the hair comment.

“You may not like our methods but they work,” Hughes says cheerfully as he walks around to face Ed again, undaunted as ever by any kind of attempt at rebuke. “We’ll have them singing to us in no time.”

“It’s a little late for you to feign politeness, but do try not to pick a fight,” Mustang tells Ed, carefully ruffling his own hair with both hands. “And as for the girl - which one was interested, Sergeant?”

“Brown hair, brown skin, about this tall,” Jones provides. “Didn’t catch her name.”

“Smile at her at least once, Fullmetal, when you ask if she’d like to help you with your project.”

They want him to fucking schmooze Smartypants? “I am not flirting with a teenaged girl!”

“That’s not flirting, it’s basic courtesy,” Mustang says, unperturbed. “Would you prefer to growl and snap at her while asking the same?”

Ed bares his teeth. “It’s still skeevy.”

“It’s work, Fullmetal. I’ve got - what did you call him? Ah yes, psycho. And then moody, and the ex-terrorist, and both schoolteachers. Would you like to trade?” Mustang says mildly.

Ed can’t help the reflexive yuck that shows up on his face at the thought of having to get cute with those freaks. “Exactly,” Mustang says. “Smile at the girl and be grateful.”

“Conning teenagers into doing your grunt work for free,” Ed mutters, rubbing at his bare forearms. “Man, today is just a rerun carousel of past fuckups, isn’t it.”

“You were paid fair and square, Fullmetal. Quite highly, if I recall.”

“Stop, you’re gonna give me a trauma flashback to all your fucking budget meetings.”

“I had to sit through you being at those budget meetings just as much as you had to sit through the meetings themselves,” Mustang says pointedly.

“Great, so we both deserve worker’s comp, fuckin’ congratulations,” Ed grumbles. “Ugh. I guess if kids are mixed in anyway might as well put them to work doing something useful.”

“Using the kids as translators also gives us better chances of getting unfiltered information, as they’re less likely to dissemble or lie outright,” Hughes points out, glasses glinting as he packs up his dossiers. “Or even know there’s something worth lying about.”
“Yes, the one advantage of working with teenagers,” Mustang says, eyes rolling skyward briefly before he heads for the door. “Naivety is just what one should look for in one’s subordinates.”

“You saying past me was easy to trick?” Ed says as he follows, just because he’s never going to be done sawing at Mustang about literally everything to do with the military in general and Ed’s involvement with it in specific.

“Oh, as if anything about you could ever be called easy, Fullmetal,” Mustang says, smirking faintly over his shoulder as he pushes open the kitchen door.

Chapter End Notes

ed: are u seriously thotting me out for the cause rn

mustang, powdering his own cheeks: not JUST you, fullmetal. Now get out there and shake what your mamma gave you
All the kids are still in here, though it looks like they’re on the scrape-the-plate-and-sop-the-dregs end of lunch. Havoc, on the short side of the table, is surrounded, with Psycho across from Hairy and Breakfast Lady by the kitchen counter rummaging in a purse. Everybody looks up when they come in and all conversation stops, which is an annoyingly familiar phenomenon. Ed no longer eats in any military cafeteria because that shit is only fun the first couple of times.

“Hey chief,” Havoc says, friendly enough that he’s evidently forgotten all about counting cards; not a man to hold grudges, Havoc. He’s also starting to grin, though, so it’s maybe less forgiveness and more recognition that they’re up to something super stupid and Mustang’s also stuck executing his own schemes for once. “Hey boss.”

Ed grunts. It’d be more satisfying if Mustang didn’t enjoy this shit. “Hello, Havoc. Hello, Molly,” Mustang says to Breakfast Lady in his you like me voice, smiling at her. “I apologize for our rudeness in not coming to the table sooner. I hope we aren’t too late to finally get a chance to try your cooking.”

“Oh, no, there’s plenty left,” she says immediately; the way she’s looking back at Mustang, it’s obvious he got to her from the word go. She does give Ed kind of a weird look, though, and Ed starts scowling back before remembering what they’re here for and trying for a smile instead. It definitely feels too tight to be natural, but for some reason it makes her whole face soften at him in - pity? Again? For fuck’s sake.

“I was just about to head out, actually, and see about more groceries,” she says, glancing between him and Mustang. “Seeing as we’ll be a full house for a while yet. Is there anything in particular you would prefer?”

“We wouldn’t dream of directing you in your own kitchen, Molly,” Mustang demurs. “You’d know far better than we what’s available, in any case.”

“Are you sure? It’s no trouble,” Breakfast Lady says, eating it up. “Really. And - Elric?”

“Yeah,” Ed says warily.

“We didn’t get a chance to thank you, earlier, for what you did with those dementers,” she says, tone a lot warmer than it was this morning. “However you did it doesn’t change that you saved my children’s lives. Thank you.”

“Uh,” Ed says, caught one hundred percent off guard and seriously not sure how to take that given she’s still looking at him with pity. “You’re... welcome.”

“Sit down, eat,” she tells him, apparently realizing that any drawing this out any more is only gonna make it worse. “Everything’s still hot, we’ve really lucked out to have found the self-heating china here.”

Whatever the fuck that means. “Thanks,” Ed says uncomfortably, going for the chair opposite Havoc. There’s a weird kind of silence after that, and when Ed glances back suspiciously he finds Breakfast Lady staring at him - no, at his knife harness. When he turned his back to her she must’ve gotten an eyeful of all the sharp pointy shit back there.
Well, at least that look ain’t pity anymore. Ed flicks a *told you so* glance at Mustang and sits down. “Smells good,” he offers, deliberately casual, and that snaps her out of it.

“You just help yourself, dear,” she says. “It’s bangers and mash.”

Whatever the fuck that is. “Oooo, something smells good,” Hughes echoes from the door, Jones and Arget filing in behind him; they’re all in on Operation Sleaze Your Way To The Facts too, apparently, because they’ve all lost their jackets and Hughes has way too many buttons undone at the collar. Arget’s in a regulation white button-up and Jones has one of the long-sleeved undershirts that were basically the only approved uniform item Ed could remotely stand to wear until Hawkeye introduced him to her high-collar tacsleeves (Ed hasn’t looked back since. Breathable, stretchy, soft enough not to irritate his stupid shoulder scar even with the knife harness pressing down over it, comes in black, black, black and also black. The most perfect garment invented since the guy who first looked at leather (black) and said “I wonder if I can make pants out of that?”).

“Oh, hello,” Breakfast Lady tells them. “You all just help yourselves, I’m popping out for a moment. All of you, behave,” she says to the kids in a much stricter tone. “We’ll be cleaning when I get back, we only got as far as the upstairs drawing room last time.”

“Aw, mum,” one of the redheads whines.

“Don’t you mum me! You wanted to help the order so much, well get helping. I’ll be back in an hour or so,” she adds to Mustang, back to her hostess voice. “There’s tea in the kettle, just ask serious to get creature for you if you need anything.”

“Thank you, we appreciate it,” Mustang tells her sincerely, smiling like she didn’t just remind them all they’re in goddamn slaver society and the locals are all fuckin’ cool with it. Ed can’t even say shit either, ‘cause ass fuck it, Hughes and Mustang aren’t wrong about needing these freaks to want to tell them stuff.

Fuck this place, seriously.

Ed mechanically loads potato and accompanying substances onto his plate while everyone else sits down around him, Breakfast Lady shouldering her purse and saying her goodbyes before going to the hall and *crack* ing out of there. Is it *rude* to teleport directly out of whatever room you’re in? Ed snorts to himself as he pulls off his gloves, then taps his hands together and transmutes the heavy silver fork into a pair of chopsticks. Al in his nagging had succeeded in inculcating an unbreakable habit by linking it to food.

Jones, across from him, eyes him curiously as the brief crackle of transmutation dies. “Not a fork man?”

Ed, now head down over the plate and mouth conveyor belting potato, pauses for a second to hold the chopsticks up, clack them and spin one over his thumb. “Ffyssical ‘ferapy.”

“Still?” Hughes asks, sounding concerned.

Ed shrugs, swallowing his mouthful with some effort. “Habit. Al.” Besides, as stabby as forks are, Ling and Lan Fan had taught Ed to respect and fear the chopstick; in community-style eating it’s hands down the most efficient way to grab and keep anything you want to be able to get in your mouth before it’s gone. Now it’s his default whenever not eating alone, because part of how Al and Winry decided his arm rehab was gonna go was making him defend the food on his plate with his life.
Psycho and the kids all seem perfectly happy to sit there and watch them eat, which is mildly creepy in a voyeuristic sort of way, but it’d take more than that to keep Ed from food and the potato stuff isn’t half bad. Kinda bland, but given he spent the past week and a half eating nothing but Xingese pretty much everything is gonna be bland in comparison. Havoc finished eating with the kids and seems pretty content to sit around chewing his cig too, though it occurs to Ed that Havoc missed the part of the meeting when they discovered they’ve landed smack in the middle of a shitty wizard rerun of their collective worst nightmare scenario.

Well, he can’t exactly say hey, remember that time you got impaled, paralyzed and nearly died? We’re doing that again! Because that’s kind of a mood killer. Mustang can have the honor of dropping that bomb. Ed can fill in on some other stuff he missed, though. “Hey Havoc,” he says, putting his chopsticks down to plant a hand on the table and lean in. “Unicorns are real.”

Havoc blinks at him. “... I.. don’t know that codephrase, boss.”

“No, I mean they’re real here. Like real real. They got fuckin’ unicorns the same way they got fuckin’ ghosts and werewolves.”

“Huh.” Havoc’s brow slowly creases as this sinks in. He looks down at his empty plate, frowning, then his eyes unfocus slightly. “Wonder what unicorn steak tastes like.”

Ed feels his own eyes widen. “Shit,” he says wonderingly. “Probably like horse. Right? I mean, it’s basically just magic horse.” He twists to look at the kids. “Unicorns are the horses with the horns, right? We’re talking about the same thing here?”

The kids all nod, staring at them like they’re hypnotized. “Horse doesn’t taste that great,” Havoc says, disappointed. “And the meat’s too tough, all stringy and no fat. Though I guess for something like unicorn you’d put in the effort. Tenderize, marinade, cook it low and slow -”

“You’ve eaten horse?” Not A Twin says.

“Those two are both from the East,” Hughes says cheerfully. “If you look close you can still see the hay in their hair.”

“Shut it, Central boy,” Ed tells him, pointing with the chopsticks. “You wouldn’t last three minutes in farm country. Horse is famine food anyway, nobody’d waste it on a city fucker like you.”


Ed can’t help his cackle. “It’s better than boot leather, you can know that for free. Even boiled soft that shit is vile.”

“You’ve eaten boots?” a twin says delightedly.

“Just the one,” Ed says. None of the rest of the kids look as excited by this as the twins are. “What? Wasn’t shit else to eat. It was that or start trading limbs for dinner, and we were already playing with a few missing cards from that deck.”

“Was this… on campaign?” Jones asks delicately.

“Promised Day,” Ed tells him, because why not, him and Arget are in the shit now with the rest of them, playing Promised Day Two: Wizards Can Teleport edition, and Hughes clearly trusts them; besides, it’s not like any of this particular bullshit is gonna be in any way tactically relevant to any potentially telepathically eavesdropping terrorists. “Me and Ling got stuck in… well, it’s a long story, but there wasn’t shit there besides me, him and knee-deep blood, so. We hadda fuckin’ eat
“Ah,” Arget says faintly. “That’s why… ah.”

“Yeah, that’s why we can dangle Ed in front of Emperor Yao and expect to get anything other than a deportation order,” Hughes says. “They shared a precious meal together one time out of Ed’s boot. With a side of knee-deep blood sauce, presumably.”


“Knee deep floor blood,” the twins chorus, looking disturbingly pleased by this fact.

“Anything can taste good if you get hungry enough,” Psycho speaks up, eyeing Ed up with a challenging spark in his gaze. “Rat started being pretty tasty after a while.”

“ Totally not worth it if you’ve got literally anything else,” Ed dismisses. “Rodents suck. Too fast and small to be worth the energy of catching, high likelihood of disease transmission, and all the tiny fuckin’ bones are such a pain in the ass. Bugs are way better.” He pauses, reflects, and adds, “If you have salt.”

“Bugs,” the twins chorus happily.

“Roasted cricket is actually really good,” Jones admits. “Some avocado, some goat cheese, chop in some onion, some tomato and garlic - that’s an appetizer right there. Gourmet.”

“And you South guys call us Easterners weird,” Havoc says in genial disgust.

“You’re trying honey fried silkworm when we head back through Guangshi,” Ed tells him. “That’ll change your tune. Fuck, that night market had fuckin’ everything.” Buckets of fish roe, spiced lobster covered in chili oil, charcoal-grilled corn, ginger syrup dumplings, fried seahorse on a stick… Ed feels his mouth begin to water. “Live crabs the size of my head. Damn. You know what, the rest of you can head on back to Central after, I’m staying there.”

“I suppose we’ll just send for you when a new all-you-can-eat opens in Central,” Mustang says dryly. “One that hasn’t been warned about you yet.”

It occurs to Ed that telling people he ate boot might not be the best way to get in nice with the wizards, but Mustang isn’t giving him any of the outwardly bland looks that mean holy fucking shit you trainwreck or stop right now before I do something drastic, Edward, so presumably it is working. “Don’t think you’re not gonna try the silkworm too, bastard,” Ed tells him. “No leading from the rear on this one.”

“I’ve had it,” Mustang says amusedly, giving a single lazy gesture at his own face: right, yeah, him and Hughes both have at least one Xingan in their family tree somewhere. “Scorpion on a stick was a festival day treat, growing up. There’s a shop in Central in the western temple district that does them, you know, only about twenty minutes from base. Fifty cenz for a whole skewer.”

“What, seriously?”

“Jiāoquān and tanghulu too. Corner of 18th and Riviere, next to the pawn shop.”

“No way,” Ed says, briefly struck stupid by the knowledge that he can theoretically get jiāoquān every day on his way to work. That’s like six blocks from his apartment. “Fuck, I’m gonna get so fucking fat.”

“Oh, no, they wouldn’t have that,” Mustang says, earnest. “They’re a northern Xingese shop. Fried tarantula is a southern thing.”

“You were all ready to eat unicorn,” Psycho says, sounding thoroughly entertained; he’s leaning back in his chair and looking like he wants to give Havoc a jovial backslap, which is doing a lot for him in the not coming across like a nutcase asshole department. He might even be good-looking if Ed didn’t know he was a slaver. “Now you’re squeamish about some spiders? Man up.”

“Hey, a unicorn is a mammal, that’s good honest red meat,” Havoc protests, then pauses. “Is it a mammal?”

“Please don’t eat anything of a unicorn’s,” Smartypants says, kind of strained. “Drinking their blood curses you pretty badly.”

Ed puts his chopsticks down again. “Okay, when you say cues, the fuck does it mean?”

Smartypants frowns at him, more in concentration than disapproval. “From what I understand, it halves your lifespan.”

They all consider this for a moment. “Not worth it for a steak, then,” Havoc concludes. “Mammal or no mammal.”

“Spiders,” Not A Twin says queasily. By the look on his face he’s still stuck at that particular conversational junction and would really like to be able to leave. “You’ve eaten… spiders.”

“I’m sure they’re not that bad,” Arget says bravely.

“Not as good as steak,” Ed has to admit. “Though you can’t beat bugs if you want crunch.”

Not A Twin goes green. “Eurgh.”

“You ate snails last year and had no complaints,” Smartypants tells him.

“What? No I didn’t!”

“You saw Fleur eating them and started shoveling them in your mouth like they were going to be taken away by rampaging Nundu.”

“That’s - I don’t remember that!”

“Given you couldn’t remember your own name within ten feet of her, I’m not at all surprised,” Smartypants says tartly.

“They really were snails, mate,” Hairy tells Not A Twin with something like apology. “I tried to ask if you were sure you wanted that but you just shouted about cultural exchange and took the whole bowl.”

“That’s -!” Not A Twin breaks off, recognizing defeat. He eyes Ed balefully. “At least it wasn’t spiders.”

“They’re fried whole in honey,” Ed tells him. “All the little hairs on the outside get all caramelized.”

“Eurgh.”
“Sometimes they’re big enough you gotta pick the legs off to fit it whole in your mouth.”

“Oh god. Stop.”

“Crunch crunch,” Ed says pitilessly.

“I was right all along, you are evil,” Not A Twin swears with a pointed finger, pressed back away into his seat. The twins are grinning enormously and Miss Redhead and Smartypants are both giggling madly on either side of them, though, which is what Mustang wanted, probably; even Psycho and Hairy look reluctantly amused.

“Yeah, I’m as bad as they get.” Ed flashes teeth at Not A Twin and then tries not to grit them as he makes eye contact with Smartypants. “Listen, y’all got any newspapers around? We’re gonna try and map any incidents of terrorist activity and we could use your help.”

Chapter End Notes

molly weasley: this guy looks like he just broke out of some kind of Miami prison for violent gay bikers but he DID keep my kids from being soulsuck deathmurdered so like. It’s probably just because of his Traumatic Childhood and Tortured Backstory

Al, from thousands of miles away: pretty sure my brother would’ve been a high-octane thot even without any kind of trauma, but that’s kind of you
“I saw a stack of daily profits upstairs,” Miss Redhead says, straightening up. “While we were cleaning. I don’t know if they were recent, though, they looked pretty old.”

“You wouldn’t be able to read them, th - oh. That’s why you - yes, of course I’ll help,” Smartypants says, cheeks darkening again.

“Me too,” Miss Redhead says quickly.

“Yeah, me too,” Not A Twin says with an edge of belligerence, after a hostile kind of glance at Miss Redhead and then Ed. Ed can’t imagine why he’s so quick to jump aboard given he’s clearly not about to forget the spiders thing, but who cares.

“I could try modifying the translation spell for you, too,” Smartypants offers, glancing hesitantly at Mustang and the others. “I’m not sure it’ll work, but - worth a try, right?”

“We would very much appreciate that,” Mustang says, manufacturing sincerity like a factory press.

“A lot of stuff won’t have been reported,” Psycho speaks up, frowning. “The daily profit only runs what the minister tells them to. The more recent stuff *definitely* won’t be printed.”

“We’re looking at everything they’ve done, from their initial rise to now,” Hughes says. “Since we can’t access police records at the moment, any public record will do. Is there a city hall, a records office, a local library newspaper archive…”?

“Everything official would be at the ministry,” Psycho says, frowning deeper, then glancing questioningly at Smartypants. “*Do* libraries keep the daily profit?”

Ed bites a chopstick so as not to howl *HAVE YOU EVER EVEN SET FOOT IN A LIBRARY* or anything to that effect. “Hog warts does,” Smartypants says. “I don’t know for sure about others. There’s a magical section to the British library, but you need a special permit from the ministry to go in there.”

“Where’d you see the stack of profits?” Psycho asks Miss Redhead. That’s either gotta be slang for newspaper or the translation rock is shitting itself again.

“Dunno, upstairs somewhere. One of the rooms all filled with junk. We didn’t clean that one yet, I know that, so they should still be there,” she says.

“Creatu- “ Psycho starts to say, then cuts off with a wary glance at Ed.

Ed narrows his eyes. “No, go on. Call your slave,” he says, not able to curb his disdain and not really trying; Mustang can eat his whole ass on this one. “Isn’t that what he’s here for? Keep
talking about how much you want to free him while you’re at it.”

That makes Psycho flush a satisfyingly angry red. “Never mind,” he says through his teeth.

“Don’t you also have a library upstairs?” Ed says, unable to resist adding, “The one full of stuff you don’t want us to see?”

Psycho looks like he wants to pour the nearest glass of water over Ed’s head. “All that’s in there is dark books and garbage. Given you can’t even read the books, all that’s there for you is garbage. And I didn’t want you in there because the very first thing you did when you came in here was wake everyone at the crack of dawn by tearing portraits off the walls, and if you go around grabbing things left and right in there you’re going to die.”

Mustang lays a hand on Ed’s shoulder just as he’s about to rip into Psycho, which, right, that’s a failed fucking grade on the don’t pick a fight situation, so Ed has to settle for huffing and letting Mustang turn his lean in into a lean back. “Why don’t we take a look at those newspapers,” Mustang says, like nothing happened and he doesn’t still have a hand on Ed’s delts. “If there are any incidents you can tell us about off the top of your head, we’ll map those first. As far back as you can remember.”

Psycho eyes Ed with something like vindication, which Ed doesn’t do more than curl his lip about because he’s pretty sure it’s exactly what Mustang was going for. Let him think he won the round; letting people think they’ve won is how Mustang gets people into his bear traps.

Psycho scratches his stubble and turns a less hostile look on Mustang. “You’ll want moonie for that,” he says. “I was in prison up until two years ago. Though,” he adds, smiling cynically, “Whatever they’re blaming on me, the worst of it’s almost certainly death eater activity.”

Escaped convict, right. “What exactly did you get locked up for again?” Ed says, because if they’re blaming terrorism on him, it probably wasn’t shoplifting.

"Hadn’t you heard? I’m the notorious mass murderer serious black,” Psycho sneers. “Responsible for all bad things in wizard ing Britain. Watch out, I’m under your bed!”

“He was framed,” Hairy says immediately, looking directly at Ed like he’s prepared to duel him with his fork for Psycho’s honor or something. “He’s innocent. He didn’t even get a trial.”

“Is that typical?” Mustang asks, sounding blandly interested.

“It was the end of the war,” Psycho says with a nonchalant shrug that does nothing to hide the bitterness. “Right after Voldemort disappeared. The next day, in fact. Nobody was interested in procedure.”

“I see,” Mustang says. “You were active during the war, then?”

“Yeah. Joined the order of the phoenix straight out of school with moonie and James and lily.”

“We’ll need to map all activity from that time period as well,” Mustang says. “Would you be able to help out with that?”

Psycho eyes Mustang and then Ed, rubbing his hand over his mouth. “Yeah. Why not.”

Yeah, why not give some basic fucking background info to the people who went way the fuck outta their way to come help you with your terrorists. “Don’t worry,” Ed says, saccharine. “You won’t have to work with me. I’ve got readings to take.”
“We’ll also need a map of the country,” Hughes says, leaning in before Psycho can bite back. “And any surrounding area too, ideally. Would you happen to know where we can get one?”

“That we’ve definitely got,” Psycho says, looking away from Ed with a visible act of will. “My brother had one of the la-dee-da ones mounted in his room, for all his little projects. That’s probably his profits too, come to think of it. Sodding nut.” He grunts. “Might as well go up and see.”

The map turns out to be a respectable piece of work, taking up an entire wall and showing the entire country and what’s around it - which turns out to be mostly ocean. “We’re on an island?” Ed says. “Huh.”

“Yeah, right here,” Psycho says, poking at some bit of it. “London, England.” The bit he poked lights up silver, and letters start forming above it. Then he uses both hands to touch the map, making a sweeping gesture, and suddenly the map *zooms in*, like the paper is a screen and just bungee-dropped forty klicks down, roads branching and spidering as they come into greater focus.

“Wow,” Arget breathes.

“Handy,” Hughes comments, sounding genuinely impressed. “Can we mark different incidents in different colors?”

“Probably,” Psycho mutters, taking out his stick and tapping it a couple times against the map until lights start turning green and then gold and red. “Yeah, there you go.”

“The daily profits are in here,” Miss Redhead calls from across the hallway, the kids having trooped upstairs with them. “Some of them are pretty recent - did your mum have a subscription?”

“Must’ve had,” Psycho says, going over there to look as Hughes, Jones and Arget cluster around the map. Ed looks at Mustang and jerks a thumb at them. “You good?”

“Yes, go on.” Mustang waves him off; he might not have a tenth the experience in array design that Ed does but there’s no way he’s gonna miss a human transmutation circle if it’s in any way in front of him, so Ed leaves him to it and heads back downstairs to start taking some energy readings.

Havoc and Jones turn up down there a couple minutes later. “We’re setting up in the map room,” Havoc tells Ed as Jones starts collecting papers. “Chief says we might as well have everything in one place and to come on up when you’re done.”

Ed glances up and frowns over from where he’s digging the equipment back out of the pack. “Where’s the kid?”

“If you mean me,” Hairy says sardonically from the doorway, the sight of him mostly blocked by Havoc and Jones, “I’m just here, being led around like a dog on a leash.”

“Get used to it,” Ed advises. “We’re not gonna have you conveniently disappearing on us because it’s ‘for your own good’ or whatever.”

“We can keep an eye on Hairy,” Miss Redhead pipes up, because apparently she came back down too.

“I don’t know if you remember or not, but yesterday he almost got murdered and you were almost collateral,” Ed says, pointing a pen at Hairy and then Miss Redhead as they shuffle out from behind Havoc, Smartypants and the rest of the redheads now visible out in the hallway. “Stick together if you want but you’re not going anywhere without a guard until we solve this thing.”
“I don’t need a guard,” Hairy mumbles kind of sulkily. “Not like having one helped against those dementers.”

“Firstly, you talk like that, you’re gonna hurt Havoc’s feelings. Look at him, he’s hurt. Secondly, you don’t find that a little suspicious? Your one and only guard disappears right before there’s an attack? If that’s a coincidence I’ll eat another boot. Thirdly, like three people have tried to get rid of you in the past couple hours alone. Now, maybe they’re just really into family togetherness in how they’re trying to get you back to your relatives’, but somehow I highly fuckin’ doubt that’s it.”

“I still don’t know what a dementer is,” Havoc says amiably, buckling a pack closed and moving to the next one. “Though I just wanna say, boss, that everything I’ve heard makes them sound very much like a you problem.”

“Yeah, so if you suddenly start feeling freaked as fuck and scared outta your mind for no reason, yell for me or Mustang and get the fuck outta there,” Ed informs him. “Take the kids with you when you do.”

“I can cast a patronus,” Hairy mutters.

“Good for you. I can tie a cherry stem into a knot with my tongue.”

“What?”

“What? Sorry, I thought we were sharing random and irrelevant facts about ourselves,” Ed says. “I don’t care what you can cast. Get used to Havoc.”

“It’s not irrelevant. Hairy ran off over a hundred dementers once with his patronus,” Not A Twin says crabily.

Hairy kind of ducks his head but doesn’t deny it, and Smartypants nods. “Oh yeah?” Ed says, eyebrows up; there’s a vague memory of Beardy saying that same word when they were talking about how Ed had killed the things. “And where was this patronus yesterday? And what the fuck, if he did that with a hundred, why’d everybody get so torqued about me dealing wth two?”

“Yeah, but you destroyed them, mate,” a twin says.

“Patronus only chases them off,” the other one says.

“Hairy did cast his patronus,” Not A Twin says staunchly. “They were just - too close, this time.”

“It’s - if they get to you before you can cast it, you… it gets harder and harder to cast the closer they are,” Smartypants explains quickly, glancing at Hairy. “You need to cast it with a happy memory, and dementers make it impossible to feel happy, or remember happy things when they’re close, so...”

Ed’s eyebrows feel like they’re high fiving his hairline at this point. “Then why don’t you use something else?”

Smartypants opens her mouth, then closes it, frowns and shakes her head. “There isn’t anything else. That’s the only thing that can hold off dementers.”

Ed, staring back at her, dearly wants to stop fucking having these moments. “Has anyone tried fire?”
“I don’t think ordinary fire works against them,” Smartypants argues.

“So your entire strategy for dealing with them is to think happy thoughts? That - you know what, no. This conversation is over. Those things show up, we deal with them, no happy thoughts required. Go help Hughes and them upstairs.”

“Could use a hand down here, actually,” Havoc says, gesturing at his pack-up work. “Could you guys help me stack up all those files?”

The kids all glance at each other but move over to do it, and since they can’t read Amestrian Ed leaves them to it, going back to setting up all the measuring equipment. He’s probably gonna do most of his readings in the room with all the potentially haunted portraits, but he might as well do a control in here and, hey, check out that armchair Beardy temporarily fucked with and see if it’s giving off anything wonky.

He has to move a grime-encrusted statuette of a ballerina off a side table to make space to lay everything out, only one look at the surface has him digging out his handkerchief to wipe off the horrible coating of gross. This place is a dump. Folding the handkerchief for another pass alone turns Ed’s gloves grey with dust. The wallpaper is stained and peeling, the floorboards are cracked and warping, and all the furniture belongs in the Flame Alchemist Target Practice Retirement Range for Shit That’s Super Fucking Busted.

Al’s going to be coming here, and probably staying more than one night, too. There’s dust and who the fuck knows what else in the air, probably evil magic wizard mold spores the way Ed’s luck goes, and he doesn’t even know if this entire building has showers. There’s almost no chance of Mustang letting them get a hotel, not when it’ll mean splitting up their forces and forgoing whatever super secret protections are keeping this base off the radar. And no way in fuck is Al gonna have to wear a sneeze mask or something the entire time he’s here.

Ed looks around the room, frown deepening, then leaves his handkerchief on the table and knocks his knuckles against the nearest wall. Not hollow; load-bearing, then. Good. “Yo, Havoc,” he says. “You might wanna stand away from the walls for a bit. You guys too.”

Havoc immediately jerks away from the nearest wall, Jones and the kids twitching in surprise and scrambling to follow half a second later. Ed pulls the glove off his left hand - he usually tunes out the familiar makeup of the cloth whenever he’s reading composition through it, but for delicate or complex work he tries to eliminate variables - and presses it to the wall.

Nothing seems too fucked, chemically speaking; he closes his eyes and lets the structure map itself out from his hand. It’s really fucking annoying to do, pushing from structure to structure and reading both shape and matter, making it make sense in a way that his brain can understand when it’s used to getting this kind of info from his eyeballs. For complicated stuff it’s necessary, and here he’s gonna be transmuting blind for most of it. There doesn’t seem to be any wiring anywhere, which does simplify things, but the house is three stories with a cellar and that’s a lot of shit.

“What’s he doing?” says Smartypants.

Cleaning this place is gonna be a fuckshow. Best thing he can do is a patch job. Sealing off every rathole and mold reservoir and layer of dust isn’t gonna help the house in the long term, but it’ll keep all that shit out of the air and away from Al’s lungs. Though, honestly, if he uses a rigid enough polymer it’ll basically replace whatever structural infirmity is in the plaster surfaces.

“Alchemy stuff,” Havoc says. “We probably shouldn’t interrupt him.”
Ed mentally runs through a couple of sealant options, weighing effectiveness against the estimated local availability of relevant elements, and decides silicone with a catalysis chaser is his best bet. Polydimethylsiloxane, o-kay. C2H6OSi n…. Let’s say nine thousand, no, eleven to twelve thousand. Alright, yeah.

“Boss?” Havoc says.

“Yeah,” Ed says, then, remembering they’re in the room with him, opens his eyes and adds, “You might wanna stand on a chair, actually.”

“Jones, tell the General to get anything he cares about off the floor, right now,” Havoc says urgently.

Jones takes off running. Havoc dives for the table, followed by a mad scramble of kids; not bad reflexes, that bunch. Ed grins, tosses his braid over his shoulder and claps.

Chapter End Notes

The sad irony is that if sirius and ed had met under better circumstances and didn’t keep accidentally ramming into each others’ rough spots they would be two long-haired hot headed leather-panted bike nerds getting chased by the cops and winning darwin awards for world’s stupidest bar fights together
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ed keeps his hands pressed together - on something like this he’ll easily use a dozen different arrays before it’s done, it’s faster to just keep the energy circling - and channels everything down through his feet, the discharge crackling over his legs. It’s a little more costly in terms of drawn energy and he’ll be a little more tired afterward as a result, but that’s what his streamlining formulas are for. He does a run-through first, to address any big issues and test if the damn matter compression that keeps this place hidden affects the actual materials in any way, but other than a weird feeling of resistance in his alchemy as it sweeps through it all seems pretty ordinary.

He gives a mental shrug and gets to work. He starts with metals and seals up all the pipes, scouring rust off and leaving the copper reinforced as well as sparkling like new, and then moves to stone and gets rid of the cracks in the foundation. The weird resistance fades suddenly after that, wobbling and then giving way all at once, and from there it’s business as usual. Ed evens out the staircases, aligns the flagstones in the cellars, straightens the chimneys, and geez, this place doesn’t have nearly as many windows as they’ll need to ventilate all the fumes afterward. Big arched casement windows, floor to ceiling, yeah, that’s the stuff. Could do with some skylights too. And all this cracked fucking… what is that, tiling? That’s better off all fused into one piece, and as for the wooden support beams...

Watery sunlight breaks over Ed as he reshapes wood and metal and glass and stone, windows peeling open in the wall beside him. There’s a shout from upstairs, then a roar, then a lot of crashing noises, but Ed’s busy and doesn’t have time for interruptions and anyway he knows what pain screaming sounds like and this was just surprise. He peels back the floorboards in front of him - cellar’s on the other side of the kitchen, it’s just dirt under here - and starts digging for ingredients.

He pulls up quartz and lye, deconstructing as he drags it up so it comes out as crumbly, ashy sand, then goes back in again for the groundwater. He changes his mind halfway through and drops that array; it’ll be easier to just assemble clean water from air via condensation, so he absently breaks his circle for a second to lean over and push open the new window beside him with one hand. He presses his palms back together and sets the energy rounding again, this time to shape and harden the earth basin into a smooth-surfaced tub for the sealant.

Now for the water. With the window open there’s no risk of using up all the oxygen in the room, so Ed freely pulls the H and O2 and makes them get frisky with their electrons.

A condensation array is the standard for pulling water from air, but the energy requirements end up stacking out just about the same given the necessity of heat for both, so he might as well go ahead and do the one that doesn’t need him to factor in humidity calculations. It does make him focus, though. Molecular restructuring is different from just configuring an existing set of elements into a different shape, and subatomic manipulation is an entire different ballgame altogether. There’s a reason lead to gold is a legal school demo array: just because it’s simple doesn’t mean it’s easy, and to get good enough to strip protons requires professional control. Making more gold than can fit on a little demo dish takes weeks for most people, and it was one of the first ways Ed and Al understood that they weren’t just not like other kids, they weren’t like other alchemists: Al figured out molecular restructuring - three hours before Ed did - by turning his glass of water into ice when he was nine, and from there subatomic manipulation wasn’t far behind.
There’s multiple ways to do it. Before the Gate, effecting state change in anything more complex than water was a matter of multi-step area-effect arrays that manipulated the target substance by changing conditions like pressure and temperature. Manipulating the atoms directly - knocking off the protons or adding them - was like slicing a single hair into perfect halves with a knife that’d turn into a viper and bite if you don’t focus every second and hold on with both fuckin’ hands. It was doable, they did it, but it was too inefficient to bother with when they could just set off the traditional set of state change arrays instead.

After the Gate, it’s like Ed is the knife.

The water forms in droplets on the sides of the basin, trickling down to join everything else already inside. Ed crouches to press his fingers to the slop and starts stripping pure silicon out of the quartz. Shaping the liquid sealant around everything will be the tricky part; all the doors and windows and taps and sinks and everything still have to be able to open and close and drain and function, but it all also needs a thorough protective coating to keep all the gross shit out of the air. Ed’s not crazy, he knows just sloshing sealant everywhere like he’s pouring glue into a diorama box isn’t gonna get him anything but a horrifying mess, so section by section is the way to go - “Fullmetal.”

Ed twitches hard enough to lose the array, the crackle of discharge dissipating and the vibrating mess in the basin going still. He looks up to see Havoc and the kids are gone, but Mustang is standing over him with his there’d better be a GREAT fucking explanation for this face on, and it registers that somebody nearby is screaming.

For a second Ed’s heart stops - did somebody get caught in the transmutation somehow, did he somehow not notice - but then the words filter through and he realizes what the woman is shrieking is insults. A male voice starts bellowing back all pissy - Psycho’s - and Ed narrows his eyes up at Mustang. “What?”

Mustang spreads both arms in a comprehensive what the fuck gesture.

“Al’s coming,” Ed says crossly. “I’m not having him get sick because the wizards love living in their own shit so much. I’m doing this dump a goddamn favor.”

“So you decided to transmute the entire house with us still inside it?”

“Uh, yeah,” Ed says. “After everything I did to get Al that immune system I’m not about to take any chances.” He frowns. “I’m good at this, bastard, I do buildings all the time. What, did somebody stub a toe when the supports realigned?”

“There is a car-sized chimera upstairs that did not appreciate how its room just experienced some surprise adjustments,” Mustang says flatly.

“What?”

“It flew out into the hall - since its door was no longer locked, due to having been moved a meter to the left - and decided to express its disapproval directly.”

“Flew?”

“Oh yes. It has wings and a beak and claws,” Mustang says in that fake-delighted voice that means he’s actually mad. “It seems to be the convict’s pet, which is lucky for us given he managed to subdue it before it could eat Arget.”
“Oh,” Ed says. That’s… not great. What the fuck are they doing, keeping giant fucking chimeras in the house? “You’d think they’d mention that before talking about curses or whatever.”

Mustang inhales through his nose. “I don’t care if all their warnings about curses are bullshit. We don’t know what’s in this house. Kindly refrain from throwing dynamite down the mineshaft when you don’t even know what’s at the bottom.” He shuts his eyes briefly like looking at Ed is giving him a migraine, then opens them again. “You’re lucky nobody fell down the stairs while they were being transmuted, or had their head stuck out a window when you moved everything around.”

“I’ve never squished anyone by accident and I’m not about to start,” Ed retorts, over the increasingly loud shouting from down the hall. “It’s not luck, I’m good at this.”

Mustang bends at the waist and grips Ed’s chin in one gloved hand. “I said, don’t transmute when you don’t know the terrain. Am I understood?”

Ed shows him teeth, skin scraping slightly against the rough fabric of the ignition cloth. “I know what I’m fuckin’ doing.”

“Am I understood, Fullmetal?”

“Yes, bastard, hell,” Ed growls, jerking his chin free. “Calm down, nobody fuckin’ died.”

“This time. You need to stop relying on luck,” Mustang growls back, straightening up. “You owe Arget an apology.” He points down at the basin full of ingredients Ed’s still crouching over. “What the hell is this?”

Ed scowls. “Sealant.”

“Sealant,” Mustang repeats. “And the reason Jones came running to tell us to get everything off the floor, I presume, is because you were just going to apply it. All at once. Everywhere.”

“I was gonna do it in sections,” Ed says, but he’s starting to sound like Hairy did ten minutes ago even to his own ears, so he shuts his mouth.

Mustang pinches the bridge of his nose, squeezing his eyes shut briefly. “Pull something like this again and I’m chaining you to a stake in the yard for the remainder of the op.”

“Arf arf,” Ed retorts sourly, but if Mustang’s making dog jokes that means he’s basically forgiven. For now, anyway. Fuck, he really is gonna be assigned a stakeout in a sewer when they get back.

“Behave,” Mustang returns at him, already turning to the extended shouting outside. “We need to deal with this.”

Ed claps to strip all the assorted silicon mush off his hands, then swipes at his jaw to get rid of the phantom tickle of Mustang’s stupid gloves. “Start going for my face, I’ll start going for yours,” he mutters as he pushes himself up, mostly to himself since Mustang’s already striding out of the room.

Ed follows him out, frowning harder as the yelling starts resolving into words; it’s sounding a lot like more of the shit the paintings were spouting, lots of foamy invective about crossbreeding and impurity and defiling scum. Sounds pretty fuckin’ racist, actually, now that he thinks about it.

Psycho is in the hall, bellowing at a giant painting while waving his stick at a pile of fabric on the ground. The fake-chimera elf is there too, mouth moving like he’s muttering to himself but totally inaudible over the painting’s hysterical shrieking. “Shut the hell up, you bloody Bint,” Psycho
hollers at it, his stick making the cloth shimmer and jump up onto the wall around the painting as curtains. He wrenches them together - the screaming cuts off - and spins to jab a finger at the elf. “And you - what the bloody hell were you doing?”

“Master says not to be interfering with the cleaning,” the elf says in a sullen, scratchy voice. “Creature is not interfering.”

“Cleaning?” Psycho shouts. “The whole bloody house was about to come down!”

“It was not,” Ed says, cranky, and Psycho rounds on them.

Mustang’s hand clamps onto Ed’s shoulder like a dog bite. “We apologize for the disturbance,” he says before Psycho can start howling again. “Elric discovered several structural faults within the building and decided to repair them himself. He didn’t expect this level of disruption; regardless, he should have warned everyone beforehand.”

Psycho gives him a wild look. “Discovered - What were you doing?”

“Renewing the pipes, patching the foundation, aligning anything load-bearing,” Ed ticks off on one hand, trying not to sound too crabby given Mustang had just had to apologize to a crazy wizard because of him. “I reinforced it all and got rid of all the dry rot, too, you’re welcome. Next I’m going to take care of your mold problem.”

“With supervision, certainly,” Mustang says evenly, not letting go of Ed’s shoulder. “And once we’ve made sure it’s safe to do so.”

There’s a crash from upstairs; somebody yells “Sorry!” and Ed looks away from the staircase in time to see the painting’s curtains shoot back again like they’re on magnetized rails. The painting revealed is of an old woman, life size, and her eyes bulge at them in furious revulsion before she sucks in an enormous breath. “Defiling scum! Get from my sight, you whore-born dogs, you wretched filth -”

“God dammit,” Psycho hisses, leaping forward to yank at the curtains again. “This, this is why we keep telling you to stop messing with things! The bloody hippo Griff nearly got loose and every time someone sneezes in this goddamned house this fucking nightmare wakes up and shrieks at the top of her lungs -”

“Oh, it’s my fault your house is a creepfest full of cursed shit?” Ed snaps, fully done. “You hate this so much, fucking get rid of it -”

“You think we haven’t tried? We can’t fucking get rid of it because there’s a permanent sticking charm on the back! Silencing doesn’t work, charmed curtains barely work, and believe me, I’ve tried everything I’ve got to get this damned thing off -”

Mustang looks like he’s seriously considering torching the painted woman, frame and all. Ed gestures exaggeratedly at it, all May I, if your lord high king majesty thinks it’s okay?

Mustang gives him a baleful eyeball but lets go of Ed’s shoulder before looking back at Psycho. “Elric can probably help you with that.”

“If your help wakes her up again I’m hexing your ears off your head,” Psycho snaps.

“Fuckin’ try it,” Ed returns, clapping and pressing his hands to the wall. If the live paintings really do contain souls he doesn’t wanna fuck around with that, so he just carves out the entire meter and a half square chunk of wall, plaster and wallpaper and everything the painting’s attached to. For a
moment there’s that weird resistance again, but Ed is in no mood for bullshit and a second later the entire block comes crashing down onto the floor.

Naturally, this makes the painted lady start shrieking again, though slightly muffled now given the portrait is face down. “Huh,” Psycho says, after a second.

“Do you mean to keep it?” Mustang says fastidiously, not bothering to raise his voice over the shouts of insulance! and fatherless scum!

“Fuck no,” Psycho says disgustedly, pointing his stick at the painting. “Silencio.” Absolutely nothing happens. “Evanesco.” More nothing. “Diffindo.” A gash appears in the plaster stuck to the back of the painting, scoring it open down to the wooden back of the frame, but as they watch the wood heals itself even as the plaster stays split. “Shit. Guess that still doesn’t work.”

“Fullmetal,” Mustang says dourly, clearly having reached his tolerance limit of listening to crazy racist screaming from something that should be an inanimate object. “Deal with it or I will.”

And Mustang problemsolves with fire. Psycho clearly wouldn’t mind given he just did some kind of invisible knife magic on the painting, but Ed wants to be sure and anyway he did just get a whole reamout on Be More Responsible When You Transmute, Fullmetal. “Okay, seriously, is this thing alive?” he demands of Psycho. “Because if it’s alive, we got a problem.”

“Alive? Ha! This is my dear old mum’s way of making sure she could still call me a worthless traitor even after she was dead.”

This is this guy’s mom? “So it’s not her soul stuck in there?”

“What? That again? Look, moonie told you, it’s a painting, it’s like - an impression, or something. You think every time someone gets their damn photo taken it gets their soul stuck in a newspaper? Paintings’ve got nothing to do with souls,” Psycho says dismissively. “If this vicious bitch even had one.”

The shrieking is getting really insistent at this point. “O-kay, not alive,” Ed decides, and claps and deconstructs the plaster and wood and canvas down into its constituent molecules. The tingle runs through his hands as he makes contact and there’s that resistance again, but straight deconstruction is fast and straightforward and the tingle disappears abruptly, the carbon disintegrating under Ed’s hands into flakes of graphene.

The screeching cuts off mid-word. Ed really doesn’t like that, but - he just did it, so. He lifts his hands from the pile of crumbly dust and shakes the residue from his gloves.

“How,” Psycho says again, after a moment of ringing silence. “You know what, that alone might just be worth all your other Shite.”

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grimmauld place, which has been abandoned & neglected for years: what the fuck is this… little blond demon…doesn’t feel like magic… the fuck is he… doing… what the f - OH FUCK HE’S FIXING SHIT? HE’S FIXING SHIT?? HE’S FIXING - HE IS
FIXING ALL THE SHIT, WHAT THE FUCK - THIS IS NOT A DRILL -

kreature, in some N-space pocket clutching his tea cozy gstring while the house gets a Mach 10 Makeover: I HATES M*HERF*CKING WIZARDS
Harry hadn’t actually seen much of what Elric did to the dementors. He’d been focusing so hard on trying to cast his Patronus through the blinding morass of despair and then trying to try again when it failed that he’d really only gotten impressions: yelling and thunderous grinding noises and then heat. When the crushing cold had gone away there hadn’t really been anything to see of what had happened, just the former underpass transformed into a dead end, emitting faint plinking noises as it cooled, and then Elric somehow ordering them around even when they couldn’t even understand what he was saying.

Ron and everybody told him it was wandless magic, and he did see Elric clap his hands and use that to transfigure his fork during lunch, but seeing that and then this is like seeing one of Dudley’s toy Hot Wheels cars and then going outside and seeing a thousand stone lorry. Elric claps and his whole body comes alight in arcs of electricity, lightning snapping almost lazily as it coils around him, trailing down his legs and probing at the floor. The sparking energy blows Elric’s hair back and lights his face even eerier than it looks already, reflecting strangely off his yellow eyes and hair and making teeth glint blue in his feral grin, and he looks nothing short of delighted to have them jumping up on tables to get away from him.

Chaos’s hand is fisted in the back of Harry’s shirt. Without warning, the crackling light abruptly leaps off Elric and washes across the floor in a wave. Then Harry yelps and jerks, because Chaos suddenly has him around the waist in a businesslike grip and lifts him up into the air like he weighs nothing. “Come on, out we go,” he says briskly, jumping back down off the table. Harry gets a glimpse of Ginny - mouth open in shock - under his other arm before he has to grab hard at Chaos’s uniform to keep from being shaken around like a dog toy as they head for the door.

“Kitchen, back door, go go,” Chaos orders, moving in a way that somehow gets Hermione and Ron and the twins ahead of him, dodging out the doorway and into the hall. The desire to try and struggle free is automatic, but Chaos’s grip is absolute and he’s not even breathing hard as he runs after the twins with both Ginny and Harry under his armpits like a couple of bouncing sacks of rice. Through all the jolting Harry sees more blue lightning flicker from the corner of his eye, and Chaos speeds up just as it passes them, sinking into the ceiling, the floor, the walls, and the entire corridor starts to shudder.

There’s a deep rumble behind them, like an avalanche gearing up. Something metallic moans in the walls. Gooseflesh sweeps down Harry’s arms as the ceiling starts to grind, and he grits his teeth and hangs on harder as Chaos swings neatly sideways to get them through the kitchen doorway. The air starts to taste metallic, almost bitter, and it’s a relief when they pass through the door and out into the backyard.

Chaos jogs a few more yards away from the building, then sets Harry and Ginny down before they can do more than start to struggle. “Whoof,” Chaos says, dusting his hands off and turning to look back at the house, not seeming to notice Harry and Ginny staggering away from him. “Man, wish the boss would give some more warning sometimes.”

“What the hell was that?” Ginny demands, jerking her rumpled sweater straight. “What’s he doing?”

“Probably fixing something,” Chaos says, like blue lightning isn’t suddenly crackling over the
visible chimneys. “I bet he’s - oh, yep, there we go.”

Parts of the house start to move. It starts slow but speeds up quick: first the chimneys straighten up like they’ve been smacked with a ruler, then it’s like the whole house shivers into motion. Windows shunt open where there was only bare brick, existing windows shudder and stretch, and there’s a brief screech of metal as one of the gutters gets dragged sharply to the right as parts of the roof shift around. Harry calms down watching it; here in the backyard the hair-raising feeling of strange, inescapable force is gone, and it all goes back to regular magic again. It looks kind of like when Mrs. Weasley expanded the Burrow that one time, actually.

“Is he remodeling?” Fred says, apparently thinking along the same lines.

“Bet Sirius isn’t gonna like that,” George says.

“He hates this place,” Ginny points out. “Might buy Elric a drink.”

“True. Might buy him more if he burned it down, honestly,” Fred muses. They watch the blue sparks crackle across the kitchen door, the frame grinding into an entirely different style and a window opening in the wood. More energy flickers across the roof, and then the lightning all fades all at once, sinking into the house like it was never there.

They all stand around and watch for a minute to see if anything else is going to happen. “Can we go back in now?” Ron says, not sounding very happy about having been chased into the backyard by surprise magic.

Chaos scratches his cheek. “We-ell, the chief’s probably downstairs now and tearing the boss a new one, so... we should probably wait for the all-clear before we go back.”

“Elric’s getting yelled at? That I want to see,” Ron mutters. He’s taken crunch crunch personally.

“You really don’t,” Chaos says, wincing slightly. “The boss yells back.”

“We’re pretty used to yelling,” George says.

“Well, sure, but the chief might make him put stuff back how it was, and then we’d have to go right back out again,” Chaos says reasonably. “Better to wait for them to come get us.”

“That was all alchemy?” Hermione says, looking intently at the house. “Is it dangerous to be around a - a transmutation like that? Is that why you got us out?”

“Well,” Chaos says, glancing at her and rubbing the back of his neck. “Sometimes the boss… well, his expectations are kinda skewed. He’s the all metal alchemist. It’s like, the doors he wouldn’t think twice about kicking in, us regular guys wouldn’t even touch the doorknob, y’know? So sometimes it’s better to give him some space. Just in case.”

“He better not have messed with any of our things,” Ron warns. Harry has a brief spasm of panic for Hedwig - the only thing of his he'd brought from the Dursleys besides his wand - before remembering she isn't in her cage because that too is back at Privet Drive, and she'll be able to fly away from any danger if necessary. Besides, the rest of the soldiers are still in the house and Chaos hasn't gone back for them, so presumably whatever Elric is doing can't be too bad.


“Why do you call him boss?” George says interestedly. “No way he’s older than you.”
Chaos kinda coughs at that, grinning a bit into his hand as he rubs his chin. “Well, he does outrank me,” he says. “And him and the chief, they’re damn good alchemists. A man who can transmute your life into a world of hurt, well - you salute when he walks by, you know what I mean?”

“So he’s your actual boss,” Fred concludes. “Blimey. What’s that like?”

Chaos laughs. “Nah, nah, I’m one of the chief’s. The boss is - well, he outranks me, but he’s not in my direct chain of command, and he’s a field agent for special investigations, so he doesn’t really have anyone answering to him.”

“We’re a special investigation,” Ron realizes. “That’s why you lot got sent here.”

“Way I understand it, one of yours asked a favor from one of ours,” Chaos says amiably. “And then she called in some favors of her own, including the chief’s. And where the chief goes, I go, and all metal’s part of his command, so. Here we are.”

Harry had been wondering what exactly led to foreign wizards showing up - very strange wizards, given they didn’t act like any wizards Harry had met, and on top of that insisted they weren’t wizards, actually - but he’d assumed they were just people Dumbledore knew from outside the country. Their interrogation - well, Elric’s interrogation - of his scar was confusing in pretty much every way possible, because it sounded like they wanted to remove it and everyone was in the room watching him when Elric looked it over, like they were going to discover something critical, something Moody and Snape and Dumbledore all had to be there for.

Harry doesn’t know what to think. He wants to sit and talk with Ron and Hermione somewhere quiet, but so far they’ve all agreed their best chance to know what’s going on is to hang around the foreigners and see what they’ll let slip. For all that Elric acts like an incomprehensible prat he doesn’t seem like someone at all interested in lying, and he’s been very direct with all questions so far.

He was the one who said Voldemort might be… possessing Harry, and Dumbledore hadn’t refuted it. He hadn’t looked surprised at all. If Harry is possessed, Dumbledore knows, has known, and didn’t tell him about it. And once Elric said it, Harry hasn't been able to stop thinking about how it is too much of a coincidence that Mundungus Fletcher, the one person assigned to watch him, disappeared for a cauldron deal right before the dementors attacked.

“The… Mr. Mustang is an alchemist too?” Hermione says, bringing Harry back out of his darkening thoughts.

“Oh yeah. Second highest ranking state alchemist,” Chaos says. “Don’t tell him I said this, but he’s a good guy, even if he does cheat at cards.”

“Are you an alchemist?” Fred says interestedly, in tones Harry recognizes as preceding a pitch to try a Puking Pastille or two.

“Hell no,” Chaos says immediately, shuddering theatrically. “Pardon my Drachman. Definitely not. Alchemy is useful and all, but frankly it’s for the crazies.”

They all look at the house, where Elric has presumably stopped doing something that had one of his fellow soldiers fleeing the scene. Chaos sounds pretty calm, but he’d sure gotten them out of there in a hurry, and while Elric doesn’t seem - well - dark, Harry can clearly see the look of wicked delight that was on Elric’s face when the room lit up around him.

Ron meets Harry’s eyes and nods like he’s thinking pretty much what Harry’s thinking, or at least
similar only with added fried spiders. “Yeah, crazy sounds about right.”

Chapter End Notes

Havoc: i call ed boss bc i met him when he was waist high, sixty percent baby fat and had just physically threatened the dictator of our country with a spear to the neck. You ever meet a twelve year old who could, would and did nutshot god? Trust me, you’d call him boss too

Havoc: plus calling him “boss” was hilarious. Still is. Have you seen the guy? I’m six foot seven. He comes up to, like, my elbow
Psycho points his stick at the pile of flakey dust and says another of their nonsense magic commands, and this time the pile swirls in place and vanishes into the air, the tingle washing over Ed. “Now it works,” he says, noticeably brightened as he looks at Ed. “What did you do?”

“Deconstructed it down to component elements.” Ed glares up at Mustang. “Happy?”

“Overjoyed,” Mustang says. “I’ll be even more so when we go apologize to Arget.”

Ed scowls as he stands, dusting his gloves together. “Yeah, why is there a giant fuckin’ chimera in the house?”

“A what?” Psycho says, eyebrows furrowing. “You mean buck beak? He’s not a chimera, he’s a hippo Griff.”

“Beak, wings, claws? Size of a car?” Ed says, making flappy flying gestures with both hands to illustrate.


“Is it standard for it to be indoors?” Ed says pointedly.

“Well, no, but he’s a wanted criminal just like me, see,” Psycho says sarcastically. “I don’t bloody want to be indoors either, but I’ve got Aurors after me from here to whales, so we just sit tight in here like good boys so we don’t both end up executed.”

“What the fuck, is this thing sentient too?” Ed snarls. “What is wrong with you people?”

“Hey, whoa, buck beak’s not sentient,” Psycho says. “Bloody smart animal, yeah, but -”

“How is an animal a criminal?”

“He clawed up a kid,” Psycho says, looking kind of nonplussed. “Malfoy’s brat, actually. Got sentenced to be put down for it since his dad pulled his damn favors.”

Ed drags both hands down his face. “Fucking translation shit,” he grinds into his hands. “Again.”

“You really got a thing with chimeras, huh,” Psycho says.

Mustang’s lips press together slightly. “I suspect chimera does not mean for you what it means for us.”

“Where we come from, chimera means an alchemically recombined animal,” Ed says tightly, dropping his hands. “Let me tell you what that means. Bad chimera alchemists try to combine two or more species together, and they produce nothing but disfigured corpses. Really bad chimera alchemists create hybrids that are in pain, all the time, and die within a few weeks if they’re lucky. And the very worst chimera alchemists,” he says, voice going sing-song, “decide that the secret to success is combining animals and humans. So yeah, you can have sentient chimeras. I’m friends with a few. They got experimented on and their transmutations were only successful because other people got murdered to power the arrays. So when I see what looks like a kid mixed with an animal
then yeah. I get a little bothered.”

Ed gestures pointedly at the bat-eared elf - or rather where the elf now isn’t, because apparently at some point he disappeared while they were dealing with Racist Painting. “Huh,” Psycho repeats. “Well, that sounds… horrible, but I wouldn’t feel bad for creature, I really wouldn’t. Little bastard probably fucked off to cry about how his favorite torturer isn’t here to join his insult chorus anymore.”

Ed looks Psycho in the eyes, hands flexing into fists. “You don’t get it, do you. He could be a baby-eating maniac and slavery would still be wrong.”

“I’m not disagreeing,” Psycho protests. “You think I wanted this? I ran the fuck away from here when I was sixteen, got disowned for it and thought good fucking riddance, too! Then my stupid death eater brother got himself killed and the inheritance fell back on me, and now I’m stuck in this fucking hellhole because one of my best friends turned out to be a psychopath and got my other best friend murdered by the dark lord. Oh, and offed sixteen muggles while he was at it, too! That’s the kind of people my family were, and creature’s one of them down to the bone. Hell, I’d free every house elf tomorrow if it wouldn’t make them riot!”

Mustang steps forward and grips Ed’s shoulder again. “It is what it is,” he says, more to Ed than to Psycho, though angling himself and using a tone that’s calculated to make Psycho see sympathy. “We have other problems that take precedence. We apologize for the interruption, serious - do you feel up to resuming with Colonel Hughes upstairs?”

“Yeah, no problem,” Psycho grunts, mollified by Mustang laying it on with a trowel. “You didn’t mess with anything else, did you?”

“Guess we’ll find out when it starts screaming insults at us,” Ed mutters.

Mustang gives him a Look. “Where’s Havoc?”

“Dunno. Ran out with the kids, I guess.”

Mustang’s Look ticks a couple of degrees more Pissedwards. “Why don’t we go find them. And make sure nobody’s been alchemized into the walls.”

“Nobody’s alchemized into anything.” Ed huffs and stalks off down the hall. He would’ve definitely felt it if somebody got stuck within one of his transmutations; it would change the whole elemental composition, like disturbing the surface of a pond with a chucked rock. Mustang does have a point about the whole maybe-somebody-falling-down-the-stairs thing, but it’s not like Ed is just yanking shit around willy-nilly. He knows what he’s fucking doing.

The sitting room door whips open when Ed’s a handful of steps away, making him and Mustang stop short. There’s no one on the other side, though, and nothing happens, so Ed glares over his shoulder at Psycho. “What?”

“What?” he repeats back.

“Fuck are you doing with the door?”

Psycho looks baffled and increasingly irritated. “What are you talking about?”

Ed doesn’t believe that for a second, but Mustang clearly doesn’t give a shit about what he believes or doesn’t because he prods Ed’s shoulder to keep going, the Behave look on his face again. Ed narrows his eyes at him and strides through, and nothing happens - no sign of any prank and the
door stays open like it hadn’t moved itself. It doesn’t really allay the suspicion but they do have shit to do, so Ed keeps going past the opened floorboards and sealant basin, which Mustang gives a pointed glance as they walk by.

“I’m still gonna do something about the mold,” Ed warns.

“Are you really trusting to your luck to ensure none of the children wander in, trip over this floor situation and crack their skulls?”

“If they wander in and trip over that they’ll deserve it,” Ed retorts. There’s a squeak to his left, and Ed looks around in time to see one of the painting people turn and run, disappearing into the side like they’ve just run out of camera frame. All the other frames are completely empty, he realizes; there’s nothing left but landscapes and backgrounds, totally absent of people.

“Hm,” Mustang says, his are we about to have An Experience noise, clearly noticing this too.

“Huh,” Psycho says, a grin starting to tug at his mouth. Scowling, Ed decides the least violent course of action is to just fucking find Havoc and make sure he didn’t get eaten by more surprise chimeras or whatever, because engaging with Psycho now will only end in black eyes and endless Mustang lectures. He stomps through the room and to the kitchen, where - the second he heads for it - the back door crashes open and presses itself to the wall, damn near quivering.

Ed stops short again. “Okay, what the fuck,” he demands, rounding on Psycho and stabbing a finger at the door. “The fuck is going on here?”

The half-disbelieving grin is growing like a weed on Psycho’s face, and then he’s snickering, then chuckling, then full-on belly laughing. “Think it’s - think it might be afraid of you, mate,” he wheezes. “The whole house - oh, this is - this is too good, oh merlin -”

Havoc is indeed in the backyard, and he’s spotted them through the open door. “All clear, chief?” he calls, loping up with the kids trailing behind him.

“More or less,” Mustang allows, eyeing the doorframe. “Are we to infer that this is the house itself acting, serious?”

“Well it’s not me doing it,” Psycho gasps, all but slapping his knee. “Oh, merlin. You shook it near off its foundations, then you disintegrated a portrait - the most magically protected one in this place, I’ll bet - it’s quaking in its boots! Oh, this is magnificent -”

Ed, gaping at Psycho, is gonna have a straight coronary and not even Al is gonna be able to bring him back. “The HOUSE is SENTIENT?”

Havoc stops right outside the doorway, eyes going wide. “Boss. You didn’t.”

“Wh - I didn’t MAKE it sentient!”

“It wasn’t doing this before,” Mustang says, very neutrally.

“How the fuck would I make a house sentient,” Ed hollers, about to go full hog feral in this fuckforsaken circus of crap.

“If anyone could, it would be you,” Mustang says, because for all his claims of diplomacy he’s always nothing but dying to pour gasoline on the nearest grease fire.

“It’s - no, no, it’s kind of always like that,” Psycho manages, wiping at a literal fucking tear of
mirth at his eye. “Sometimes it shows it more than others. Like when it likes somebody. Or when it’s pissing itself scared,” he adds, breaking down into cackling again.

“Blimey,” one of the twins says, edging past Havoc to enter the kitchen and gawp around. “You really changed everything, didn’t you.”

“I know!” Psycho says like he’s a five year old that just got told he’s getting free candy forever for the rest of his life. “He had the whole house shaking like a leaf. Think if I start hexing the walls it’ll be scared of me too?”

These idiots’ priorities are broken. The look Ed gives Mustang is probably at least thirty percent over his daily allotment of crazy, but holy fucking shit this is garbage and at least Mustang’s looking back like he understands what Ed’s foaming about. “The house,” Ed says, because he has to get this out or literally feel his brain shoot out his ears as boiling steam-pressured liquified neuron goo. “The house. Is alive. The HOUSE.”

“I dunno that you can call it alive,” Psycho says happily as Havoc cautiously steps inside, the rest of the kids sidling in behind him. “Or sentient. What would it even be sentient with? It hasn’t got a brain.”

Ed stabs a finger at the door. “That saw me going for it. It can tell where I am, and where I’m about to go, which means it’s watching me.”

“Watching all of us, most likely,” Mustang says in a neutral tone of voice, hands slipped in his pockets in that way that means he’s trying to hide how he’s rubbing his snap-happy fingers together.

Not A Twin pauses in his suspicious squinting around the kitchen to make a face at them. “That’s… creepy.”

“Creepy?” Ed demands. “Creepy? We passed creepy ninety klicks ago and kept fucking accelerating, you dunderfucks, and now this is some straight up ethics panel, crimes against humanity, strip your license and throw you in jail pigshit. Who the fuck makes a HOUSE sentient?”

“You?” a twin says.

“It’s most likely a magical system built into the house that they don’t understand,” Mustang says directly to Ed, before Ed can open his mouth and vomit lava into the twin’s face. “A security system, probably. It may have programmed behavioral traits, but I doubt there’s any chance of real sentience.”

“And it got activated by me moving things around,” Ed completes, nodding like a bobblehead, trying to live in a better world than one where fucking wizards make sentient houses like that isn’t a fucking screaming nightmare of an ethical violation. “Right. No problem. Nothing to worry about. Holy fucking shit, Mustang, that better be it, I fucking hate this place so much.”

“You and me both,” Psycho says, all friendly. “Feel free to do more of what you did again anytime.”

“Absolutely do not feel free,” Mustang says. “We are not having a repeat of the flying chimera situation.”

“I told you, there aren’t - oh, you mean buck beak,” Psycho says. “Yeah, maybe don’t do that. He’s tetchy when he’s surprised.”
“Buck beak is here?” Hairy exclaims from the knot of kids. “Where?”

“Upstairs,” Psycho says. “Master bedroom. Want to go see him? It’s about feeding time anyway, and it might calm him down some after all the excitement.”

“Yeah,” Hairy says, looking cheered by the prospect of going to see an apparently car-sized monster that tries to eat people, specifically children. “Yeah, I’d like that.”

Ed can’t even go a minute without being avalanched by these wizards’ suicidal numbskullery. “You don’t even tell people there’s a giant chimera living in your house? What if they open the wrong door by mistake?”

“Why don’t you show them all where it is?” Mustang says, taking a hand out of his pocket to gesture at the kids and Havoc. “Just so we’ll all be aware and know how to handle things in case of another incident.”

“Another incident,” Havoc repeats.

“Oh yes. Ask Arget,” Mustang says. “She executed a very admirable dodge.”

“That the blonde girl? Good reflexes, that one,” Psycho says approvingly. “That was a hell of a roll.”

“Yes, we’re all very lucky she didn’t get to her firearm before you got there,” Mustang says in a very sincere voice. “It may have taken as much as her full magazine to deal with the problem.”

“Right,” Havoc says in his *we’re all fucking doomed* voice. “Lead the way.”

“Go on, we’ll join you in a moment,” Mustang says. “Elric has a hole to close up in the sitting room floor.”

“Sure,” Psycho says. Hairy glances back at Ed like, what, does he want to talk or some shit? But apparently the lure of consorting with dangerous animals outweighs whatever the fuck he might be wanting from Ed, and he follows Psycho out of the kitchen. The rest of the kids more or less do the same, though the twins and Smartypants especially look like they’d rather stay and watch Ed shout at Mustang some more.

Too fucking bad for them. Ed stalks off back to the sitting room, Mustang behind him. Before he can clap, though, Mustang comes around to face him and gestures at the basin. “Show me what you intended to do.”

Ed’s gonna go ahead and assume he doesn’t mean a live demonstration, especially after all his nagging. “It’s polydimethylsiloxane,” he says shortly. “Or it’s gonna be. Was gonna just pour it on everything - in sections, don’t have kittens about it - and catalyze in place to seal all the nasty shit in. Everything’s all molded through, and alchemizing through wallpaper and plaster and wood would just send all that shit into the air. I was gonna polymerize out the ass so it’ll be rigid enough to act as a structural fix anyway, for anything that’s unsound.”

“Hm,” Mustang says, wandering over to examine the nearest wall, then back to look at the proto-sealant slurry. “Open those windows, would you?”

Ed warily pushes the windows open. “Why?”

“Just testing something,” Mustang says, taking his left hand out of his pocket and snapping.
The wallpaper on the far wall bursts into flame in an even line, right along the bottom edge, and steadily climbs higher. The wood revealed underneath the curling paper is stained and dark but untouched by the fire: Mustang’s controlling the burn perfectly, balancing the ratios of oxygen, suffocating the flames where he doesn’t want them and feeding them where he does. “What the hell happened to *don’t transmute*, bastard?” Ed demands, jerking a hand at this little spectacle and stepping away from the thin smoke. “Fire’s way more dangerous than anything I did! You didn’t even check to see if there was anything there that might react when you start torching shit, you *hypocrite*."

“Firstly, I told you to know the terrain before you transmute, because making you not transmute entirely would require me to drug you unconscious and probably hog-tie you upside down to a tree,” Mustang says, eyes on the flames as they eat up the burning paper. A faint arc of active transmutation discharge wanders over his glove as he continues controlling the reaction. “Secondly, the tactical landscape just changed. If the house, or something in the house, *is* alive and watching us, and there’s nothing we can do about it…” Mustang shrugs minutely. “Can’t hurt to scare it some more.”

Ed cannot believe this bastard. First he’s all ohhh, it’s fine, Fullmetal, this thing definitely ain’t sentient, and then he turns around and acts like it’s a goddamn hostage to intimidate. “You are the least reassuring person in the world,” he hisses.

“I’m not here to give reassurances,” Mustang says dryly as the flames wink out, leaving nothing but a bare wall and a thin line of ash on the floor. The smoke has all been siphoned out the windows; only the faint smell of burned paper lingers. “I’m here to win. Reassuring you in any case is only achievable by crowbar.”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“You’re a problem solver, Fullmetal. Pretty words aren’t going to do much for you. Either find out what the activated system is and deactivate it or make sure it’ll jump when you say how high.”

“I’m not going to *bully the house!*”

“Of course not,” Mustang says indulgently. “You’re just going to fix things. Like a doctor. A surprise chiropractic adjuster, as it were.”

“I’ll chiropractically adjust you if if turns out I’ve been transmuting something *alive* this whole time,” Ed swears.

Mustang lifts a hand and waggles his fingers slightly. “Did it feel alive to you?”

Ed watches him for a second, slipping his hand in his pocket again. “No. But I know you’re getting some kind of information when you touch things like that. It isn’t exactly subtle.” He tilts his head slightly, reading whatever it is he gets off Ed’s face. “If this is supposed to be some kind of secret, I’d advise against doing it regularly, in front of multiple witnesses, and immediately before you do any alchemy.”

Ed scowls. It’s not exactly a *secret*, or at least not from Mustang, because Mustang knew from the getgo that Ed committed human transmutation, and even before he knew the whole of everything he’d always kept Ed and Al’s secrets. He’s also the one who taught Ed that nobody needs to know the whole of what you can do, though, and that if you have an advantage, any advantage, it’s best to keep it to yourself; Ed hasn’t told anybody besides Al about this little trick. Though he hasn’t
been hiding it either. Anybody who pays attention would notice and infer exactly what Mustang had.

And there’s no actual reason not to tell him. “Go through the Gate enough times, you pick up some extra tricks,” Ed says after a moment. “I can get elemental composition through touch, if I focus. Al can too. I could do it pretty much from the start, because I went twice right away -” he jerks his chin at his right shoulder, tapping his left leg - “but Al picked it up after we got his body.” Ed frowns. “Though that may be because the armor couldn’t process the input. I couldn’t do it through my automail hand.”

“That explains a few things.” Mustang tilts his head further, assessing. “Is that also why you had me touching the painting?”

“Yeah. I dunno if an alchemist who’s never passed through the Gate could feel the tingle. Or -” Ed huffs. “I can see it too. I’m seeing - something. Looks like air distortion from heat. It’s around the paintings, the flowerpot, it’s present when they use their sticks, it was all over the house when we arrived. When it was invisible.”

“You were looking at it,” Mustang realizes. “You could see it?”

“Not really. It just looked like a really big patch of heat haze.”

“Hm.” Ed kind of expects more, but after that Mustang just keeps looking at him. It takes him a couple seconds too long to recognize this particular stare; Mustang’s waiting for him to realize that whatever he just said or did is stupid as all hell and once Ed figures that out they can get back to having an an adult goddamn conversation.

Ed runs through the past couple minutes and can really only come up with one thing. “I… probably should have told you about it.”

“Yes. You should have,” Mustang says neutrally. “Telling me these things allows me to better tailor the situation to our advantage.”

Ed’s hackles go up on reflex, because even if it’s Mustang, even after all this time, he still can’t bend to bridle. “I ain’t gotta tell you every little thing about how I do my alchemy.”

“The fact that you can see things nobody else can is something one might call tactically relevant information,” Mustang says mildly.

“Al’ll probably be able to do it too,” Ed says, defensive and knowing as he says it that it’s stupid, got nothing to do with what they’re actually talking about.

“Fullmetal.” Mustang’s voice is still quiet; it’s probably just because he doesn’t want to take chances on eavesdroppers when the doors are open and the entire house might be one big eavesdrop, but the effect nonetheless is a change in tone that doesn’t usually happen when they’re just yelling at each other. “I understand you typically work alone, or with Alphonse, or with soldiers who don’t need anything from you besides orders. I understand you’re unused to having to share intel in real time, and I understand your leash is long on any given op. I’m the one who spools the damn thing out. Most of the time this works to mutual benefit. But this is not your typical op, and when we are all in hostile territory, with no firm allies, knowing almost nothing about the situation, the people, the country itself - anything you’ve got, I need to know. Do you so mistrust my judgment?”

One of these days Ed seriously has to do something about how Mustang can make him feel eleven
and limbless again with nothing but a couple of sentences. “I gave you my notebook. And I needed clean control group testing,” he says, but even he knows that’s weak shit.


“I know. I’m accommodating.” He really is, fucking damn it. “Anything else you’d like to share?”

“No, that’s it,” Ed says, trying not to sound like a shitty resentful kid about it.

“Very well then.”

Ed rolls his shoulders, trying to get rid of the tension. “Great. Fine. We good? We done? Need to know what color my underwear is too?”

Mustang rolls his eyes, dissolving the moment. “That’s no state secret, Fullmetal. If it’s anything other than black I’ll eat my gloves.”

Ed opens his mouth, incipiently triumphant, then remembers today they are black and growls instead. Mustang smirks. “Predictable.”

It would be very stupid to transmute all his underwear different colors just because of this and as such Ed’s not gonna do it. He’s not. “They might not have been.”

“Mhm. Go on, I want you to take a look at the chimera.”

Chapter End Notes

mustang, poking ed with a broom: look edward i know ur fundamentally a paranoid lunatic but for the love of fuck please work with me. We’ve talked about this

ed, crouched on top of his 93748583 trust issues and hissing: no!! no!!
They stop in the map room first, where Ed, first through the door - this one doesn’t slam open for him by disembodied forces, at least - gets a faceful of Hughes.

“Guess what, Ed! No, really, guess!” Hughes says, fully manic. “Here, I’ll make it easy, I’ll prompt you. How many newspapers do you think they have here? Just gimme a ballpark. Just take a wild goddamn guess.”

“Fff...five?” Ed says warily, figuring only a stupid answer would have Hughes this crazed.

“One,” Hughes hisses, a single finger thrust out in Ed’s face.

“One?”

“ONE.”

“That can’t be right,” Ed argues.

“That’s what I said,” Arget all but wails from the table.

“That’s… Central alone has like fuckin’ thirty, and we live in a dictatorship,” Ed stresses. “A military dictatorship.”

“Only one newspaper,” Arget whispers, clutching the notebook on the table in front of her and staring at nothing. “One.”

“Arget is one of the editors of Monthly Broadcast Engineering,” Jones says apologetically. “So it’s a little personal.”

The name rings a bell; Ed’s definitely seen that title on some hand-printed little magazines among the vast drifts of paper in Mustang’s outer office before. “Doesn’t Fuery write for that on the weekends or something?”

“He’s my co-editor,” Arget mumbles blankly. Jones pats her back in sympathy.

Mustang cuts his eyes to her and then looks pointedly at Ed, so Ed says, gruffly. “Hey. Arget. Sorry I moved the house around without warning and let a chimera loose that almost ate you.”

Jones barks a laugh that he tries to turn into a cough, though he does a pretty shit job of hiding his grin behind his fist. Arget seems to snap out of it, blinking rapidly at Ed and then once again going tomato red in one violent flush. “It’s fine,” she says squeakily.

“It’s not fine,” Mustang says, because he’s a bastard, “but no one died and we aren’t going to have any more surprise alchemy, so I suppose all of us now have a new drinking story courtesy of
Fullmetal, Maes, other than your conniptions over the state of the free press - any concerns?"

“No, there’s a decent chunk of papers here,” Hughes says. “Their numbers are the same as ours and serious gave us the range of years their terrorists operated in so we’re sorting that now. This over here - we started plotting deaths he knew of personally, and almost all of them happened within the victims’ own homes, which was apparently a sort of calling card of their lord Voldemort. Only three attacks with mass casualties plotted so far - here, here, here.”

He taps each location with a pen; the triangle created by the three glowing red dots is a distorted isosceles, surrounded by a handful of yellow dots Ed assumes are the individual murders. “We asked serious to start with incidents that were confirmed to be perpetrated by the terrorist group. Casualties aren’t exact but he’s certain that in all cases the dead numbered less than fifty. You tell me if that’s alchemically significant.”

Ed grimaces and shrugs. “It can affect scale,” he says. “The more blood, the bigger the point on the array.”

“Wonderful. So, not as big as ours was.”

Ed seesaws a hand. “Reserving judgment ’til we have more data. They might be laying things out differently. If they’re making an array at all.”

“Sure, let’s be optimistic, why not.” Hughes pushes his glasses up. “The good news is - if we can trust the information - the majority of the population are non-wizards, and their government is entirely separate from whatever they’ve got going on in ‘magical’ society. The magical government doesn’t build roads or any other municipal structures, doesn’t zone anything, doesn’t do much with infrastructure at all. Of course, they may just be able to bypass all this with magic, but we may be dealing with a much less entrenched enemy than initially anticipated.”

“Spectacular,” Mustang says dryly. “Any more good news?”

“Well, the last war in these parts was around sixty years ago, and did not get as far as land invasion due to this country being this cute little island we see here.” Hughes taps at the map again and grins in a hahaha well at least it’s not raining lava! way. “The country isn’t anything near like a circle either, which as I understand it doesn’t preclude a mass array within the borders but does limit the size and number of people it’d, you know, gruesomely alchemically murder. What about you guys?”

“The house is sentient and Mustang wants me to abuse it,” Ed says immediately.

Hughes raises his eyebrows. “I thought you already abused it. Unless there’s another reason why this entire room gained two new windows, some square footage and shook a pint of plaster dust onto our heads with an accompanying soundtrack of creepy ghost noises.”

“No, yeah, that - sorry ’bout it and all, but - the house is reacting to us. And watching us. And fuckin’ slamming open doors for me when I start to look like I’m gonna go through them -”

“Most likely Fullmetal triggered some kind of dormant magic security system,” Mustang says. “It seems to be programmed to mimic a personality, however, which means it may be susceptible to certain pressures.”

Hughes, Jones and Arget cast wary looks around the room. “So, what, do we shoot the walls a couple times to show it who’s boss?” Hughes says.

“For the sake of our ammunition supply, let’s say Fullmetal and I have it handled.”
“All yours then, you sociopath you,” Hughes says amiably. “Any more disturbing freak things we should know about?”

“I dearly hope not,” Mustang says. “Though the way things are going I doubt we can rule out further surprises.”

“You’re telling me. You know the images in photographs here move around?” Hughes says.

Mustang groans. “Who told you?”

“Oh, don’t worry, I’m not bringing back any of this incredibly cursed shit to get anywhere near my dear Elysia,” Hughes says cheerily. “Though really, Roy? ‘Who told you?’ The newspapers are right in front of my face. Which one of us went blind that one time, me or you?”

Mustang half-curls a lip at him in a friendly snarl. “I can’t believe you would make fun of a veteran’s combat injury. What kind of example are you setting your men, Colonel?”

“Better one than you set yours, General Sadism,” Hughes says. “See this, Corporal, Sergeant? It’s called poking the tiger and it’s useful, lauded and necessary when the tiger flips an entire house with you inside it and then comes back, tells you it’s alive and that the plan is to bully it.”

“You. You get me,” Ed tells Hughes, pointing a finger.

“I would say you of all people know better than to blame me for Fullmetal’s actions, but clearly you are two of a kind,” Mustang says, faux-icy.

“You’re my CO. Anything I do is your fault,” Ed informs him.

“Hawkeye is your CO. What part of this exactly would you like to be her fault?”

That makes Ed wince slightly. “But you’re her CO, so it’s still your fault really,” he argues.

“Why don’t we present this fascinating deontological question to her when she returns and see what she might add to the discussion?”

“Ooh, ouch,” Hughes says, leaning back theatrically. “One hit kill. Score point for Mustang.”

“I take it back. You’re dead to me,” Ed tells Hughes disgustedly, which just makes him point fingerguns back at Ed and wink.

There’s a knock on the door, and Psycho sticks his head in before Jones and Arget can lose what’s left of their faith in their command structure. “Hairy and them are all feeding buck beak,” he says. “Your man too. Molly will probably be back soon and she’ll likely want them to start cleaning again, so probably best to get what help you can now.”

“Certainly,” Mustang says. “Send them on in, if you’re finished?”

Psycho nods and ducks back out, all obedient. “You gonna help out?” Hughes asks Ed and Mustang, waving his pen at the map.

“Maybe later,” Ed says, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. “Gotta do readings. Plus I got like… eight hundred years of mold to deal with.”

“Chimera,” Mustang reminds him.

Ed scowls. “Fine. But then I’m gonna fix the mold.”
“And I’m going to supervise,” Mustang says, in the tones of a wearied prisoner asking when the torture will end. “Call us back when you need to see an array.”

They step out, turning for the room they can hear muffled voices from at the far end of the hall, just as there’s a loud creak from behind them. Ed and Mustang both turn to see a door at the very other end slowly and dramatically swing open.

Nobody comes in, or out, or otherwise gives any sign of being anywhere near it. They aren’t anywhere near it, and so far the invisible crazed footman door-slamming has only happened in pretty close proximity.

They both watch it for a long minute. It had been a pretty significantly loud creak. “More haunted fuckin’ house shit?” Ed says.

“Probably.”

“Is it just me or does that seem like an invitation to you?” Ed says resignedly.

“Unfortunately.”

“Well, if it’s another chimera, it probably would’ve jumped out at us by now,” Ed grumbles, and heads over to see what the fuck the house wants. The house. Ed wants to hit himself in the head with a rock.

There’s a faint sound from the doorway as he steps up to it, and for a second his stride falters because he - had to have imagined it. It’s a slick, chesty kind of sound, like trying to breathe through the really bad kind of pneumonia, only not quite. It’s not soaked lungs that make that breathing noise, it’s nonviable ones.

He knows that sound.

Ed stops. Inside the room is dim, but not enough. Wetness glistens on a cracked-open ribcage. Organs splay out from a steaming, broken shape, and there’s blood everywhere but it doesn’t hide the blond hair, the upturned face. Al stares up at him from the floor, eyes horribly, guttingly open. Awake. Aware.

“Fullmetal.”

It can’t be real. There is no possible way it’s real, Al would have to be dead and buried and transmuted, this is, a hallucination, he’s had them before, he knows how vivid they can be, this is not real -

Mustang’s grip bites his shoulder and then Mustang’s ahead of him, striding towards the door. Ed jerks forward after him, because he shouldn’t, nobody should see - only Mustang stops hard just like Ed did, sucking in breath like a gasp, and Ed sees the blond of the hair change, going lighter - sees the thing bubble and twist as it mutates into Hawkeye, blood spurting, gushing from her neck -

“Down,” Mustang snarls, and reflex has Ed already ducking from the first syllable. With a snap the inside of the room explodes into flame, Mustang yanking Ed to the side and out of the doorway as the air rushes past them in a massive WHOOMPH.

“What the fuck,” Ed gasps, slamming his back to the wall, adrenaline clearing his system, arms up to clap or protect his face in case of even closer-range explosions. “What the fuck was that?”

“Trying to trick us,” Mustang says icily, and snaps again. Fire booms.
“Think it’s dead yet?” Ed cranes to see around Mustang; his explosions don’t produce much smoke since the fuel is usually just O and H, but there’s a thick grey haze billowing out the door that’s making it impossible to see through.

“Let’s make sure,” Mustang says, and snaps a third time.

“Yeah, okay, it’s fucking dead,” Ed says as the boom dies away, grabbing Mustang’s forearm and using it to press him against the wall enough to let Ed see around the doorway. Not that he’s opposed to thoroughly torching the fuck out of whatever Envy-knockoff thing was capable of - showing them that - fuck, it’ll have been getting into their heads. In that last second Ed recognized the fake-Hawkeye’s coat from the Promised day, that distinctive bloodstain down her neck that spoke to a failed slit throat, and where else could that have come from but their own minds?

That thing on the floor hadn’t gotten the memo about the failed part. Mustang clearly did not appreciate being shown his favorite teammate with her throat cut, because there’s nothing left in the room but a thinning grey haze in the air. The space itself looks undamaged save for some pretty impressive scorch marks on the walls, ceiling and floor, because even that riled Mustang apparently has the presence of mind not to burn down the building he’s currently inside of. He didn’t even blow out the windows.

The faint crackle of active alchemy dies, and Ed becomes aware that Mustang kept the circle on his glove active until just now, hand held a couple of inches from Ed’s ear by the way Ed’s gripping his forearm. Letting the transmutation go means he also isn’t seeing anything else that needs blowing up, so Ed releases his grip.

There’s also nothing that even slightly resembles a corpse. “No body - how fucking hard did you hit it? Was that even oxygen?”

“Standard array,” Mustang says, distractedly terse. “That isn’t the usual kind of smoke for burnt organics. Either its body wasn’t meat or it can also teleport.”

Ed squints at the grey haze. It looks kind of greasy, almost, drifting slowly and clinging low to the ground. “Looks like at least some of it got particulated.” Fucking gross. Good thing it’s staying low; fuck knows he doesn’t want to inhale that shit.

They both cautiously stick their heads in the room, scoping it out from either side. “Whatever it is, looks gone now,” Ed says, taking a step inside and doing a 360, checking the ceiling and corners as well. Breathing is heady: Mustang was concentrating oxygen in here right until the last minute and it’s still dissipating. “Looks like there was only one of the fuckin’ things.” Adrenaline chased the cold out of his veins, but between that and the O2 he’s now ramped to the eyeballs and starting to get pissed about it. Fuck, he’s had that nightmare about Al. “What was that?”

“You… merlin’s tits,” comes Psycho’s voice, kind of blankly. Ed and Mustang turn; Psycho’s standing in the hall with his stick held out in front of him, a shimmery blue haze spread out in a vague circle ahead of him like a kind of shield. It winks out as Mustang steps back out of the room, Ed behind him, and Psycho lowers the stick but keeps staring at them with a kind of half-thoughtful, half-impressed look on his face.

“Roy?” Hughes calls from down the hall, through the door of the map room. “You dead or what?”

“You wish,” Mustang calls back, still eyeing Psycho right back. “All present and accounted for?”

“Yeah, we’re fine. We good to open the door?”
“Yes. Havoc?”

“Down the hall, chief,” Havoc calls, muffled. “Kids’re all with me. All clear?”

“Clear.” Hughes’ door opens first, then Havoc’s, both of them taking a cautious scan of the hallway before stepping out with their sidearms still in their hands. Smart of them; when you hear the Flame Alchemist unexpectedly fucking shit up nearby that means things have gone really wild and the best thing you can do is batten down and not get in the line of fire. Though Havoc and Hughes would’ve leapt right in, probably, because they’re the kind of maniacs that voluntarily hang with Mustang. Only this time Havoc had the kids and Hughes had Jones and Arget.

“So,” Hughes says, coming over to peer into the room that’s still emitting eddies of haze. “What was that about no more surprise alchemy?”

“We encountered a hostile,” Mustang says calmly, still watching Psycho who’s watching him right back. “Something capable of shapeshifting and most likely some form of mind reading, given it turned itself into people we know in situations we would react to with… volatility. Do you have an idea of what that might have been?” he says to Psycho. “Or how it came to be in the house?”

“Sounds like a bog art,” Psycho says carefully. “Me and Molly thought there might be one up here, from all the rattling. We thought it was in that desk there, but it might’ve got knocked loose when everything… moved around.”

Mustang’s tone is still all nice and polite, but there’s no hint of charm anymore. “And what exactly is that?”

“A bog art,” Psycho says. “It’s - a pest, kind of. You get them a lot in old houses and things. It shows you your worst fear.”

They all just kind of stare at him. Ed’s pretty sure he’s gone permanently mute with incredulity. A pest. All he can think is thank fuck Mustang turned the thing into particulate smog from the word go, because everyone else would have much more destructive reactions to a telepathic trauma episode shoved in their face. Hawkeye, Havoc and probably even Hughes would’ve emptied their clips into the thing, and Ed really would have brought the house down. Mustang can control the fire down to the millimeter, which is not something that can be said for bullet ricochet. These walls and floorboards are all plaster and wood, too, and Hawkeye’s .45 cal sidearm would go through them like a meteor strike through marzipan and god help whoever happened to be on the other side.

“For what?” Mustang says.

Psycho looks at him. “What?”

“That wasn’t a lure,” Mustang says. “Showing someone something they fear doesn’t draw them in. It’s not a prey lure, so it’s not using that to feed. What purpose does it serve?”

“To scare you away, I guess,” Psycho says. “Get you to leave it alone?”

Everybody looks at the new wallpaper of scorch marks that redecorated pretty much everything in the room. “Huh,” Hughes says. “I’d say most people don’t have a startle reflex like Roy’s, but honestly that’s not even close to true. They just wouldn’t hit it with fire.”

“Not everyone has a flight response,” Mustang says evenly. “Can it teleport?”

“What?”
"Apparate," Ed says tersely. "Can it do that?"

"No?"

They all look back at the open door to the scorched room. "That seems to be taken care of, then," Mustang says. "For something capable of extracting specific information telepathically and at a distance, using such to show people nightmares... somewhat of a waste, I think."

Nightmares. What they saw had been grounded a little deeper than that. Hawkeye had almost gotten her throat cut. Ed sees the scar sometimes when she’s putting up her hair or adjusting her jacket. And that was exactly what Al would look like, if he’d died, and Ed had dug him up just like he did to Mom and tried to bring him back.

“A pest,” he says aloud. “A fuckin’ pest. The house opened that door for us. It wanted us to see it.”

“Probably wanted you to get rid of it,” Psycho volunteers. “They can get pretty nasty if they’re left to grow in some old dump like this.”

“Nasty,” Ed repeats, then doesn’t say anything else because his brain, voice box and tongue have all ceased cooperating in an arguably self-defensive maneuver to prevent him from explaining, in full detail, just what nasty is.

“I don’t think this building qualifies as a safe house,” Arget says, then snaps her mouth shut and kind of ducks when Ed hacks out a surprised laugh.

“You are absolutely correct, Corporal,” Mustang says. “Let’s change that. Havoc, with me. We’ll be clearing the building room by room. Maes?”

“We’re in here,” Hughes promises, holstering his sidearm and patting it. “You taking serious?”

“Yes. We’d appreciate it if you’d join us,” Mustang tells Psycho, in a cordial way that doesn’t even try to hide that it’s an order. “I’m sure you know the house best. Fullmetal, take the children outside.”

Ed rolls his shoulders. Everything still feels a touch too sharp, and he needs to see Al here and alive and whole in a way that feels like a misaligned automail-nerve connection in his lungs. He probably should go outside. Mustang can handle anything the house throws at him, and he has Havoc to watch his back, and honestly even babysitting doesn’t sound like too bad a price to feel some sun on his face right now. “Fine.”

There’s a clicking, chirping kind of noise. An eagle head the size of a horse pokes out of the door Havoc and the kids came out of, curving around to look at them with unblinking golden eyes. It cocks his head inquisitively and makes the clicking chirp again.

“Oh, he’s awake,” Psycho says, heading over. “I hit him with a Somnium when we heard - all that -” he waves back over his shoulder - “to make sure we wouldn’t have any accidents. Hello, lad,” he adds, patting at the thing’s massive neck. “In you go. Come on, look, there’s a nice big bone left for you there, go ahead and shred that up.”

“You’re right. I do need to be outside,” Ed says to no one in particular. He’ll come back and see about giving the thing a skylight or something. Make sure it has fresh air. Later. Just - later.

“Right. Shit - hold on.”

He claps and presses a hand to the wall. An approximate floor layout of the three stories and cellar scores itself in the plaster in rough lines. Psycho might be going with them but at this point wizards
are basically on the same level of reliability and helpfulness as marmalade hammers. “Map.”

“Thank you,” Mustang says, stepping over to examine it. “We’ll come get you when it’s done.”

“Go on,” Psycho says to the kids. “Won’t take long. Probably spare you some of the cleaning, eh?”

They don’t exactly need that ringing endorsement to cluster eagerly around Ed like a bunch of teenage idiot moths. Everyone here is dangerously close to getting a lesson on personal space bubbles; Hairy and Not A Twin are now his current favorites based solely on the fact that they’re staying well away from him. “Let’s go,” Ed says shortly, pivoting on his heel and eeling between the twins to head for the stairs.

He’ll snag the analytical equipment on his way out. He can probably take readings just as well outside the house as in; the shimmer had been all over the whole thing, after all.

Chapter End Notes

mustang: wow that was traumatic, we should probably make sure we work through that. fullmetal, go outside and sniff a flower. do a therapeutic pushup or something

ed: what about you

mustang, cocking gun: oh, i’m going to therapy too
“So,” Roy murmurs to Havoc as they make their way down the third floor main hallway. Black is ahead of them, opening doors first; no sense risking his own people on point when the owner of the house is there to do it. If there are any more lovely little surprises Black can take the brunt of them himself. “The chimera. The…” Roy shapes his mouth carefully over the foreign word, “hippogriff.”

“Big bastard,” Havoc agrees. “Ate a couple kilos of cow in like five seconds right in front of me. Did fine with the kids, though - they were careful, though, weren’t horsing around or teasing it or anything. And when we heard you go off he -” Havoc indicates Black with a roll of his shoulder, keeping his pistol pointed at the ground - “got it quick with one of their lights from a stick things and it hit the ground snoring.”

Havoc keeps looking down the corridor - they’re on either side of the doorway Black entered with his wand out, facing each other to see over each others’ shoulders both ways - but his eyes flick to Roy’s for a second. “And... you know I’m no expert, but… it seemed cooped up, yeah, but didn’t look to be hurting.”

Roy sighs. There are many, many, many things he would rather be doing than once again hunting nightmares in some miserable dank corridor with Havoc - once was enough; he hasn’t got the room on his torso for another goddamned burn scar and Havoc’s already had one miracle worked on his spine - and dealing with a chimera is unfortunately one of them. Edward had gone and made himself an expert - utterly incapable, in true Elric fashion, of leaving well enough alone, the damn brat - and as such kept mildly retraumatizing himself on the regular. Roy won’t even put a stop to it, because far better to have Edward investigate those cases than someone an ounce less compassionate or less capable.

And so he gives the order, every time. “I’ll have Fullmetal take a look at it.”

“Right.” Havoc chews his unlit cigarette. “Honest opinion, chief?”

“Why not.”

“Ed gets to that thing up close, he’s either gonna kill it dead or ride it home and set it up in the garage next to his motorcycle.”

Roy considers the odds. “...I will not have Fullmetal take a look at it.”

“Yeah. Probably for the best.”

Black pokes his head back out of the room. “Looks all clear in here. Long as you don’t mind curtains full of Doxies.”

“Doxies,” Roy repeats.

“Like fairies,” Black says helpfully. He makes a little size box with his hands. “Little blue people. About this big. Vicious little bastards - don’t let ’em fly close, they bite and their venom’ll make you woozy.”


“Oh yeah,” Black agrees cheerfully. “Wanna see?”
Roy hates this fucking place. He can *feel* it giving him wrinkles.
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The sun is high in the sky when they step out into the scrubby front yard, which seems utterly bizarre to Ed and even more so when he realizes they were eating lunch less than an hour ago. He picks a dry-looking patch of grass near the wall, sets the equipment pack down and then sits crosslegged beside it to start working his bracers back on. He'd had the presence of mind to grab them on the way out as well, and at this point he doesn’t give a shit if they make him less approachable. Anything damn well approaching him had better take a look at him and think twice.

“What are those?” Miss Redhead says, because once again the kids have decided to arrange themselves around him like he’s a never before seen zoo animal.

“Party gloves,” Ed says sarcastically. “What do they look like?”

Miss Redhead scratches her nose. “Kinda like what my brother puts on to touch dragons?”

“Dragons,” Ed says, then decides wholesale he’s just not gonna fucking go there.

Smartypants takes the moment to jump in with her own concerns. “What happened upstairs? We only heard a lot of loud - noises.”

“Explosions,” a twin says. “We heard explosions.”

“Yeah, that was Mustang,” Ed says, disgruntled. “Taking care of one of your bog arts. Or whatever the fuck it was. Dead now, in any case.”

“He blew it up?” Not A Twin says. “Little much for a bog art, in it?”

Ed turns a look on him. He’s been told his eyes look creepy when he stares all blank - thanks, Winry, way to compliment a guy - and he hopes that’s coming the fuck across now. “If you tell me this is another thing you wizards deal with using happy thoughts, I’m going to riot.”

The twins snicker. “You said I was possessed and it was giving me telepathy,” Hairy says, seizing the wheel of the conversation and jerking it hard left before Not A Twin can put his baffled pissy look into words. “Is that true?

Ed shrugs and starts pulling the measuring equipment out of the pack for the third freakin’ time today, flexing his hands to settle the bracers some. “Dunno.”

“You don’t know?”

“It’s classified.”

“Classified? It’s my bloody head!”

“And it’s classified,” Ed tells him. “Congratulations. Not everybody has that. We can make you a little Top Secret stamp for your forehead if you like.”

“It wasn’t classified before,” Smartypants says intently as Hairy simmers. “You said dumbell door said there was a prophecy, and what you said about there being only one guard on Hairy, and how
he disappeared - *that* can’t have been classified, you said it in front of everybody."

“Sure it was. I just didn’t have a reason to care,” Ed says, turning on the spectrum analyzer and making sure the EMF reader is hooked up. It’s the third fuckin’ time he’s had to lay all this shit out; he’s getting the damn data this time or else.

“And now you do care?”

“Yup.”

Smartypants and Miss Redhead exchange looks in his peripheral vision. “What if we give you a reason to… not care again?” Miss Redhead says slowly.


“Oh, you rate our best, do you?” a twin says jovially; those two really come across a lot like Paninya, in her happy-go-lucky, my-knees-are-artillery-canons, anything-is-fun-so-long-as-it’s-not-boring way. At least *somebody’s* happy.

“My hourly rate for alchemical consulting is sixteen thousand cenz. For context, the monthly rent on my apartment is nineteen thousand,” Ed says, not looking up from the EMF reader. “Do the math. Y’ain’t got my kind of currency, obviously, but you want something from me, you better know I don’t come cheap. Oh, and remember you’re starting in the hole, ’cause you already owe me.”

“For what,” Hairy snaps.

“For when we went to visit you instead of the library, after they deliberately withheld information,” Ed says, looking up long enough to point his pen at Hairy. “And for after when I saved your life. And hers, and his, and theirs.”

He sticks the pen in his teeth to dig back into the bag while they figure their way through that; sure enough there’s a spare handheld radio in there. He flips it on, toggles to 91.5 on automatic - Central traffic, weather and daily news - and is vaguely pleased to hear crackly music wander out of the speaker. Good to know people this side of the anomaly at least use radio. Wizards probably don’t, but at least the rest of the population maybe isn’t too insane.

Magic disrupting electrical equipment. It certainly hasn’t affected his automail, but then his leg is shielded pretty fucking thoroughly against electrical discharge; he had the usual insulation on the inner cords and shit but on the current version Winry coated it with something that made the metal surfaces matte and doesn’t even transmit static shock. (He had gone on an electrical alchemy kick when rewiring the Rockbell house during Al’s recovery and maybe slightly a little bit electrocuted himself. Winry slapped the shit out of him, took his leg away and made him hop for an entire day and a half while she muttered dire threats and cooked up whatever polymer she dunked his leg in. He’s also now forbidden from existing in that house without socks, *even with* the damn coating, just because he accidentally brushed a live electrical array with his metal toes once -)

The house really hasn’t affected any of their equipment so far. It seems pretty fuckin’ full of magic shit - on top of presumably being covered in magic top to bottom, to power and control the fucking…. door opening security system…. and this radio works fine, though it was turned off the whole time it was inside. He definitely saw Jones and Arget testing radios, though, and they would’ve said something if anything had just up and gone dead.

Maybe it needs direct interaction? Ed spits out the pen. “Yo, one of you do a spell at this,” he says
aloud, holding up the radio. Time to find out what kind of attenuation he’s gonna need, if any.

“Sure. If you tell us about the prophecy,” Miss Redhead says sweetly.

It takes Ed a blank second to remember what the fuck that’s all about, but when he does he rolls his eyes. “Pff. That’s not worth what you’re asking me.” He’ll just test on magic objects and then get Psycho or whoever to do some spells later. Would just a straight-up Faraday cage block all magic, if it turns out to just be essentially an EMP effect? But no, that wouldn’t disrupt any magic within the shielded area. Would it? He’s gonna have to test that.

The kids are being suspiciously quiet again, and when Ed glances up to check on that Hairy still looks like he wants to bite and Smartypants and Miss Redhead are exchanging deeply charged looks of the Plotting Girl variety. “We can apparate,” Smartypants says, turning back to Ed when she sees him looking. “We can take you wherever you need to go.”

Ed gives her a really? look. “Only two of you can do it legally, and I bet your parents are gonna have a lot to say about you doing that for me regardless.”

“We wouldn’t tell them,” Miss Redhead says, sounding scandalized at the prospect.

“Taking a minor somewhere without their parents’ knowledge or permission is kidnapping,” Ed says, unimpressed. “Why the hell would I want to get involved in that when there’s adult wizards to zap me places? Try again.”

Smartypants chews her lip, eyes sharp. “You know… we don’t have to be helping you read those newspapers.”

That gets Ed to focus. Smartypants looks a little alarmed to see him grin. “From bribes straight to threats? You sure you wanna ante up like that?”

Her eyes narrow and she lifts her chin. “You’re the one who told me to try blackmail.”

“First, that’s not blackmail, that’s extortion. Second, you sure you wanna practice on me?”

Smartypants’ nostrils flare slightly. Her eyes narrow further until she’s glaring at Ed like he slapped her with a dueling glove and dropped it at her feet. “Fred,” she says imperiously. “George.”

“Well, well, well, miss Granger,” one twin says.

“Are you really asking little old us -”

“- to get involved for you? After all -

“- we thought you liked Mister Elric here. Why, he doesn’t even know -”

“- our reputation.”

Smartypants raises her chin a little higher. “First two months of term, I don’t report anything I see to any professor. Ron won’t either.”


“Three months,” Smartypants says, ignoring him.

“Why, Prefect Granger,” a twin says.
“That’s a very handsome offer.”

“But I think you know -”

“- we’re going to need a little more.”

Smartypants doesn’t look away from glaring at Ed like he took the last cup of coffee in the break room and didn’t put on a new pot. “I’ll look over two of your products and give whatever spell assistance I can.”

“Three,” a twin says instantly.

“Done,” Smartypants says, and the twins extend a hand each - opposite ones, so Smartypants can shake them both simultaneously.

“You have a deal,” the twins chorus, then turn identical shark grins on Ed.

“So, Mister Elric,” one of them says. Ed raises his eyebrows and wonders if this kind of thing is what Winry’s talking about when she complains about his and Al’s ‘matchy creepy doll smiles’.

“We don’t believe we’ve been properly introduced.”

“We’re the Weasley twins.”

“He’s Gred -”

“- and he’s forge. Proprietors of Weasley’s wizard wheezes, masters of mayhem and problem-solvers extraordinaire. We’re delighted to welcome you to our humble acquaintance -”

“- and thrilled to see where it will go.” They both bow at the waist with added flourishes, which they manage with impressively practiced coordination even sitting on the ground.

As performances go it’s not a bad one, even if half the words don’t mean anything to him. “Ed Elric. Fullmetal Alchemist,” Ed says, twiddling his fingers in a wave. “Professional fucker upper. I got a brother too but he ain’t here yet so unlucky you, me is all you get.”

“An absolute pleasure,” one twin says.

“Simply a charm.”

“We only hope you feel the same.”

“Because we like you, Mister Elric.”

“We like you and we feel a kindred spirit in you.”

“So let us be the first to ask -”

“- what is it you want, Mister Elric?”

Ed raises his eyebrows further and sits back, considering them. Smartypants is watching him close but doesn’t seem to need to add anything despite the obvious Type A personality; Miss Redhead looks eager and Not A Twin’s landed squarely in fatalistic disgust. Hairy’s still glaring at Ed in a way that might be meant to be intimidating but really mostly reminds Ed of that time Al tried to housetrain a feral kitten.
The twins’ double act sideshow aside, it’s a serious question. What *does* he want?

Well, to start with, to not fucking be here. Or for at least *here* to not be so prodigiously batshit. Failing that, huo guo for dinner. A really hot shower. A nap. Al within touching distance and provably not sprawled inside out and transmuted anywhere on any floor.

So, realistically, nothing these dandelions can give him, but it’s probably better to think in more practical and immediate terms. What can he use them for, and all that.

Well, he needs Hairy to get his ass babysat so Ed can take his readings in un-telepathically-spied-on peace. Phrasing that in a way that won’t make it super suspicious is gonna be annoying, and saying ‘you, Hairy, go over there and don’t look at what we’re doing’ is probably gonna go over about as well as ‘all of you, go over there and play pattycake or get drunk or whatever it is teens do and don’t look at what I’m doing’.

Man, if only one of this posse wasn’t a living fuckdamn intel leak, then Ed would have himself a team of baby research assistants… who can’t read Amestrisan. Or write it. Probably can’t be trusted to accurately read off the numbers on all the equipment too.

Never fucking mind.

Maybe they *can* stick around while he gets his data? It’s not like the terrorists are any more likely to read Amestrisan than the kids are. Though they might not have to be able to read it to recognize the equipment and guess at what Ed’s trying to do; Smartypants had recognized the voltmeter, after all. Best not to risk it.

He can’t even send them out on an errand to buy him snacks or something. Well, maybe he can send a twin. Teleporting in and out is probably safe enough to risk transit. Though when they went out to take the metro it seemed like only Smartypants had money. And fuck, right, everything’s segregated: out of these cult children Smartypants had been the only one to know what she was doing, period. Maybe he can send *her* out for snacks.

Only they’re all probably already marked as known associates of Hairy, who the state just tried to kill. Yeah, they’re not leaving this yard.

So they’re all stuck here, unable to do anything for Ed that Ed might even remotely want them to do. When Teacher wanted him and Al close enough to keep an eye on but not interrupting her she’d either set them to chores or training, but he’s not about to assign them housework and he highly doubts these sugar crisps will be able to handle running laps ‘til they drop or an hour of walking around only on their hands.

The super duper intense looks on Smartypants’ and Hairy’s faces say they aren’t gonna leave him alone when they get back inside, either. Shit, maybe Ed’ll just offload them onto Mustang and tell *him* to name a price. The guy’s good at wringing use out of teenagers. Making ‘em translate newspapers, case in point. That’s half Ed’s stupid job, anyway, luring people into Mustang’s scheming little claws via the transitive property of favors so he can trick Amestris better one backroom handshake at a time.

And if Ed hands this bouquet of babies to Mustang he’ll immediately turn them into hostages to leverage against their parents or something. If they toddle up to him all innocent and ask him what *he* wants they’re going to get fleeced within an inch of their lives. Man, these kids have gotta learn not to just barge up to the first idiot who looks like he knows something and make it desperately obvious that they don’t. Not everybody is as nice as Ed and Mustang.
Ed sighs hugely. He can’t fucking believe he’s doing this. “First off. When I have something you want, you don’t fucking ask me to name my price. Especially if you don’t know me, or what my goals are. There are better techniques to sound out what I might ask for - open offers make you look desperate and tell me you didn’t do your research. She did it right -” Ed points at Smartypants(422,357),(429,371)(431,357),(438,371)(440,357),(446,371) “she used translation work, something she knows for a fact we want, and leveraged that. Where she went wrong is switching from offer to threat so fast and so obviously. That’s a real risky move, ‘cause when you dangle a treat and then yank it away it makes people pissed, and threats are something you back yourself into a corner with.”

The intense staring is tending more towards confusion now. It’s a little weird to be on this end of things, because usually Mustang yammers on about this kind of shit after Ed’s gone and brought shame to the honor of all manipulators everywhere or whatever and he lives in denial of there being a next time. It’s a little less weird to think of it like a reversal of Al’s lectures about Learning To Negotiate And Have You Heard Of This Thing Called Tact, Brother.

Plus, well, he’s started, so now he might as well finish. “Once you threaten someone, you can’t take it back. You have to be one hundred percent prepared to take on how I might respond to being threatened, and you have to be one hundred percent committed to following through on the threat if your demands aren’t met. You don’t follow through, you lose all credibility instantly and boom, you’re a joke, nobody takes you seriously ever again.”

He cocks his head at them, not smiling anymore. “So. You offered me a treat, then you took it back and threatened me. How am I going to respond?”

Smartypants looks taken aback but the twins both start clapping, looking once again delighted and way too much like a couple of gangly ginger Paninyas for Ed’s health. “That was magnificent. Is there more?” one of them says earnestly.

“What would you do?” the other one says with interest. “You wouldn’t get away with hexing us - that’d look bad, wouldn’t it, an officer like you mixing it with some poor little kids? And telling on us would just get us yelled at -”

“- which we already get every day of the week. What’s the worst you could do?”

Ed feels his eyebrows creep up again at that. “My worst?” Goodness. These kids really are babies. “Well, if I was feeling a real asshole, I’d just turn you all over to Mustang.”

Miss Redhead snorts. “It’d look even worse for him to hex us,” she says confidently. “He’s supposed to be the boss of you all. And we haven’t even done anything wrong. We’re just asking questions. He wouldn’t be able to get away with hurting us either.”

Ed barks a laugh before he can stop it. “Oh, he’s not gonna hurt you,” he says. “He’s a politician. Why fuck you up when he can get better use out of you whole?”

“Politician?” Smartypants says narrowly. “In the military?”

Ed waves a hand. “In Amestris, same thing. The point is, where I’m bad he’s worse. I’m up front. With him you won’t even realize you’re getting screwed. He’ll have you sign away your life and come off still owing him a favor. And there’s people way the fuck worse than him out there, so if you start your angling by swanning in all cute and threatening strangers blind you’re gonna get your asses used like a kitchen dishrag.”

“Wow, worse than him? After all that?” Hairy says sarcastically. “Who’d be worse, Satan?”
Ed frowns. “Who?”

Not A Twin also frowns at Hairy. “Your big red guy? The one underground?”

“No, that’s Santa claws,” Miss Redhead corrects. “Satan is the one with the horns.”

Claws? Horns? “What the fuck are you talking about?” Ed says.

Smartypants looks like she wants to put her face in her hands and scream a little bit. “We are talking about how Hairy’s in danger, and everyone is keeping secrets from him,” she says pointedly. “Secrets that could put him in danger. Including you. You want me to threaten you better? Tell me why we shouldn’t go to Mustang and tell him you offered to sell us your classified information, anything we wanted to know. It’ll be our word against yours, and all of us will swear you did it.”

Ed starts laughing; he can’t help it. “Oh fuck - please, can we? Fuck, I’d pay money to see that. Oh my god.” He’d get that writeup framed: 

name: ED ELRIC, charge: HIGH TREASON, grounds: SOLD SECRETS to WIZARDS (UNDERAGE). “Good instinct, though, to keep looking for leverage,” he tells Smartypants; he needed that laugh. “For a situation like this, though, you’re better off tabling the talk so you can do some research on your target and come back ready to actually land a hit. Oh, and make sure you’ve got a way to check your sources. What’s stopping me from squeezing you for favors, making up some totally random shit and telling you it’s the prophecy? Never trust intel that comes from only one source.”

Smartypants is now looking at him like she wants to strangle him with his own braid. It’s a look Ed sees often on people. “Maybe we’ll go to mister Mustang anyway, tell him you told us about the prophecy and see how he reacts,” she says. “You wouldn’t be able to disprove it. If he asks us to say what it is we’ll just clam up and say we’re scared of you retaliating - you know that’s believable. If we say that in an order meeting in front of everybody I’m sure that would create a situation you’d much rather avoid.”

“Sure, that might work,” Ed allows. “If Mustang wasn’t Mustang.” And if the classified bit wasn’t just an excuse for not compromising opsec around Terrorist Radio Four-Eyes over here. “You don’t know how he operates. That’s more research you gotta do, by the way, if you wanna spare yourself any grief later. You wanna kick some shit up the chain, you wanna be real sure how it’s gonna get received. Also, cute gambit. ‘Tell us stuff or we’ll say you told us stuff’? That’s a new one.”

“It’ll make trouble for you,” Smartypants says coldly. “Dumbell door’s not going to be happy when he hears you’re willing to sell the order’s secrets if the price is right.”

Ed pffts again. “Why would I care what he’s happy about?”

“Your officer would have to deal with it, though,” a twin says reasonably. “Are you sure about how that’s gonna be received?”

Ed rolls his eyes. “The only thing Mustang gives a shit about is getting promoted and styling his hair. He’s not gonna get worked up over whether some foreign schoolteacher thinks he’s toeing the line or not.”

Not A Twin’s mouth drops open. “Some schoolteacher?”

“Dumbell door is the most powerful wizard in great Britain,” Smartypants says intently. “Even Voldemort is afraid of him. He’s the reason we aren’t already all living under death eater rule.”
Every time Voldemort made an attack on the ministry dumbell door held him off. The only reason they didn’t make him minister after the war is that he refused. He’s not ‘some teacher’.

She looks very serious and very seriously into the idea of Beardy being her wizard superstar, so Ed decides to meet her where she’s at. “Look, none of you even know where the fuck Amestris is, so I get it, Beardy seems like a real big deal to you guys. Hell, around here, he probably is. But unlucky me, I’ve seen Mustang work for nearly, shit, like ten fuckin’ years now, and believe me when I say he’d waltz Beardy like a debutante on prom night. Probably get a thank you for it, too. He’s fucking untouchable. The bastard led a coup and lived. Shit, he led a coup and won.”

Not A Twin frowns. “A what?”

“It’s when you forcibly take over a government,” Smartsays, now back to eyeing Ed with something like wariness.

“He tried to take over the government?” Not A Twin demands. “Like Voldemort’s doing?”

“He didn’t try,” Ed says, mildly offended on Mustang’s behalf; he may be a bastard but comparing him to some maniac like lord bucatini and his In This Cadre We Make Tactical Decisions Based On Prophecy reputation is just embarrassing. “He did it.”

“But he’s not the leader of your country, is he?” Smartypants says, eyes narrowing again.

“No,” Ed admits, not bothering to add not yet. “He was too injured, after. And he had some other stuff to do.” Like get the ball rolling on Ishval reconstruction and be enough of a heavyweight to make any old-guard assholes think twice about trying to stymie anything.

Then Ed lets his grin split again, because Grumman is a wild old coot but he’s decent and sticking him in the Central Office was a pretty hilarious trick on Mustang’s part. “So he installed his best friend’s grandpa as leader instead.”

“That’s nepotism,” Smartypants says, now halfway to horrified.

“That’s common sense,” Ed tells her. “He was the highest-ranking general in Mustang’s faction and he was old-guard enough to appease the establishment fuckers who were still hanging on. He’s not a fucking psychopath like some of the others and he’s not gonna order any suppressions or mass executions or outright fuckin’ genocide, which let me tell you is a big step up from the last guy.”

He’s also not a murderous homunculus, but that’s just kind of a bonus given what regular ol’ humans manage to get up to in positions of power. “So no, Mustang wouldn’t hurt you. Most likely he’d leverage you over your parents, ’cause it’s not like you have much else to offer.”

Everybody looks kind of appalled about this. “Some of us haven’t got parents,” Hairy says, glaring at Ed.

“Yeah, and that puts you in a pretty shit position,” Ed tells him frankly. “Right now, politically, you’re most useful to us. Your government is trying to kill you and that makes you a liability to this whole vigilante op, and the guy who seems to care the most about whether you live or die is a wanted convict too. Getting rid of both of you would lower risk for the whole group and make a lot of problems disappear. Somebody decided to put only one guard on you. Somebody wants to separate you from everybody else and send you back to stay where the attack happened. You tell me who that somebody is. You’ve got nobody in this order of the whatever who’ll advocate for your safety with any kind of clout behind them, and I guess because Beardy’s such a rockstar from
what we’ve seen nobody’s even thinking of questioning anything he does."

This time the staring is a lot of doe-eyed betrayed shock. Ed’s guessing nobody’s quite laid the situation out like that for them so far. “He’s got us,” Not A Twin says fiercely after a second, but even he looks kind of shaken.

“And that’s something, at least,” Ed allows. “Anybody tries to stick him somewhere away from all of you and post another conveniently disappearing guard, you all stall like hell while one of you runs and gets one of us.” He makes hard eye contact with the other kids one at a time, then leans in and fixes Hairy with a look. “For now - stick with your friends. Don’t go anywhere alone. Especially you two,” he says, gesturing between him and Miss Redhead. “If you realize you’ve been separated from the group, get the fuck back to them as quick as you can.”

“Maybe it was like… bait,” a twin says hesitantly, more subdued than Ed’s seen either of them so far. “Maybe that’s why dumbell door had Hairy without more guards. Maybe he was trying to lure death eaters out to get rid of them.”

“Then there should’ve been an assault team that came busting in as soon as those fuckin’ dementer things showed up,” Ed says directly. “Not a couple of civilians tracking us down forty minutes later having hysterics about how we all almost died. Did that look like a well-sprung trap to you?”

Their faces say it didn’t. “You still haven’t told us anything,” Hairy says tightly, apparently still convinced Ed’s not on his side or something. “Don’t think we haven’t noticed.”

“Yeah, because you haven’t made it worth it,” Ed says patiently. Not that they could make it worth it to compromise opsec, but it’s not like they need to know that. “And ‘scuse you, I just gave you a shitton of tips on how not to get your asses clocked when you run around trying to dig up what people don’t want you to know. Which racks up more debt in your column as far as I’m concerned.”

“We need to know about what’s going on. Hairy needs to know. Voldemort’s trying to kill him,” Smartypants says, low and insistent. “And you just said - that dumbell door -”

She breaks off, face twisting. It does suck hard ass to discover people you thought were allies are actually maybe not so much. Or that they’re just really incompetent, which is arguably more depressing.

“There are legitimate security reasons for why nobody’s telling you shit,” Ed allows, deciding not to mention that one of those reasons is that they’re in high school. “That might change pretty soon, though. We’re working on it.”

He mentally runs through everything he said just to check if he’s said anything weaponizable, but Mustang is a devious politician bastard isn’t a secret and it’s not his political shit that lord volumetry would be worried about: like Mustang said, they’ve got basically nothing here, no favors owed, no contacts, nothing to rely on but what they brought. And Hairy didn’t actually see Mustang blow anything up.

“Just tell me. One thing,” Hairy says, jaw clenched. “Do I have telepathy with Voldemort?”

Ed shrugs. “I dunno. Try and see.”

Hairy gapes at him. “Try and see?”

“Yeah. Like if you do, you should know what he’s thinking, right? Or seeing or whatever? Try, I dunno, tuning into his channel or whatever.”
“His channel,” Hairy repeats, now looking like he wants a go at Ed’s braid-strangling once Smartypants is done with her turn.

“Radio Voldemort,” a twin suggests brightly. “Volunteers to twist Hazza’s knob?”

“George!” Not A Twin squawks.

“Oh sure. And I’ll twist yours right off, since you’re asking for it so much,” Miss Redhead growls, whipping her stick out of her sweater pocket and twisting to jab it at the twin.

“Whoah, gin gin, let’s not get carried away,” the twin says, leaning out of the way with his palms up, just as the front door to the house opens and Havoc leans out.

“Thank fuck,” Ed says. “Y’all done in there?”

“All clear,” Havoc agrees, glancing them all over and slowly raising an eyebrow at Miss Redhead and the twins caught in a standoff. “You kids having fun out here?”

“Lots,” Hairy says through his teeth.

“Great,” Havoc says, eyeing him dubiously. “All good, boss?”

Ed gives a sarcastic salute with the radio. “Dandy.”

“We’re gonna try and get through those papers, then.” Havoc scans over the kids again. “Who’s coming back up with me to help translate?”

“All of them,” Ed says unequivocally. “Go on. Shoo. I got work to do.”

Chapter End Notes

ed: now that i am no longer an age that ends in -teen i take great satisfaction in calling everyone even a single week younger than me a baby

ginny and hermione: oh my god... he’s… he’s a bitch. he's a huge fucking bitch

ed: that’s lord high god bitch to you, BABIES

also ed: my nightmare child-endangering boss is meaner than your nightmare child-endangering boss! nyah!
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

to any science people: APOLOGIES IN ADVANCE. im basically mashing up wiki pages, snorting them off the back of my bachelor’s in bullshit and then projectile vomiting the results

None of the kids look thrilled about this, so Ed scoots back, claps and presses one hand to the ground. The crackle of discharge gets them scrambling back doubletime, and Ed rides the block of dirt up and stands as it reaches waist height. “Go on, git,” he orders, looking down at them; that’s enjoyable enough that he wishes he’d made the dirtblock taller. “Classtime’s over.”

“Didn’t you want us to cast a spell on your radio there?” one twin says brightly, having recovered quickest from the shake of the ground.

The offer actually seems sincere, but Ed knows better than to take what seems like a freebie, especially after a conversation that was essentially his handing them a primer on swindling. “Maybe later. I got shit to do first,” he says, waving it off. “Go help with the papers. And you haven’t given me your report on all the people you remember from the resurrection,” he adds, pointing at Hairy. “I want it in Hughes’ hands by dinner today. If you want your Mal-boy bitch hung out to dry, that is.”

Hairy’s mouth clicks shut on whatever he was gonna say and he comes over all determined, like when Al’s feral kitten would try and get the chicken chunks out of the perforated toy ball Al made for it. “Fine,” he says curtly, and turns on his heel to stalk past Havoc and into the house.

Havoc gives Ed some eyebrows as the rest of the kids all share looks and follow Hairy, but Ed waves him off too. “I’m gonna be out here. No more distractions. It’s time for some science.”

“Science like, the whole house is gonna shake again science?” Havoc says warily.

“Nah. This is the sit and look at lots of numbers science.”

“Yikes,” Havoc decides. “Sure you don’t wanna do that inside?”

“Nah. If I accidentally open a wormhole or negate all their shit or whatever it’s prolly better for me to be outside.”

“Ah-huh,” Havoc says carefully. “And what’s the chances of that lookin’ like?”

“Dunno. Lessay… more’n zero but lessan fifty percent.”

“I don’t love those numbers, boss.”

“And that’s why you shouldn’t gamble,” Ed tells him, pointing with his radio. “Come get me if they teleport back in there with Al, ya?”

“Ya,” Havoc agrees, more amused than resigned, and heads after the kids. Mustang must not have briefed him yet about how they’re up to their ears in fresh Promised Day manure again. Ed shakes
his head and hops off his new makeshift lab table.

He pulls out his notebook and sets out the equipment; his experimental setup is basically already done thanks to his damn start-stop attempts to do exactly this throughout the day, so he can just go to the corner of the yard where the edge of the house butts up against the next one, right where the shimmer is, and jump right in.

Thirty minutes later he’s wondering just what the hell kind of stupid he’s hopped into. It’s electromagnetic radiation all right - and via the broadband probe it’s coming out as a wide goddamn chunk of waves in frequencies from around 15 to 300 THz, which classifies it as UV, visible light and infrared. Only it’s doing none of the things that any of that shit is supposed to be doing.

The temperature of the house wall is noticeably cooler than his hand, yet is coming out significantly warmer in numbers when he alchemizes a pyrometer and reads infrared - but not on the thermometer Ed haphazardly transmutes with the mercury out of his bracer. The house is also not emitting any kid of visible light Ed can see, so he frowns, alchemizes a shitty little spectrometer, claps a little dirt dome into existence and takes a reading in under there, the spectrometer pressed up against the wall. No ambient light, no glow, no light whatsoever - and yet, same fucking thing.

His immediate conclusion is that it’s bullshit. In full dark the sensor’s giving readings like it’s detecting light, but light is light and whatever magic is it doesn’t behave like light. Which shouldn’t be possible, because the whole reason light is “light” is because of its wave amplitude and frequency. That is the definition of the type of energy. That’s how energy works.

The obvious answer is faulty equipment, only all the other readings are bunk too - maybe it was all damaged somehow when it was brought across the anomaly? But no, the spectrometer he just made here and now, and it’s pretty much a miniature copy of the ones Ed’s worked with a couple times in the state labs. Nothing is shorting out like Smartypants expected it to - is Amestrisan equipment just fundamentally different from what they have here? There’s no special shielding around what he and Al made - if there were EMP bursts happening this stuff would short out. Maybe that only happens when magic is used directly on it?

There’s too many variables. Ed gets up and records ambient conditions out on the sidewalk, and the readings are markedly different there than even just in the front yard, a couple meters from the house. He scribbles out a basic electrical array in his notebook, pulls some metal from a bracer to create two poles, sets it up on the lab table and activates the thing. The voltmeter gives back a near-perfect reading; Ed wrote two volts into the array and that’s what he’s getting back. A dummy-basic light array is next; same thing. As far as he knows there’s no array to create radio waves, but that doesn’t mean there can’t be one; he could just create an antenna, but he’s not super clear on how to modulate radio equipment to produce a single very specific frequency for testing, not when he can just build the exact value he wants into an array.

After fifteen minutes of fiddling he codges together something functional by vandalizing the electrical array and making the current chase itself around the circle and oscillate enough to create radio waves at exactly twelve hertz. Radiometer reads it right back to him, deviation less than 0.03. A heat array with a 300K value proves his crappy little thermometer works just fine, and same thing for the pyrometer besides. Tentative conclusion - equipment works fine, it’s just magic that’s causing some kind of malfunction.

Ed squints at the shimmer playing at the very edges of the building. It’s not acting like light - just because Ed can see it doesn’t mean it’s actually on the visible spectra, though given he can see it
kind of begs the question of whether the Gate gave him extra rods and cones in his eyes or fucked with his brain’s optic processing or what. Is there even a way to check for that? More importantly, is any of this operating within the scope of what humans have so far affectionately called the laws of physics? If wave $x$ has frequency $f$ and amplitude $\lambda$ then it behaves like waves of $f$ and $\lambda$ do, yeah? If duck, then quacks, yes? Does he need more sensitive equipment? Is whatever magic actually is just registering as false positives on the meters? Has he just fallen facefirst into a phenomenon that’ll destabilize a lot of physics theorems so deeply held they’ve been elevated to laws? Are the laws of physics just different on this side of the anomaly? Fuck, he hopes not. He doesn’t have that kind of time. If he doesn’t finish this within two weeks Mustang’ll be pissed enough to actually follow through on his threat and ship him to that magic high school.

The data he’s getting back is consistent. Interference or equipment malfunction or user error tends to create variation. And technically, an array to negate magic would probably still work. If he assigns the energy values to match the range he’s getting, i.e. waves with approximate frequencies between 15 THz and 300, then he should get an array that will sink all of that. In theory.

Ed rubs his forehead. Radiochemistry isn’t one of his deeper specializations, and neither is nuclear chem in general; thank fuck he answered that angry mail from the Central U girl all those months ago that led to - well, first it led to a flaming argument via longform letter, but they’ve been penpalling about the atomic fission problem for long enough that Ed’s picked up some background and read enough specifics on the chem side to know what he’s doing here. He’s gonna have to send her chocolate or whatever when he gets back. (And probably properly remember her name, too, though at this point if they stop addressing each other as Officer Moron/yapdog/third-rate/BITCH he’s pretty sure she’ll think he’s had a stroke or something.)

Time to take about a billion more readings, because if nothing else he can determine how consistently he’s getting the same bogus results.

It’s midafternoon when his eyelids start to droop. Well, he did do a fair amount of alchemy today, and while he’s used to working through adrenaline spikes and the jittery comedowns after that doesn’t mean they don’t take it out of him. The frequency of these incidents seems to have developed an inverse relationship with their severity; he’s had way less of this shit in the past couple years but it’s like each episode wants to make up for it by hitting individually worse.

He still feels pretty comprehensively shitty, in a bone-deep way that’s not really at all because the research isn’t doing what he wants it to do. He unfolds his legs to stick them out straight and takes a minute to press his forehead to his knees, exhaling into the stretch with his hands loose on the ankle clasps of his boots. He really wishes Al were here.

Fuck, he’s getting old.

The solution to sleepiness is to get up and do some jumping jacks, maybe a full set of pushups since it’s not like he exercised this morning, but his entire body quails pathetically at the thought of even dragging himself to his feet. That makes him kind of want to slap himself, but even his traitorous arms - Ol’ Faithful and Prodigal Right - turn out to have submitted leave forms and skedaddled when he wasn’t looking. His braid loses whatever purchase it had on his shirt and slithers down over his shoulder as if trying to join the rest of him in sagging into the ground.

Maybe he can just nap out here for a bit.

Ed considers that, snorts, and pushes into the full stretch since he’s down here anyway. It relieves the background ache of his automail port enough that he ends up doing the full mobility set of leg PT, and that wakes him up enough to gather all the equipment into the pack again and dissolve his makeshift lab table back into the ground. He shoulders the pack and turns back to the wall of the
One story up he swears, jumps down, claps to make the stone of the front stoop spell out *I’m on the roof* like a reverse welcome mat - if Havoc or whoever comes back out to look for him and finds him disappeared it’s gonna be a whole damn carnival - then starts his climb again. It’s an easy go: by the time he reaches the roof he could swear the casing on the outside of the windows has gotten wider and deeper to give him better footholds, which is actually possible given this place might have a brain, fucking hell.

He hoists himself onto the roof feeling vaguely both intrusive and intruded upon, enough that he mutters a doubtful “Thanks, I guess,” at the house.

Then he adds, “If you fuckin’ try some of that bog art, mindreading, show-you-nightmares shit again, I will peel you like a softboiled egg. Then I’ll give what’s left to Mustang. In a matchbox. Get me?”

There’s no kind of response, which is pretty much the best answer he could hope for. He sets the pack down and looks around for a suitable spot; there’s still some bird crap up here, so he grimaces, claps and retiles the roof, molding the slate blocks into each other and wedging the whole thing tight to the roof beams and layer of paper tar. It’s warm up here from the reflected heat, which is good considering Ed left his jacket inside; he tugs the pack over to one of the chimneys, sits down and sets about researching its pillowesque properties.
“What an utter prat,” Ron says.

They’re all crowded into the upstairs hall toilet. Hermione had tugged Ginny’s sweater, so Ginny cheerily announced “Bathroom break! Elric said none of us can go anywhere alone!” to Chaos and promptly dragged Harry and Ron in after her. Fred and George followed amiably enough behind, and now they’re all stuffed in here around the toilet and cracked clawfoot tub and sink. “Don’t be jealous,” Ginny tells Ron, because honestly, she’s had about enough of his steaming and pouting. “Elric’s an arse but he’s no worse than any of you get.”

Ron colors impressively and sputters. “Oh, right, a bloke’s just fine when you want to - to snog him!”

Ginny tosses her hair and affects her haughtiest, most annoying tones. “So? When a man, with a certain physique, in leather trousers, not to mention knee-high boots, destroys a dementor for a lady - ”

“He didn’t destroy it for you!”

“Never mind that. We need to talk to Mundungus,” Hermione says in that scary final-exams-are-in-a-week-and-I’ve-still-got-half-a-textbook-to-memorize voice that probably won her the prefectship. “Why did he leave right then, right before the dementors appeared? Who assigned him to guard duty that day? Was it Dumbledore?”

“Heard Dung say something about a cauldron deal,” Fred volunteers. “Said he was just gonna pop away for a second, and it’d been dead quiet the whole time and he didn’t think he’d be missed.”

“You’re not seriously thinking Dumbledore made that happen,” Ron says incredulously. “Not on purpose, not as - as a setup. Not Dumbledore.”

Hermione’s mouth is a flat line. “Elric was right that it’s too much of a coincidence. If nothing else we have to find out what did happen - what if somebody knew Mundungus was watching Harry that day, and paid somebody to call him away at just the right moment? It doesn’t have to have been - anyone in the Order. This could just be somebody watching them. Seeing who they talk to. Watching us.”

That’s sobering. It settles across all of them like Elric’s harsh voice had, describing Harry’s situation in terms so cutting and frank that Ginny hadn’t been able to help a shiver down her spine. He’d made having parents sound so - transactional.

And he’d had a point. Harry doesn’t have anybody to talk for him to Dumbledore - Sirius might try, but Elric had been right there, too: Sirius can’t do anything when he’s got Aurors sniffing every corner of Britain for him and if he weren’t stuck in this house he’d have already tried to take Harry from his horrible relatives. Harry still looks disturbed by what Elric said, though to be honest he’s looked some kind of disturbed pretty much every moment since he set foot in Grimmauld Place.

Hermione lasers in on Fred and George. “How do we get ahold of Mundungus?”

“He should be at the next Order meeting,” George says. “We can corner him after.”
“Should we ask Elric to get some answers out of him?” Ginny says. “Dung might not even answer if we ask, you saw how he is. And we’d get in trouble for hexing him in place or something, but Elric - well, he just told us all about how he can get away with anything, didn’t he?” She smiles winningly. “Let’s test it.”

George points a finger at her. “Evil,” he says approvingly.

“Think he’ll do it?” Fred says.

Ginny shrugs. “Bet he’d want to know what happened to make Dung run out and who it was he went to meet. If we set up the opportunity I bet he wouldn’t say no.”

“And if we set it up for him, he might see it as a favor,” George says, rubbing his chin plotterly.

“What’s stopping him from talking to Dung himself?” Ron says crossly. “Bet they won’t be keeping Elric out of any Order meetings. If he’s so interested in the answer why wouldn’t he just ask him direct in front of everybody? He doesn’t need to sneak around.”

“So we catch Dung before the next meeting,” Ginny says. “Bring him to Elric before anyone else can.”

“We can’t leave the house,” Hermione says with deep dissatisfaction. “No, we’ll have to wait for the Order meeting. We’ll hex him if we have to - we can make it look like an accident. And having the answer from him can be leverage, too - this is information we can trade for what Elric knows.” Her eyes gleam with something like anticipation. “If nobody’s going to tell us anything, we’ll just have to get the answers ourselves.”

“Why, Prefect Granger,” George says with a hand raised to his mouth and a mock gasp. “Where did this new rebellious streak come from?”

“This isn’t school, George,” Hermione says, colder than Ginny’s ever heard her. “Voldemort is back. Elric did save our lives yesterday. If none of us could have gotten a Patronus off we would’ve died. We have to know what’s going on.”

“Dunno what you mean about new, either,” Ron mutters. “She set Snape on fire our first year.”

Harry and Ginny snort in tandem, which she secretly finds very cute, and Hermione shoots Ron a half-surprised half-smile, cheeks darkening slightly and looking much more like the usual Hermione, merely bossy instead of icy cold. “Needs must,” she says crisply, sticking her nose up. “Besides, he deserved it.”

“Hah!” Harry says.

“So we’re agreed,” Hermione says. “Fred, George, you keep an eye out for Dung. I’ll see if I can figure out a jinx to keep him still and not apparating before we’re done with him. And we probably should help the Unplottables with their translations, if only to cover what we’re really doing.”

“If we don’t want to be stuck cleaning, yeah,” Fred says.

“I need to write up… what he asked for,” Harry says, kind of quietly. “The list of names. For Elric.”

The Death Eaters that Harry had seen, that night You-Know-Who rose again. Ginny can’t think about that too much; it’s too big, too terrifying, in that awful formless way of childhood nightmare. “One of us should probably try and get a look at what Elric’s doing out there,” she says instead, the
idea taking shape. “Not Harry, since Chaos is technically following him, but the rest of us can take coordinated toilet breaks or something. He wanted us to cast a spell on his radio, right? Maybe we can figure out what else he might want.”

“You just want to ogle him some more,” Ron mutters.

Ginny rounds on him, hands on her hips. “And?”

“And you can’t keep acting like that! You’re acting like - what even is it about him? You’d think he was some kind of man-Veela or something!”

“Got the hair for it,” George remarks.

“Not the legs, though,” Fred counterpoints.

“Bit short, ain’t he?”

“Little on the petite side, yeah.”

“You can’t call that petite,” Ginny dismisses. “He’s two of you in the shoulders. Besides, he’s the same height as Harry.”

They all look at Harry consideringly - or, in Ron’s case, in appalled bewilderment - just as there’s a knock on the door. “You kids okay in there?” Chaos says, muffled.

“Fine!” Ginny yells back. “Ron just needs some moral support with his, you know -”

“- personal situation,” George completes. “Very personal -”

“- very moral,” Fred adds.

“I hate you all so much,” Ron swears.

“See?” Ginny calls through the door. “He’s having a very tough time. We’ll be out in a moment!” She cups her hands around her mouth. “Just push, Ron! Push!”

Chapter End Notes

Ron, protected by heterosexuality: why the fuck does everyone think this horrible blond gremlin with a nicki minaj laugh is some kind of hotshot casanova

twins: chaos factor

hermione: foreign jock

ginny: angsty protagonist vibe

harry, very quietly: draco in leather pants
He dreams he’s in a warehouse of multicolored underpants, stacks upon stacks looming over him threatening to fall, and he’s clapping to at least alchemize the dyes black when it all goes white and he’s yanked into frothing, clutching darkness and then agonizingly white light. He reels, weightless, looking for the Gate but it’s not there - *hello, mister alchemist*, a massive pair of underwear says in a thousand voices, and Ed’s about to let loose a very confused scream when a *crack* has him slamming bolt upright. He’s on his feet and blinking madly a solid four seconds before reality reasserts itself: outside, wizard loony land, house, roof, teleporting. Right. He should probably go see who it is.

He goes over to the lip of the roof and sees three familiar figures walking down the street towards the house, late afternoon sunlight shining off two distinctive blonde heads and one vivid Amestrian uniform in the lead. “*Al!*” Ed exclaims, and barely has the presence of mind to remember he doesn’t have a metal arm anymore and can’t just jump down the side of the house and dig his fingers into the wall as a brakeline.

He swings down windowsill by windowsill instead, jumping and rolling impatiently on the last story, and bolts across the yard. “*Al!*” he calls, vaulting the low garden fence to get onto the sidewalk quicker, and across the street Al startles and then grins at him. He’s in a Xing-type traveling jacket over a sweatervest and work pants with about a million pockets on them, and that plus the boots means Hawkeye told him all about the elbow-deep shit they’ve landed in: somehow in the past couple of years Al contracted whatever unfortunate disease causes people to enjoy wearing wingtips and ties, and he doesn’t usually forgo unless he expects to be in a fight. Hawkeye’s also carrying his pack, which doesn’t bode well for Al having a good energy day, but he doesn’t look ashy and at least his stride is fine.

When Ed gets within a meter of him Al neatly spins his cane up and plants the end against Ed’s chest, stopping him short in a fairly bruisey kind of way. “Prove you’re Ed,” Al says, still smiling. Well that’s…. reasonable, if Hawkeye briefed him on how they’re dealing with potential homunculi again. “When you got drunk in Baozhe that one time you talked for an hour about Mei’s -”

“*Okay you’re Ed,*” Al says hastily, flipping the cane and using the handle end to hook Ed into a hug. “Sorry, you just came running at us out of nowhere -”

“No it’s fine, it’s smart, you wouldn’t *believe* the fuckshow going on here - thank *fuck* you’re here, finally, we can get some real problem solving going -”

Al laughs. “Okay, keeping in mind that I’ve been working on nothing but medical arrays for the past ten months -”

“But half of that’s isolators and stabilizers anyway, right? We need that first, probably, ’cause shit, the *readings* I’ve been getting -”

“What are you even doing? Colonel Hawkeye told me some, but -”

“Turning off thhhhe...,” Ed trails off, remembering Mustache is right there. He pulls back a bit,
leaving Al’s arm around his shoulder. “There’s a kid with this like… chunk of soul stuck onto him. Maybe. He’s like haunted or something. We gotta get rid of it.”

Al’s eyebrows creep together. “A chunk of soul?” he asks, the flick of his glance telling Ed he hasn’t missed his clumsy dodge or why he did it. “Sure, I can take a look at that.”

“Great,” Ed says, steering Al to turn towards the house. “We’re all in there, it’s a dump kinda but don’t worry, I fixed it up -” except for the mold, shit, and he was gonna do something about the bathrooms too, install showers, fuck, maybe Al can sit outside for a bit while he takes care of that.

Al is frowning strangely at the house, though, in a more than yikes-this-place-sucks way, and he slows and stops a good twenty meters from the gate, arm slipping from Ed’s shoulders. “What is that?”

Ed glances at the house, then smacks himself in the forehead. “Fuck, that’s right.” He’d only seen a weird shimmering blob when he’d first arrived, after all. Their magic mass-compressing security measures or whatever. “Hawkeye, how’re we getting him in?”

Hawkeye’s watching them with tolerant amusement. “I believe entry to the house requires direct transfer of information,” she says, nodding at Mustache.

“I’ll go see if Albus is available,” he says, also watching them and looking kind of bemused about it. “There may be a bit of a wait - there’s a cafe around the corner if you’d prefer to sit indoors.”

“Uh, yeah, sure, thanks,” Ed says. Mustache nods cordially, and with a last vaguely curious look at Al he glances both ways down the street and then teleports out with a crack.

Al, still staring at the house, says, “That’s qi.”

Ed whirls. “Holy fuck, are you sure?”

“Oh-huh,” Al says, not looking away from it. “That is… a lot of qi, really concentrated… and it’s doing a lot of fluctuating I’ve never seen before -”

“Oh my god the emissions,” Ed breathes. “They read as light-spectrum, it’s UV all the way into infrared - it’s solar radiation somehow, I knew it -”

Al’s eyes widen and he spins to look at Ed. “And now we can prove it -”

“- because here it’s concentrated enough to measure! YES! We are getting a paper!”

Al meets his double high five with equal force, laughing as Ed whoops and jumps. They knock elbows together as he lands, right to left, and fuck, Ed’s never gonna get over how he can do that again without getting a spiked gauntlet bruise to the bone. “Now we just gotta prove it,” he says, bending down to scoop up Al’s cane, dropped for their high five. “Which is gonna be crap, because all the data I’m getting is beyonducky.”

“Congratulations,” Hawkeye says, somehow dry and sincere at the same time. “Anything in particular you’d like me to report to the General at this time?”

“Sure; tell him shit’s fucked but we’re working on it,” Ed says. “And that looks like magic is qi, if he cares about the technicals.”

“I’ll let him know,” Hawkeye says, now entirely dry. “Will you go to the cafe, or…”
“Nah, we can chill out here, it’s cool,” Ed tells her. “Oh - hey, don’t freak if Mustang like, hugs you or some shit, okay? He’ll explain all about it.”

Hawkeye slowly turns to give him her full attention. “Will he now.”

“Yeah, it’s tactical and all that,” Ed says, then figures he might as well read Al in now too: sooner the better for shit like this. “Apparently they got ‘household pests’ here that hang around corners waiting to read your mind and use what it finds in there to shapeshift into a tailor-made nightmare scenario, special just for you.”

Hawkeye’s face gets significantly stonier. “Read your mind?”

Ed grins unpleasantly. “Oh yeah. The wizards might be able to do that too, I don’t know yet. None of them seemed even a little bit surprised about it. They thought torching it was overkill.”

Hawkeye’s mouth tenses just a fraction. “I take it the General reacted aggressively.”

“You fuckin’ bet,” Ed says. “He didn’t go totally pantaloones, though, don’t worry. He toasted the thing and then we cleared the house. There’s a chimera in there too, by the way, size of a horse, and it’s got wings and claws and can use ‘em - it’s the convict guy’s pet. Oh, and the house is sentient. Kinda.”

Hawkeye looks at him the way she usually looks when he shows up in her office saying something like sooooo you know that one fancy historic aquaduct in Versahn? welllllll the good news is it’s been upgraded, or, so apparently you can get arrested for accidentally blowing up some guy’s moonshine still even if you fix it up after: like she’s going to make it Mustang’s problem. “I see. I will refrain from making any remarks along the lines of ‘it could be worse’.”

“Yeah, don’t curse us like that,” Ed agrees. “We’ll come and join you once Beardy shows up and tells Al the magic word or whatever.”

Hawkeye inclines her head and hefts Al’s pack slightly. “Would you like me to take this to our rooms, Alphonse?”

“Oh - yes please, thank you, Colonel,” Al says, breaking off from staring at the house. “I appreciate it.”

“Of course. I’ll see you inside.”

“That is… so weird,” Al says, staring after her as she walks through the yard gate and up to the house. “She just… disappears. How did they make qi do that?”

“Guess we’ll find out,” Ed says. “It just looks like a regular house to me now, but until I got the magic words it was this huge big like… heat shimmer.”

“I’m getting that too,” Al says. “Visually, I mean. In qi-sense it’s… well, it’s not that. Everything’s very… tangled? I don’t even know if that’s the right word.”

“Shit, I can see qi,” Ed reflects. “We can see qi. Oh - Mustang can’t, by the way. There’s also this like, tingle feeling - did you feel that when the mustache guy teleported?”

Al frowns. “I’m not sure,” he says. “Though I do think I felt something when I touched the… port key. Walking through the anomaly was very distracting.”

“Ya, fuck that thing,” Ed agrees. “I can feel the tingle feeling on pretty much everything that’s got
the shimmer. That I’ve touched so far, anyway. And bastard can feel it too, but can’t see it. Nobody else can see or feel anything either, so I’m assuming it’s an alchemist thing - well, a Gate thing. And we can see and feel both prolly ‘cause -’

“- we’ve been through the Gate enough times that we should have our own cat flap,” Al agrees. “Hm. So you’re testing what magic is? Energy-wise?”

“Ya. We gotta…” Ed looks around, then tugs Al over to sit on the curb of the sidewalk a little ways down from the house. “We need to figure out an array to shut magic off,” Ed says, lowering his voice some just in case. “Like what happened with our alchemy. We’re keeping it under wraps because we actually really do need to take a look at that kid’s qi or whatever, because whatever’s going on with him might be broadcasting everything he sees and hears directly to the top terrorist.”

“That’s not good,” Al says thoughtfully.

“Ya. And the government is compromised out the ass - did Hawkeye tell you they sent these like… fear demon thingies after me? After the kid, I mean. Only they got me instead.”

“Unfortunate,” Al agrees.

“As fuck. For reference, use thermite. Like… a lot. And get mad, that helped fight the, y’know, artificially induced panic attack. Did Hawkeye tell you about these things already? Like what they do?”

“Eat souls?” Al offers.

“Yeah, apparently, so, y’know, don’t get close. Anyway. They don’t know if the terrorists sent those things after the kid or if the government did, but either way the government’s covering for it, so now the kid’s officially missing and I’m technically… well, technically I don’t exist? They don’t know it was me that killed the dementer things, they think it was the kid. But if the cops knew I was there I’d get real fuckin’ arrested. And tried for treason. And probably executed.”

“Oh, are we enemies of the state again?” Al says. “Exciting.”

“Yeah, it’s been nonstop reruns of our childhood greatest hits around here. Monsters, genocide, raising the dead - I’m waiting for someone’s dad to pop out of the woodwork and explain away his ditching as all part of his secret antiterrorist crusade.”

Al gives Ed the look he always gives when Ed starts talking about Hohenheim, which is disturbingly similar to the look Mom used to give them when they fucked up the kitchen trying to alchemize cake or propped boards against the side of the house to sled off the roof: like she’s disappointed but understands that they’re congenital lunatics and can’t help it. Ed gives Al his own look right back, because he understands Al’s got rainbows and tweety birds and an endless well of forgiveness in his heart, but what Ed’s got is mostly cyanide and spite.

Al sighs. “So we’re keeping our array work under wraps?”

“Yeah, like - if anybody asks, it’s to fix the kid’s soul problem, not cancel magic. Oh - here, have a translation rock.” Ed digs out his own and drops it into Al’s jacket pocket; he’ll get another one from Mustang later. ‘They’ve got a couple meter radius and they’ll translate to their Inglish or whatever even if you speak Xingese, so, y’know. Assume someone’s always listening. They don’t really translate names, though, and we’ve had some dumb glitches already. The kid with the soul
problems? Get this - his name’s Hairy Potter.”

“What, really?”

“Ya. At least his parents died before they could be held accountable for that one.”

“That’s mean, brother,” Al says, not sounding very much like he cares about it. “He’s an orphan?”

“Yep. Which puts him up the shitpipe, because the head of this vigilante op is ready to kill him off to get rid of the chunk of terrorist stuck in him. Which is also why we're trying to get rid of it.”

Al frowns, parsing through that, slowly rolling his cane where it’s laid across his knees. “Do you think it’ll come down to human transmutation?” he says after a moment, quiet but matter of fact. “From what you’ve seen so far.”

“Honestly, no clue,” Ed says. “But there’s no rune or anything, and I’m gonna go ahead and say whatever’s binding the other soul to him - if it’s a soul - then it’s bound with magic, not alchemy. And if it’s magic -”

“- then a magic-cancelling array should decouple the souls,” Al finishes, eyes widening slightly and then narrowing in satisfaction. “And nobody has to lose any limbs. Or organs.”

“Yes. It’s - ah shit,” Ed swears, his own satisfaction cutting off as he realizes. “If it’s qi the alchemic negation array won’t work, fuck.”

He smacks his fist on his thigh in frustration - and then a second, worse realization blossoms. Ed chews his lip and stares down at the road surface between his boots. He doesn’t look at Al. “The other one will, though. I bet. If we modify it.”

“You mean the -”

“Yeah.”

When Ed risks a glance up Al meets his eyes. They look at each other. The prospect of using a philosopher’s stone array, designed to drain and bind the life energy of human souls, even a modified one, is not exactly a super happy one. Feels pretty fuckin’ gross, actually. And they’re probably going to have to do it. Their options aren’t many, when it comes to the magic. They might not have a choice.

“Well,” Al says. “I guess that means we already have a base design.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah,” Ed says, something uncomfortably like relief easing in his lungs, then feels moved to add, “We’re not using it for anything bad.”

“Yeah…”

“We’ll rebuild the array from scratch. We adjust for qi, magic-whatever frequency only, and isolate the rest.”

“Yeah.”

“And if it really is qi and really does come from solar radiation, then it’s a constant energy source. The magic should self-replenish. Once the array shuts off I bet there’ll be no permanent effects, same as what happened with our alchemy.”

“We’d have to test it. Extensively. We still don’t know why the qi concentrates like that…”
“We’ll find out,” Ed says decisively.

“Yeah.”

They sit quiet for a moment, back to looking at their knees. “Do anything fun with Mei while I was gone?” Ed ventures after a bit.

“You were only gone two days,” Al says, Hawkeye-dry.

“And? I’ve had loads of fun these past two days.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, it’s been shit. What’d you and Mei do?”

“Same stuff we all did, mostly. Picnicked on the beach yesterday.”

“That’s fun,” Ed says. He hates sand in his automail and while he likes the waves he can’t go in deeper than his waist because of his leg; it’s good they waited until he was gone and wouldn’t ruin it for them with his crankiness. “Did she want to come with you? Here?”

“She went to talk to Ling,” Al says. “Pretty much as soon as Hawkeye passed on her message. The General wrote quite the letter.”

Ed snorts. “What’d he say?”

“That he was so overwhelmingly confident in his team’s ability to handle this possible-homunculus, definite-philosopher’s-stone-armed, self-resurrecting genocidal wizard that there was absolutely no need for Mei or Emperor Yao to worry. Or, say, post troops near the boundary crossing, at strengths of sixty to a hundred men at minimum, and be aware that undetectable possession is one of the weapons in the enemy’s arsenal. Things like that.”

“Ha! So you’re all up to speed, then?”

“Well, this is the first I’m hearing of a sentient house,” Al says.

Ed groans. “Bastard thinks it’s some kinda, I dunno, magic security system programmed to have a personality. It’s creepy as hell.”

Al eyes him for a long second. “What did you do?”


“Dunno. You’re looking kind of guilty around the edges.”

“I am not! What does that even mean? And I just woke it up, or whatever - I didn’t do anything to it!”

“Ah-huh,” Al says skeptically. “Woke it up how, exactly?”

“I was fixing things! That house was a total craphole, there was rot in the support beams and the foundation was like a hundred years old, and there’s still mold everywhere because bastard stopped me from finishing the job .”

“And why’d he do that?”
Ed huffs. “Because the transmutation accidentally set loose that pet chimera I told Hawkeye about, and it tried to chew on one of Hughes’ people.”

“You transmuted with people in the building,” Al concludes with another sigh. “Brother, I’ve told you, people don’t like it when you do that.”

“People are pansies. It was fine! Only now the damn house is smacking doors open for me and using us to get rid of its fuckin’ ‘pests’, and that means it’s watching us, and that is creepy as shit.” Ed scowls. “And I haven’t even installed showers or dealt with the mold yet. You shouldn’t go in there until I do.”

Al rolls his eyes skyward. “I’m not going to keel over and die like a hothouse orchid if I’m exposed to the slightest suboptimal conditions, brother.”

“Yeah, but what if you do?”

Al narrows his eyes at him. Then he narrows them even further. “What happened?”

“Nothing happened!”

“I know you’re not dumb enough to think you can bullshit me.”

“I’m not bullshitting!”

“- which begs the question of why you keep trying, especially when you know I can beat it out of you.”

“No you can’t!”

“- and while I am perfectly willing to chalk up many things to the mad little hamster that does all that foaming and scratching inside your brain.”

“HAMSTER?”

“- I really don’t appreciate it when you treat me like an invalid. Which you don’t do unless something happens. So. What happened?”

Al punctuates this by pointedly changing his grip on his cane, which is ninety-seven centimeters of galvanized steel and has been alchemized into a sword way the fuck more than once. Teacher originally gave it to Al when he was still having trouble walking for very long, and he does rely on it occasionally still, but Ed is under no illusions that these days its primary role in Al’s health is to be the hit nobody ever sees coming.

Not that he fucking needs it, because the little squirt is fucking psychic when he wants to be and uses that to hit his helpless victims like a fuckin’ freight truck and get away scot free without ever leaving a mark. “‘Pests that show you nightmares’,” Al quotes, case in fuckin’ point, not even waiting a full breath for Ed to defend himself before slicing in. And then his face goes from hunting wolverine to terrible empathy, which is garbage and routinely makes Ed want to alchemize himself into a hole deep enough to reach the core of the earth, so it’s a good thing it only lasts a second before it melts into familiar exasperation.

“Idiot,” Al tells him, jostling their knees together. “You think I don’t get it? Honestly, you can be so dumb.”

“Hey!”
“I’m here and I’m fine. I’m going to stay fine, because most mold isn’t inherently harmful unless an individual has a genetic sensitivity or is subjected to long-term exposure, and my lungs are perfectly healthy. Besides, you’re the one who always gets infections anyway, not me.”

“Hey!”

“Just accept that my immune system is better than yours,” Al tells him mercilessly. “And stop freaking out.”

“I’m not freaking out! I’m fine,” Ed stresses, offended to the very core of his soul. His immune system is badass. “Really. The mold’s gotta be taken care of anyway, you know that.”

“So we’ll do it together. Properly. What were you even going to do about it? You’re no good at detail work - were you just going to seal it up inside everything else? Oh my god you were.”

“I was going to do it properly!”

“Just for that Teacher would make you scrub it all out by hand.”

“Ugh. I wouldn’t even be able to reach it all. That shit’s clear in through the walls.”

“We’ll take a look when we go in.” The last of the afternoon sun slips below the horizon in that abrupt way Ed’s more used to experiencing in mountain country, though with the city all around them he supposes the shadow of the buildings brings on evening in a similar way. The two of them glance around and shiver in tandem; it really does get clammy quick around here when the sun isn’t right on you.

“Maybe we should go wait in that cafe,” Ed says. “I got no idea when whatshisface is gonna show up to let us in. Hey, maybe we can alchemize some of the local money! I saw some yesterday but didn’t get to hold it, so -”

“We are not stealing anybody’s money,” Al says severely.

“We wouldn’t steal it! It’d be borrowing! We’d give it right back!”

“Oh, you’re going to ask them first, are you? ‘Hello, I’m a foreigner here, can I please hold some of your money?’ Don’t worry, there’s nothing even slightly suspicious about this, I’m definitely not about to run away with it -”

“Well how do you want to do it, genius? The wizards use totally different money than the, whatever, non magic people, and telling them hey, I just need to hold your money for a second isn’t gonna be any less suspicious either -”

“Just knock over the tip jar,” Al says exasperatedly. “In the cafe. Then you help pick it all up, and take all the time you need to read the composition because you’re so very clumsy, all while apologizing, very sincerely.”

Ed stares at Al. “That’s genius,” he says. “If they have a tip jar, that is. They don’t tip in Xing.”

“Yeah, ’cause that’s called a bribe in Xing,” Al says, pushing himself to his feet and holding out his hand. “Come on, let’s go find out.”

“Ya, okay. Hang on, gotta leave a message for when they come looking for us - shit, the wizards don’t read Amestrisan.” Ed pulls himself to his feet and lets go of Al’s hand, glancing around for something to use. “Maybe a signpost? Like, if we draw a little coffee cup and an arrow, do you
think they’ll get it?"

There’s a crack behind Ed, and Al’s eyes flick over his shoulder. “Ah,” he says. “I don’t think that’ll be necessary.”

Chapter End Notes

everyone thinks that ed and al are Like That bc they grew up without parental influence but i like to think that absolutely nothing would’ve changed if trisha lived

ed & al: mom! we discovered like, SO much corruption and this evil government plot to kill us all! Also there’s undead monsters! We’re gonna go fight god! who is also dad’s weird clone twin so our uncle! Your brother in law technically!

trisha: gosh! I’ll have to ask him why THAT didn’t come up in the prenup… oh right, we never actually got married. Haha silly me! Anyway have fun! Make sure you eat a healthy lunch and look both ways before you cross the street! Fuck it up kiddos!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s Lemons, Mustache and Beardy, all standing there looking at them with their sticks in their hands. “Edward,” Beardy says, not quite surprised. “This is -” his eyes flick over Al, then Ed. “- your brother?”

“Yeah,” Ed says. “Dr. Elric, here to deal with all your weird soul problems. You letting him in or what?”

“Well in that case let me just say we’re very glad to have him,” Beardy says genteelly. “The order of the phoenix’s headquarters can be found at number twelve Grimmauld place.”

Al twitches strongly as, presumably, he sees the house do its roiling burst-outta-nowhere thing. Ed sees absolutely no change, which is decent evidence to the protective magic whatvers being some kind of perceptual filter keyed into a single person saying a specific passphrase; that’d be way easier and cheaper to do, energywise, than actually compressing the matter and mass of the building and folding it in between the others. “Right this way,” Beardy says, gesturing for them to head up the walkway like he didn’t just watch Al almost jump out of his skin.

Al just nods back all gracious and shit and goes, expression nothing but blank politeness, because if the wizards want to play the stone-cold no surprises game then by fuck Ed’s little brother is gonna win. Ed follows his lead, resisting the urge to stick his tongue out at Beardy and the other two over his shoulder.

They slow as they reach the stoop. Al glances down at it, then at Ed. “What were you doing on the roof?”

“Stuff,” Ed says, because he’s not gonna say napping like a hundred year old man in front of the wizards. “Oh, hey, that reminds me - gimme a sec.”

Scaling the front of the house is even easier than it was before - the window casings are definitely more pronounced now - and it takes less than a minute to jog over to the chimney, grab the pack and get back down again. The wizards are all staring way too intently at him again, but Al’s transmuted the stoop clean of Ed’s message and is dusting his hands off. “Ah,” he says in understanding at the pack over Ed’s shoulder. “Science.”

“Ya. C’mon, let’s get you set up - shit, the mold.”

Al closes an iron grip around Ed’s bicep and lifts the pack off him, squeezing hard when Ed tries to hang onto it. “It’s fine,” Al says, smiling in that way that means he kind of wants to suplex the stupid out of Ed and would probably try if they weren’t in company. “I’m sure it isn’t that bad.”

“But you -”

“Can handle it. We just had this conversation. Go inside.”

“After you,” Beardy says, back to his weird cheerful voice, but Al propels Ed forward with his grip before he can do more than curl his lip over his shoulder at the wizards.

Psycho’s in the hallway walking towards the door, though he stops when he sees them coming in.
“Whoa,” he says, squinting between Ed and Al. “Bloody hell. You twins too?”

Al laughs. “We haven’t gotten that one in a while,” he says, in a tone that makes Ed accidentally kick his ankle. “Because I’m so much taller now,” Al continues blithely, neatly stepping out of the way of Ed’s second much more targeted kick, “and my brother’s so much uglier.”

“I brought you into this world, I can take you out,” Ed threatens.

“You really couldn’t,” Al says unconcernedly. “I’m indestructible. Hello, I’m Alphonse - you are?”


“Serious,” Beardy says serenely. “Is Molly in?”

“Yeah, in the kitchen. She’s refamiliarizing since he moved everything around.” Psycho says, gesturing at Ed.

“Ah,” Beardy says. “I was wondering why the hall seems to have undergone some changes.”

Al turns a Look on Ed. “What have we told you about inflicting your taste on other people?”

“Aha! See, this time, not me, not even a little bit!” Ed brandishes a finger at the walls, then pokes up at the skylight in the roof of the light well that now makes up half of the front hall. “I changed absolutely no colors and all the creepass shit - the wallpaper, those freaky hooks, that fuckin’, leg thing, whatever that is - that was all there when I got here.”

Al gives him the skeptical eyebrows. “You expect me to believe black wallpaper isn’t you?”

“Oh, fuck you very much, I added nine windows and brought up the ceiling clearance by like six centimeters.” He’d actually been thinking of the fancy West Hub passenger train station in Central, the older one with the high vaulted ceiling and vast arched windows with huge repeating panes of glass; he couldn’t recreate the scale here, obviously, but it was a similarly grimy building that nonetheless managed to feel airy and full of light so he figured he should at least try for the same effect. “So any time you see daylight in this dump you should be going oh my god, thank you, dearest big brother, angel of construction, miracle of architectural design -”

The highly necessary recitation of Ed’s due is interrupted by Mustang and Hughes appearing at the top of the stairs, Hughes immediately bouncing down like an overexcited racedog that somehow got itself into full officer uniform. “Al!” he exclaims, zipping over and hugging Al one-armed like they didn’t see each other in Xing yesterday. “Welcome back to the circus!”

“Hello, Colonel,” Al laughs, hugging back. “I’d say I’m glad to be back, but circumstances being what they are, I just hope I’ll be able to help. Hello, General.”

“Alphonse,” Mustang says warmly, following Hughes down at a less manic pace, then turns a significantly faker smile on the wizards. “Gentlemen. Am I to assume we are once again waiting on Madam Bones?”

“She and Alastor will be here shortly,” Beardy says. “I see you saw fit to make certain adjustments to the house.”

“There was enough wood rot in this place that I was amazed I didn’t find termites,” Ed says flatly. “It wasn’t adjustments, it was a safety rescue mission.”
“Hawkeye wanted to see you upstairs, Fullmetal,” Mustang says, smiling at Beardy like a piranha that’s just spotted a bare leg. “Why don’t you get Alphonse settled in. We’ve made some progress with mapping incidents, Albus - would you have a moment to discuss methods of operation with us?”

That’s a get the hell out if Ed’s ever heard one, so he says “Uh huh, going,” and manages to snatch the equipment pack from Al and scamper out of reach up the stairs.

Al catches up at the top, though Ed’s ready this time and dodges the cane swipe that goes for his ankles. “Don’t call me doctor when I haven’t earned it,” Al hisses as they jostle down the hall and up the second flight of stairs, Ed doing his best to keep the pack over his own shoulder. “You know that cheapens it!”

“What? You practically are a doctor,” Ed grunts, absorbing the elbow jab to his side and launching himself up the last three stairs in one go to get away from the follow-strike. “You were with that traveling clinic for a whole year -”

“And I’ve got four more years of study, so quit making me look like a fraud just ‘cause you don’t know what titles even mean, Lieutenant Colonel -”

“How is it making you a fraud! Besides, these wizards don’t even have doctors -”

“Edward,” Hawkeye says.

Ed and Al reflexively scramble to attention, Ed wincing as he accidentally smacks himself on the ear trying to salute with the arm that’s still got the pack hanging off it. Hawkeye’s standing in one of the bedroom doorways, giving them a glacially patient look as they realize they are not in fact about to die and consequently slouch back out of form. “You can set up in here,” she tells them, gesturing through the doorway.

It turns out everybody else got rooms too, same as Ed did the first night, though apparently Hawkeye bunked downstairs with Ed when he’d passed out on his transmuted couch. “Fuck, sorry,” he tells her. “You shoulda woken me up for my watch.”

“The General warded the room alchemically,” Hawkeye says. “You would have woken if there had been any problem.”

“Still,” Ed mutters. “Sorry. It’s not fair to you.”

“You wouldn’t have woken me if I’d come from combat,” Hawkeye says calmly. “There was no need for you to take watch.”

“Combat? Wha - oh.” Right, the dementer things. That wasn’t so much combat so much as some kind of… episode, in Ed’s mind, though he’s gotta admit it qualifies. There was an attack; he defended, then counterattacked.

“We’ll be in the map room, though I believe the General is not in a hurry to see you,” Hawkeye says, which is the nice way of saying keep your ‘diplomacy skills’ out of the meeting until we call your ass in to fuck something up. “Get settled and continue whatever experiments you are able.”

That suits Ed fine. “Got it,” he tells her, Al bowing slightly, and she nods and strides out of the room.

“What’s the General covering for you now?” Al says, going over to where Hawkeye put his pack beside one of the beds.
"Nothing! He just doesn’t want me to mess up his asskissing session. Bastard decided we need to get the wizards to like us and for some reason he wanted me in on that, because it’s like he doesn’t learn or something.” Ed looks around for his own pack and finds it in the corner, jacket on top, so he sets the equipment pack down next to it.

“Sounds to me like he’s covering for something you did,” Al says, taking off his own jacket and folding it neatly into his pack, cane hung over his forearm. “Like transmute an entire house with people still inside it.”

“That ended up fine! And that reminds me.” Ed stands in the center of the room and sticks his hands on his hips, glaring up at the ceiling for lack of anywhere else to aim. “Hey. House,” he says sharply. “This is my little brother. You try any funny shit with him and I will \textit{atomize} you. You play nice, we play nice, y’unnerstand?”

When he turns back around Al’s wearing the \textit{I don’t want to use any unfounded and speculatory words like pigstuck crazy but I sure am thinking them} look. “You talk to the house?”

“I \textit{threaten} the house,” Ed corrects. “It’s different. If it wants to throw any more \textit{pests} at us it had better understand the consequences.”

“Right,” Al says. “Understand them. Because it can hear them. With its ears.”

“Hey! \textit{You} heard without ears just fine for a while there, remember? Besides, nothing about magic already makes any sense, why should this be any different.”

“Point,” Al concedes, even if he still looks way too amused around the eyebrows. “Could an entire house be animated by a bound soul, do you think? It seems like it would have too many disparate parts. Given I started losing integrity towards the end there I can’t imagine it would last very long either.”

“Well, given I didn’t get slingshotted right into the Gate when I transmuted this thing into a new tax bracket, I’m gonna have to say no,” Ed says sarcastically. “Also, gross. Who the fuck would bind a soul to an entire house?”

“If there hadn’t been a suit of armor in Dad’s study I would’ve been a book for six years,” Al says peaceably. “Or a jar. Or a floorboard.”

Ed tries not to twitch visibly. He’s had \textit{that} nightmare too. “Well, it was, so you weren’t. Suck it up.”

Al \textit{hmms} to himself, now also looking up and scanning the ceiling and corners. “I wonder if it has anything to do with the qi density,” he murmurs. “Everything’s so concentrated here, and fluctuates so rapidly. Is one behavior a function of the other…? And would a sufficiently concentrated mass be capable of developing something like a mind?”

“Your research topic, not mine,” Ed says decisively. “The mystic goddamn currents are all your area and I’m about goddamn ready to be done with soul shit, thanks.”

“Mm,” Al says, still watching the ceiling, though whatever he’s going to say next is interrupted by a creak of floorboard at the door.

They both look over. It’s all of the damn kids, \textit{again}, clustered up tight like they were gonna try to peek around the edges of the open doorway, and they’re missing their babysitter. Ed scowls. “Where’s Havoc?”
“In the map room,” Miss Redhead says, staring at Al as they shuffle more into the doorway. “It’s right down the hall, we told him we were going to see you, it’s fine. Who’s that?”

“I’m Alphonse,” Al says cheerfully, turning to clasp his hands over the head of his cane and give them a full Xing-style bow, all polite. “Hello everyone. Sorry my brother’s a huge bitch.”

“Hey!”

The kids all burst into startled giggles, even Hairy and Not A Twin cracking reluctant grins. Al smiles at them all, the goddamn traitor. “He’s going to say he hasn’t even done anything -”

“I haven’t even done anything!”

“- but he’s either wrong or just hasn’t gotten around to it yet.” Al’s gaze travels over the kids, smiling cheerfully, and stops on Hairy.

His expression doesn’t change, but Ed can see the second it fixes in place. Bingo. Al’s definitely sensing something there. “I haven’t done jack shit,” Ed says aloud. “Okay, not much. I haven’t done anything bad.”

“You always say that, too,” Al says.

“Because it’s always true.” The giggling is dying down, but all of the kids are still staring at Al like a pack of dachshunds transfixed by a single beef sausage.

Ed has, unfortunately, seen this look before, though usually it’s on the slavering hormone-riddled Central U undergrads that haunt the cafe Al likes to study at and occasionally make it as far as their apartment for ‘study group purposes’. Smartypants and Miss Redhead are the worst offenders, eyes big and rapt and entirely too hungry, though the speculative way the twins are eyeing him isn’t reassuring either.

“Knock it off,” Ed tells them flatly. “This ain’t a meat counter. None of you are old enough anyway.”

Not A Twin chokes; Smartypants makes a tiny little squeak. Al sighs and knocks his cane against Ed’s flesh calf. “And this is why I apologize for you straight off the bat.”

“You’re twenty, right? That’s not old,” Miss Redhead says, totally ignoring Ed.

“Relatively speaking,” Al says, amused.

“That’s way too old!” Not A Twin squawks.

“So? I can look,” Miss Redhead retorts.

“No you can’t,” Ed and Not A Twin stress at the same time, then glare at each other.

Al coughs, a grin tucked into the corner of his cheek. He’s always way too tolerant of the slavering wretches, too, because ‘they’re not that bad, brother’ and ‘you’re reading too much into things’ and ‘maybe you should go out some yourself’. And he says Ed has no sense of self-preservation. “What’s your name?”

“I’m gin ee,” Miss Redhead says instantly.

“He has a girlfriend,” Ed says, because it’s clearly time to bring out the big guns. “She’s beautiful, she’s rich and she could break you with one hand. You know what, I think we should invite her
Ed’s cut off by Al grabbing his braid and firmly covering his mouth with one hand. “I could always start talking about your love life,” Al tells him pointedly, which keeps Ed shut right up when Al lets go. “I really am sorry about him. He got dropped on the head a lot as a baby and then went and made a career out of it too. Your names are…?”

They all fall over themselves to give roll call while Ed glowers and Al ignores him. “You in the army too?” one of the twins asks once the names have stopped sleeting past, eyeing Al up like he thinks the sweatervest might be some kind of special uniform.

“Oh, no. Though I do consult occasionally.”

“He’s a medical researcher and he’s a specialist in exactly your kinda weird shit,” Ed says shortly. “He’s in training to be a doctor.”

Al sighs at him in a way that makes Miss Redhead giggle again. Ed scowls deeper as Al turns his smile back on Hairy. “I’m currently a clinician at the Imperial House of Purification Arts - oh, sorry, that doesn’t really mean anything to you, does it? It’s a hospital in the Xingese capital. We see a fair amount of unusual cases due to it having the most centralized research wing, so when we have a moment I’d like to take a look if you - oh my goodness a kitty!”

An enormous yellow cat is pushing itself through the forest of teen legs in the doorway, squash-faced and raggedy-eared and deeply smug looking. Naturally it goes straight to Al, who immediately drops his cane to crouch and stick his fingers under its nose. “Oh, you’re a big kitty, yes you are,” he warbles, which of course makes the thing rear up and plant its paws on Al’s knee. “Oh, hello! So friendly!”

“That’s crook shanks,” Smartypants says, far too approving for Ed’s taste. “He’s my cat. You can pick him up if you like.”

“Oh, can I? Ooh, you’re a hefty boy!” Al descends into cooing madness as he hauls the purring chunk into his arms, standing with some difficulty. “What a big sweetheart!”

“A doctor, huh,” a twin says.

“Yeah a doctor. He’s damn good at it.” Ed can see how one might not be awed by these reports of great medical prowess, especially not with Al burying his face in the cat’s stomach and saying “Who is just the most handsome boy! Who is the most regal, handsome boy!” in a high-pitched baby voice, but he still takes offense. “The important thing for you is he’s exactly the specialist we’re looking for.”

“And what a nice coincidence that is,” Not A Twin says in a sour voice, back to watching Ed suspiciously. “That your brother just happens to be exactly the right guy. Though maybe that’s not so strange to you, with your country running on nepotism.”

“I’m not the only one with the relevant experience,” Al says calmly, surfacing from the cat lolling in his arms. “I’m just the one that happened to be geographically closest and immediately available. And with the right clearance, I suppose. Who’s a darling handsome boy? You are!”

Ed snorts. The combination of ‘medically trained qi sensing alchemist with a human transmutation background and combat experience’ is definitely not a skillset that’s just found lying on any corner, but if Al wants to downplay himself in front of the kiddies that’s his prerogative. Al’s unflappability and kissy noises seem to be throwing Not A Twin for a loop, too, even if it’s making
Smartypants look disturbing intense again. “Your relevant experience is with possession?” she says.

Al stifles a choking noise into the cat. “You could say that,” he says, sounding remarkably non-strangled. “Possession is… definitely something I have experience with. Among other things.”

Smartypants opens her mouth again, but there’s footsteps down the hall and a second later Havoc shows up. “Oh, hey, Al,” he says, waving at Al and nodding at Ed. “The chief wants you guys.”

Chapter End Notes

ed: and this is my little brother he’s basically a doctor there are no doctors better than him in fact he invented medicine actually

al: EDWARD.

ed: what? the only people our mom can brag to are in the afterlife and that’s not nearly enough market share. someone’s gotta pick up the slack
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Roy folds his arms over his chest and looks at the map.

When Olivier came to him with the letter, he knew she knew what he was going to do, because he’d finally managed to drag enough of Foreign Affairs into alignment to be able to if not dictate strategy then at least order tactics. However Olivier may care about a childhood fling, she would not have brought it to Roy unless she expected - wanted - a certain outcome. Olivier might be a bloodthirsty bitch with a stone cold frozen heart but no more so than Roy is, really, and on the plane of Amestris’ internal power struggles they tend to if not wholly agree then at least not actively try to knife each other.

So she needed an alchemist, and she wanted Amestris strong. Building themselves up as a nation means allies, resources, reach, opening the country to new ideas and weakening the hold of the reactionaries who preferred the insular jingoism of the constant war days. That means when an opportunity to assess a potential ally on the other side of Xing - one with a largely unknown species of alchemy, no less - lands in their laps, they take it.

Roy had not anticipated… this. He’d fully expected to be able to dispatch the actual terrorist problem to Fullmetal while he focused on getting the lay of the land and opening relations with the wizarding nation: it’s why he brought Riza and Maes, who have their own offices to manage and their own teams back home, instead of a squad from Special Operations with a couple of up and comers from the sharpshooting pool or a pack of diplomatic attaches from Foreign Affairs. He needed people he could trust to be effective and discreet and understand that what they find on the other side of Xing might be things that should not make their way back to Amestris. At least not yet.

And they’ve certainly found some of that. Roy’s hands throb in that particularly annoying way they do nowadays when it’s damp or he’s having a particularly good wander down Shit Memory Lane. This miserable little island is serving him both at once, so of course all the sad little bones in his palms are making the most of it. He doesn’t uncross his arms to rub at the scarring; both the convict and the ex-terrorist are in the room and Albus is examining the map next to him, as Roy had asked him to look over what they’d managed to glean in the interests of fact-checking the convict’s work.

Roy’s doing his own cross-examining. Simple logistics are working against them: their physical dependency is significant with wizards using teleportation as a primary means of transportation, and that may not even be something they can address. Roy can’t burn any bridges because it’s thousands of kilometers just to get back to the boundary crossing to get them home, and the distances involved even within this island are, according to Black, anything from a day to three days’ ride by car or train. Not undoable, but leaving them at a heavy disadvantage if moving independently from the wizards.

So they’re making nice. It’s requiring some more or less constant downshifting. Roy came prepared to be open, friendly, and dealing with a national director of law enforcement: someone intimately involved with the laws, attitude and conduct of the nation, by no means in a minor position but not one equivalent to head of state - in other words, someone like him. Instead he finds a tiny culture and a tinier government secreted away from the majority of the population: a truly segregated society, as if all the alchemists in Amestris had suddenly decided to secede themselves
from the rest of the world and set up their own secret cult. He has so far met Amelia Bones once, and while she does seem on the more competent side as far as wizards go she felt a lot more like the harried municipal police chiefs Roy dealt with as a colonel back in East than a national director of anything.

That’s probably the size of the wizarding population at fault, though the fact that a prophecy is guiding the actions of not only the terrorists but the head of law enforcement - who herself defers to the headmaster of what Roy has been able to determine is a prestigious boarding school - is a bit much.

This whole situation is both bigger and so much smaller than he expected to find. They are woefully underequipped to take on a problem of the magnitude that Father was, but so far things don’t seem to be operating on that scale. If all similarities to the homunculi are set aside, from what Roy’s understood so far the terrorism has been just that, a small band of individuals striking out at mostly civilian targets. These wizards are calling it a war. Well, alright: a small group of people can certainly do a lot of damage in the right circumstances, and this society is small as well. Albus Whose Last Name Roy Will Never Try To Pronounce is no general and this passel of teachers and family members are no soldiers, but this group in this house is the war effort in its entirety. The utter lack of institutional backing does make them vulnerable to, say, Roy taking the fuck over, but the maneuverability this grants him does not outweigh the lack of resources.

At least Albus seems to understand this. Roy recognizes the occasionally distant look of a man trying to do too much because there’s just no one else who can do the dozens of exhausting little things that need to be done, specifically by you, you only, right now. He also recognizes the look of someone having noticed that there’s a lot more teeth than tongue behind Roy’s smile, though to be fair Roy’s been inexcusably sloppy in hiding both his advantages and his disdain.

It’s unlikely to have shaken out any differently, however, circumstances being what they are. Edward, just as paranoid as Roy if not quite in the same ways, was not wrong when he identified Albus as being not very invested in the Potter child’s survival. There had been a grim, quiet edge of desperation under the surface when Albus spoke of the… whore cruxes, which Roy read as genuine distress at the situation: if Albus had been trying to project remorse to the group he would’ve been more open about it. But no actual effort to protect the child has been put forth, and Albus has clearly resolved himself to the boy’s death, even if not totally reconciled himself with it. And everyone else in this dear little cadre of justice warriors is either all on board or blissfully ignorant of this resolution.

Roy finds this to be some very woolly thinking. If the situation is as dire as Albus makes it out to be and his mind so made up, killing the child eliminates a potential spy as well as one of these all-important soul fragments. Maybe Albus doesn’t think he can get away with it among this group if he does act openly, or isn’t confident in his ability to enact a cover-up, but either way merely placing the boy in dangerous situations, withholding support and hoping for the best is inefficient on top of being just plain cowardly.

That plus the widespread cavalier attitude towards telepathic creatures who can apparently enter houses at will and shapeshift and-or induce hallucinations - not to mention outright slavery - is not painting Roy a sparkling picture of the culture they’ve been dropped into. He suspects his future is going to involve a lot of very angry Edward once this terrorist problem is resolved, and Roy has half a mind to just slip his lead and tell Fullmetal to come back when the slavery’s over.

This terrorist problem. Don’t give your enemy any credit they haven’t earned. Don’t underestimate and don’t assume, either, and in this situation he’s going to err on the side of not getting any of his people killed. Roy is not given to cutting others any slack by nature, but he is not in a position to
indulge anything but the preferences of their hosts. He focuses on the recognition of Albus, the understanding of his position, reaches deep until it becomes something like sympathy, until he can stand in the center of the feeling and turn a look on Albus that is, for all intents and purposes, genuine.

“Would you have anything to add to our data?” It takes effort, but the best way to lie is not to lie at all. “This has been from serious’s recollections and what we’ve managed to determine so far from the state newspaper, but if you see anything you think is missing, please don’t hesitate to write it in.”

Albus nods slowly, then draws his wand, still looking at the map. “If I may,” he says, and at Roy’s gesture he waves the wand in a slow arc across the wall, a distant look of concentration on his face.

And that’s another thing, Roy thinks critically, watching colored dots ripple in dozens across the map, golden script blooming next to each with what is presumably details about the incidents in question. All this with a simple, silent gesture of a wooden stick. It reminds him far too much of Edward’s more complex transmutations: like alchemy is not a carefully measured tool with an exhaustively rigid set of rules but a wish-granting well that he dips into at will and flicks around to get exactly what he wants. His remodeling of this house, case in point. And Roy knows better than anyone that alchemy doesn’t just give Edward anything, and he can pick apart what’s actually happening, understands intellectually that Edward is merely using different arrays consecutively and it’s only the speed with which he channels the energy that makes it seem simultaneous. But the eyes see wood and metal and stone moving in tandem, an entire building writhing into a new form, and the brain can’t shake the awe of seeing something that is, well. Magic.

And Roy may have range and pure destructive capability, but from what he’s seen magic is dangerous for the same reason Edward is dangerous: versatility.

“Translation charms have never been my specialty, I’m afraid, but touching a point will cause its text to be spoken aloud, which will then be comprehensible to you,” Albus says, folding his hands into his sleeves across his chest, his wand disappearing within. “These are all the incidents to my recollection, during the last war. Any event since the try wizard tournament is marked in red - like so.”

“Most of the deaths we learned of from Black were individuals or pairs being picked off,” Maes observes as he steps up beside Roy, eyes scanning the map. “Most of them grouped by family, killed in or near their homes. Would you say that’s the majority of these as well?”

“Of the deaths, I’m afraid yes,” Albus says soberly. “Voldemort made it clear he would personally target any who dared to oppose his actions.”

“And if you were muggle born, they went after you,” Black says from across the room, with some bitterness. He shrugs when they glance at him. “If you sympathized in any way with muggle borns, you were labeled a blood traitor and they came after you too. Molly’s pureblood, but that didn’t stop death eaters from killing her brothers.”

That’s not exactly textbook takeover tactics, though once again, in a society this small Roy has to adjust his parameters. Simply murdering whoever speaks out against you, regardless of their position, would certainly cow most who heard of it into obeying any demands you might make. “How complete is their control over the state now?” he says. “On estimate. Since Amelia is one of yours, I assume that at least some of the law enforcement forces are clean. Given the deployment of war weapons and the subsequent summons to trial, I’m further assuming enough of the national security and judicial organs are compromised to qualify them as enemy tools. What other avenues
does the enemy have for attacking you through the state?”

The door opens; Riza slips in and closes it behind her, taking up position on the other side of the doorway. Roy nods to her, and everyone’s attention shifts back to him; he raises his eyebrows at Albus.

“We are not certain yet that the ministry is so compromised,” Albus says. “It may well be that factions opposed to me are taking advantage of the dementer attack to discredit Hairy and press their own advancement. No one wishes for Voldemort to have returned, you see. Without proof they would prefer to live in a world where the war is over, and I cannot say I fully blame them.”

“We don’t have access to motives,” Roy says, trying not to sound like an exhausted teacher trying to explain addition to a very dull student for the nth time. “We only see what has been done. If they are acting compromised, it is safest to assume that they are unless proven otherwise.”

Albus inclines his head but is clearly not convinced, and the rest of the wizards are taking their cues from him. Roy holds in a sigh. They may as well move on directly to actionable objectives; useful intel seems to crop up most in the nitty-gritty with these people anyway, such as the charming little revelation of the tongue-binding tattoo.

“So far, the enemy has struck through your government rather than risk any of their own number personally,” he says, uncrossing his arms. “Though given the apparent overwhelming preference for individual assassination, as evidenced by the last war,” he gestures at the map, “we can likely expect that next. As I doubt any of us are interested in sitting around waiting for an attack, we can begin by taking one of their known generals off the board. Luscious Malfoy, wasn’t it?”

“You’ve found a way to dispel the binding of the mark?” the ex-terrorist says, in a tone that indicates he highly fucking doubts it.

“There are ways around that sort of thing,” Maes says unconcernedly. “We can test them on you later. Our primary goal here isn’t to get information anyway. You said this Malfoy is well-connected, powerful, rich? Sounds like a critical resource for your lord Voldemort. Let’s remove it.”

“Yeah. Yeah, you know what - why shouldn’t we?” Black says, pushing off from the wall he’s leaning against. “Grab him, question him, whatever ways you’ve got, obliviate him after. Even if he’s got his cronies with him, hell, I bet we could take them if we all had a go.”

“Serious,” Albus says.

“What? They sent dementers after hairy. I don’t know about you but I’m done playing nice.”

“If Lucius disappears even for a day there will be an uproar,” Albus says. “Inquiries will be opened immediately, and that’s only if he is engaged quietly enough not to trip any alarms.”

“What do we care?” Maes says bluntly. “No, really, serious question. What reason do we have to care? If we make it look like he faked his own death that’ll throw everybody off - the death eaties will think he deserted and everybody else will assume they turned on their own.”

“Is faking someone’s death your solution to everything?” the ex-terrorist drawls.

“Worked for me,” Maes says brightly. Roy holds back both a snort and a grimace; they’d faked his death all right, but only because he’d nearly actually died. It had been far too close. Maes still can’t turn his torso all the way to the left anymore and was only let back on solids last year, even if he’d been up on his feet two months after the coma.
“If we do it right, nothing will point back to you,” Maes continues. “Because it sounds like you lot don’t make a habit of assassination.”

“We do not,” Albus says. “Because Voldemort made it clear that any action against him will be met with tenfold retribution - against loved ones, against children. Striking at Lucius will almost certainly goad him into a display of force. It will not be against us: he will choose some muggle school, some innocent family, someone we have no way to identify and protect, and make an example of them.”

“Hence making it look like he faked his death,” Maes says patiently. He’s a lot better at not sounding like he thinks wizards are morons; must come from having kids and having to explain one thousand times that no, sweetie, you can’t eat icecream that fell and melted in the sandbox. “And if we pry enough information out of him fast enough, we can make it look like he sold some death eater secrets before he fled.”

“You can leave the abduction to us,” Roy says, as reassuring as his voice gets. “Be seen in public during the operation, even, to allay suspicion. We will likely need the assistance of at least two individuals who can apparate, but my understanding is that any one of the order can do so. If you take care of transport, we can handle the rest.”

“You will need me for the verity serum,” the ex-terrorist says. “And Albus to meet, to be able to take Malfoy into Grimmauld place. He won’t be able to enter in any way unless told the secret by the secret-keeper.”

“I wanted to ask about that, actually,” Maes says, pushing up his glasses. “What kind of traces are on you? And what happens when you enter this house? Do you just blink off the radar? Because if enough of you start disappearing when you go to the same place over and over someone’s gonna add up these not very complicated numbers and get home base. They don’t need to be able to see this house to camp outside of it and wait for someone to come out.”

“Sever us, Alastor and I are personally warded against such tracking, and have been since the last war,” Albus says. “None of the others are considered of sufficient interest to warrant active surveillance. We have largely been apparating from within the house, save for when someone needs to be given the secret.”

“Could someone be tracking you through the ministry’s resources?” Maes presses. “Without official knowledge or approval?”

Albus and the ex-terrorist exchange glances. “Personal relationships... may be prevailed upon, to supply certain information,” Albus says carefully. “But the ministry is also not watchful for Imperius or poly juice now, not as they were during the last war. It is not out of the question for infiltrators to be sent out, and to be successful.”

“Imperius,” Maes repeats. “Poly juice. What, exactly…”

“Imperius is a curse,” Black speaks up again. “One of the unforgivables. It makes you do as you’re told, though it’s possible to fight it, if you’re a strong enough wizard. Poly juice is a potion - you need a bit of the person you’re turning into, a hair or nail clipping or something, but once you drink it you’ll turn into them for an hour.”

Roy and Maes stare at him, faces reflexively blanked in horror. More fucking shapeshifting. No wonder Black and the children hadn’t been alarmed by the creature that morphed into nightmares: it’s common here, and clearly weaponized. “What protocols are in place to counter that?” Roy says, voice coming out more clipped than he’d like.
There’s no detection charm for the Imperius, though if someone’s acting kind of weird - dazed, repeat themselves, repeating actions - that’s usually a pretty good sign,” Black says.

"Polyjuice can be reversed with a dispelling charm,” the ex-terrorist says. “During the last war anyone to enter the ministry was subject to it. It reverses itself after an hour as well, on the dot.”

“And among you?” Roy says. “What is in place to ascertain you are not dealing with imposters?” Maes hadn’t woken in time to warn them of Envy and what it could do, but afterward Roy had been sufficiently paranoid to add identification signs and countersigns to his team’s codenames. They would have to do the same for Jones and Arget here as well. He’d had a moment after they’d cleared the house where he felt he’d lost his temper against that… bog art, and regretted it; now he finds he mostly regrets not burning a little hotter.

“A death eater impersonated Moody last year,” the ex-terrorist says laconically. “Since then we have made a habit of checking for poly juice whenever we meet outside Grimmauld place. Someone under Imperius would be able to enter, but not reveal the location or grant access to it. Complex cognition and any tasks requiring more independent thought than walking tend to be impossible under Imperius, which makes it fairly recognizable to those looking for it.”

Isn’t that just wonderful. “Do you foresee anything specific that would preclude us from taking Malfoy?” Roy says directly. “Anything like, say, his magically binding tattoo.”

“Lucius is an ambitious target,” Albus says slowly. “Amelia and Alastor would know better than we what specific wards he may have on his person; they have watched him quite closely even if they could not move openly for his arrest. I can say this: he would have to be taken very quietly. Any obfuscation around his disappearance would have to be absolute. Voldemort thinks nothing of massacring muggles just to make a point. As for what he would do in retribution for such a strike against him…”

“All the more reason for us to act before he further consolidates his resources,” Roy says. “We of course welcome any input you have in regards to laying a convincingly false trail, as well as any other aspect of concern about the operation.”

“Allowing Malfoy in on the Fidelius would compromise this location,” the ex-terrorist says. “Even if you obliviate him, the charm would see him as having access.”

So the ex-terrorist, at least, assumes that they’ll be turning Malfoy loose when they’re done with him. “Obliviate?” Maes asks, before Roy can address that.

“A memory charm. It suppresses memories targeted by the caster.”

Roy has to stare again. “Ah,” Maes says after a second. “Of course. Another one of your unforgivables, huh.”

“No,” the ex-terrorist says, a trace of amusement back in his voice. Edward hadn’t been wrong when he’d identified this one as enjoying himself at these little talks, either. “It is commonly used on muggles who see something they shouldn’t.”

So that’s how they maintain their untenable cult society. First slavery, now this. Amestris may be the bloodiest war dog on their side of the Divide but at least they haven’t had slavery since Xerxes disappeared, and no madman has managed to create an array for mind control yet. It is increasingly likely that Roy’s official report to Emperor Ling is going to strongly encourage setting up some very strict border controls at the boundary and tracking down and interrogating every merchant who’s crossed over the Divide. Who the hell knows what they might have brought over without
telling anyone, or what they’ve done. If it’s possible to learn this magic, all it would take is one scruple-free bastard to wreak havoc through a society entirely unprepared for such a threat.

Riza’s stone-faced by the door; her eyes are behind Roy, on Jones and Arget. Those two are now in this deeper than even Roy expected. They’re here because Maes trusts them, but now Roy has to trust them as well. He’s going to have to set some guarantees in motion.

“Well then. Can you set up the same protective measures on another location?” Maes says to the wizards, only a slight edge to his smile indicating that he’s focusing on the practicals so as not to shout. “This is a bit more residential than we like our ops centers.”

“Yes. It will take time to cast the Fidelius,” the ex-terrorist says. “You wanted to use Potter as bait, to follow a death eater to their current base. You may as well do that while we determine how best to take Malfoy out under the dark lord’s nose.”

“Well, hold up,” Black says, taking a few steps forward, his tone much sharper than before. “Use hairy as bait?”

“It is only an option,” Albus placates - effectively, Roy notes: Black doesn’t exactly settle, but he’s definitely backing down. “We may only need to use his wand, for its trace.” That’s also not the tune he was singing in the meetings Black was not privy to: either he doesn’t want to deal with whatever fuss Black may cause right now or he intends to keep the child’s involvement to himself until it’s too late to protest. “We are still determining what is viable. We have yet to show you the hog’s head, Roy - I apologize for not getting to it today, but we were caught up at the ministry longer than we anticipated. I assume you would prefer not to see the surrounding landscape in the dark? Then let us go first thing tomorrow.”

“There a building close by we can put those wards on?” Maes says, glancing at Roy. “We’re terraforming, right?”

“Most likely,” Roy says; if the proposed ambush site turns out to be a relatively acceptable spot he can have Edward further optimize it with his earthworks. “If there’s no suitable structure nearby we can make one.”

“Ah, yes,” Albus says, glancing around the corners of the ceiling. “It’s good to have proof young Edward’s transfigurations won’t affect any wards we may place on a building.”

Roy lets that one slide - for now. “Indeed. It’s good to know alchemy and magic are not disruptive to each other,” he says, meaning it. “Though of course we’d need to see more before we can fully commit to any tactics - as you said, our execution must be impeccable. Especially with the revelations of these control and memory spells.”

“Of course. You asked for a demonstration of the death eaters’ favored spells,” Albus says. “Alastor has volunteered to conduct such a demonstration and Amelia agreed to oversee it. We will be able to do it here, I think, if the back yard still has a functional extendable hedge charm.”

“Probably,” Black says, grimacing.

There’s a knock on the door, and a moment later Havoc sticks his head in. “Do we need more translation, chief? Only Ms. Molly says she wants the kids for cleaning.”

There are curious teenage faces trying to see around Havoc’s bulk. “I think we’re set for now,” Roy says. He feels very much done here; he’s yet to brief Havoc on the full extent of the situation, and better to have the rest of them read in on security measures against shapeshifters now as well as
talk to Edward before tossing him into the arena. “Go get the Elrics. We’ll catch Alphonse up to speed.” He inclines his head to Albus. “If you’ll excuse us. Let us know when Madam Bones arrives and we can begin.”

Chapter End Notes

me, 20 words away from finishing this scene: wait where’s lupin

me: ….. IN THE BATHROOM I GUESS

also i genuinely don’t mean to rag on hp canon that much but i keep on picking pov characters who are huge fucking bitchholes. go figure
Mustang exits the map room before Ed and Al can enter, paying no attention to the milling kids or Beardy and the other wizards behind him - though Beardy nods and takes off pretty much immediately, Lemons behind him. “There you are,” Mustang says to Ed. “Are these rooms combinable?” He gestures between the three doors on their side: bedrooms, all of them, and presumably where everybody’s bunking down.

“Yeah,” Ed says. There’s only two load-bearing posts up here on this side of the house and he can work around them, easy. “You want one big room?”

“Yeah,” Ed says. There’s only two load-bearing posts up here on this side of the house and he can work around them, easy. “You want one big room?”

“Yes. Furniture should be fine as is.”

Ed squints at him. “Why?”

Mustang sighs. “Given the nature of our situation, the prudent option would be to separate ourselves as little as possible.”

“Paranoid,” Ed says approvingly.

“Apparently the elf also enters people’s rooms at night and goes through their things,” Hughes says brightly, popping out of the door behind Mustang. “And who knows what else might be around, given teleportation and pests with telepathy. Are you doing the transmutation now? Okay, everybody out!”

“Creature isn’t that bad,” Smartypants protests, but goes with the rest when Hughes makes vigorous shooing motions and sends them off down the stairs, Psycho with them. Havoc makes to go too, but Mustang motions for him not to bother; Ed’s gonna hope the lecture about staying together in one suspicious little clique stuck in at least one of those teenage brains.

Just like Mustang’s encouraging their own sticking together by making themselves a new clubhouse. “Okay, let’s do it,” Ed says, raising his hands. Mustang looks like he’s gonna say something, but Ed’s already pressing his palms together and Mustang doesn’t open his mouth so it can’t be that important. Ed sticks his elbow against the wall and channels the transmutation into the house that way to keep the energy circling - it’s only three arrays this time, because removing the dividing walls is mostly a matter of adding the excess plaster to the other walls and shunting the wood beams into the spaces under the floor. There’s no pipes up here in this section - bathroom’s on the other side of the stairs - so everything grinds into place in under a minute.

He keeps the three doors, because multiple exits is always handy and it’s easier to seal off a doorway than create a new one with a functioning hinged door. Al opens one as the crackling energy dies down, poking his head in and nodding. “Hang on, I’m gonna make showers.” Ed says distractedly, trying to decide whether to pull pipes or make more space in the existing third floor bathroom first - if he extends one of those walls all the way back, they can have it open directly into the new big room they won’t have to schlep through the hall while wet or whatever.

“Ground floor,” Al says, catching his elbow and pushing it away from the wall before he can activate a fresh array. “That way you can pull what you need from the dirt. You’re not going to find enough carbides up here.”
“Actually,” Mustang says, “Alphonse, I hate to impose, but could you take care of it? I need to speak with your brother.”

“What now?” Ed complains, but Al just says “Of course, General,” and Mustang just heads for where the hall turns a corner, which gives Ed no choice but to follow.

-o-

Al looks at Sergeant Jones and Corporal Arget. Then he looks at Ed, stomping after the General. He looks back at the Corporal and Sergeant. Then he looks over at Hughes. “How much do you owe me?”

Hughes sighs, digs out his wallet and hands over some bills; Hawkeye sighs and looks away pointedly, but by now Al knows what it looks like when she’s hiding a smile. He counts, then quirks an eyebrow. “Two and a half?”

“One direct, one clear interest but no follow through,” Hughes says. “And about half of those kids are salivating, which I figure stacks out to about one with the way they’ve been following him.”

“I see,” Al allows. The math is a little fuzzy, but as it’s money in his favor, if Hughes has decided it counts then why not let it count.

“You… bet on your brother,” Sergeant Jones says slowly, like he’s seeing a fundamental realization dawn.

“Not quite,” Al says, pocketing the cash. “You could say I’m running an experiment.”


Corporal Arget makes a tiny wheezy noise as the realization seems to hit her too. Hughes grins at her. “You know, you aren’t anywhere near his chain of command. The fraternization regs don’t apply to you either.”

The Corporal now looks like it’s even odds whether she’ll bury herself in a hole in the ground dug with nothing but her fingernails or faint. While she’s doubtlessly a very capable person, that doesn’t bode well for her chances of dealing successfully with Ed. He gets confused when people don’t bite back, and then he gets upset when it turns out he’s been inadvertently bullying someone instead of just having a conversation.

Nonetheless. “Looking to lose some more money, Colonel?” Al asks, smiling at Hughes.

“Oh, you know me! Anything for my dear comrades’ happiness,” Hughes chirps. “Told your brother any more horror stories from the venereal clinic lately?”

Touché. “I’ve actually been on the cardiac rotation for the last few months,” Al says. “It’s been very educational. Astonishing, really, the kind of effects stress can have on the heart.”

“Exactly,” Hughes says, giving Al a cheesy, overdone and entirely genuine wink. “The heart’s just as important as the brain, you know - keeps you going!”

“Oh, I completely agree,” Al says. He does. Ed may be an idiot in this arena, but even idiots deserve help. “Speaking of things that keep us going, I’d better see about those showers… Stand back, please.”

-o-
“Hate to impose, my ass,” Ed mutters, thumping after Mustang. “What?”

Mustang leans one shoulder against the wall, arms folded but in the casual way, not the Life Is Testing Me Via You Specifically, Fullmetal way. “You have a demonstration match tonight where we know very little about the opponents save that they have an advantage in both maneuverability and range. As the goal is to determine capability, it will likely be a matter of endurance to draw the most information out.” His eyes tick briefly down Ed’s body, assessing. “I know you’ve done more on less, but there’s no harm in conserving your energy.”

Ed is stuck staring in total gearshift for a second, because he was expecting another reamout on who the fuck knows what, but Mustang’s - checking resources, right. “Fuck off, I’m fine,” Ed says automatically. Then, grudgingly, to Mustang’s increasingly skeptical look, “I took a nap.”

Mustang’s eyebrows curve upwards. **Wow,** his whole face, stance, and silent air of judgment screams. “Shut up,” Ed tells him preemptively, jabbing a finger at the stupid brigadier bling pinned across his chest. “Isn’t that what you just said you wanted? Here I am, reporting for goddamn duty, fresh as an alchemically gifted daisy.”

“I’m not sure we could go that far,” Mustang says, giving him a more explicit once-over and making it clear the results are less than impressive.

Ed scowls back. “I don’t look *that* bad.”

Mustang extends a hand and uses one finger to draw aside some of the loose hair around Ed’s jaw. “You have brick-print impressions all down the side of your face here.”

“What!” Ed slaps a hand to his cheek and scrubs furiously. “Ugh, fuck, the chimney.”

“I suppose that answers the question of where you took your nap,” Mustang sighs, folding his arm back over his chest. “And that I should be grateful you weren’t just passed out on the sidewalk.”

“And Al didn’t even *say* anything, the little traitor,” Ed complains, still trying to rub the skin dents away. “We were talking for like half an hour!”

“It’s not too visible with your bangs down like that,” Mustang says. “It’s possible he didn’t notice.”

Ed glares at him through his hair, scrubbing at the sides of his head to pull more loose from the braid and add more cover to his bangs. “As fuckin’ if. Al sees *everything.*”

“In that case I assume he thought it could only improve your image.” Mustang watches Ed for a moment. “There are advantages to having me conduct the demonstration instead.”

Ed scowls harder as he takes a last swipe at his cheek, blowing some staticky strands out of his eyes. “I already screwed whatever low profile I might’ve had when I crunched those dementer things. Only one who saw what you can do so far is Psycho. I don’t trust these fuckers. Better nobody sees your pansy ass coming.”

“Very well.” Mustang sighs. “And now you look like a scarecrow. Just redo the braid.”

“I’ll redo your face,” Ed says automatically. “I ain’t here to win no beauty pageant.”

“You forget that I’ve seen what you do to your hair,” Mustang says, pushing off from the wall and heading back towards everybody else. “Alchemically assisted blowdrying is impressive, I’ll admit, but also something I expect more from Armstrong than from you.”
“It’s efficient!”

“Mhm. Undeniably.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Why, nothing. Isn’t that what you usually assume it means when I open my mouth and noises come out?”

“Well someone’s cranky,” Ed grumbles. “Relax. I’m good to kick ass. I’m not gonna fuckin’ embarrass your Lord High Generalship at the demo.”

“I couldn’t care less,” Mustang says, an edge of coldness surfacing in his voice. It’s not at Ed - he knows better now, Mustang doesn’t talk like that to his people - but it does tell him there’s storm clouds a-brewin’ on Planet Bastard. “Let them think us weaker than we are. We need every advantage we can get our hands on.”

That sobers Ed all the way up. “I’m about to brief all of you,” Mustang says, probably sensing that Ed’s going to demand what the fuck he just found out now.

“You’d better,” Ed says, seriously not looking forward to finding out what’s got Mustang checking in on him like a worried auntie when usually he figures Ed’s the one doing the math on whether he can handle something or not. Shit, did he and Hughes find out there is a national array? They’re not hauling ass in full evac, so maybe not, but it’s definitely not anything good.

Everybody else is now in the big room, where it turns out Al’s done exactly what Ed meant to do and attached the bathroom via a new door. “You told me ground floor,” Ed says accusingly, poking his head in to look over the gleaming set of three new brass-tapped shower cubicles; Al even frosted the glass.

“Because you can’t do distance transmutation,” Al says all reasonable, the little fucker. His eyes flick to Mustang, just for a second, before he frowns at Ed. “What did you do to your hair?”

“Fucking - for fuck’s sake.” Ed yanks the tie off, snaps it on his wrist and drags his braid apart, shaking everything out. “Happy?”

“Now you look like that lady’s dog we saw in Versahn that hadn’t been groomed in three years,” Al says.

“Fuck you too,” Ed tells him. He knows he looks dumb when his hair is all elbows from being stuck in a braid for days; he’ll put it back up when the marks on his cheek fade off. “Brief us, Mustang. Where are we doing this?”

Mustang takes them back into the map room, where he explains that Beardy did some push-to-talk thing to all the glowy spots on the wall. Ed tests one - it announces heart ford Shire killings, seventeen dead, Gordon and Alyssa Slatham, Margaret Brewder, Elias, Issac, Clare, Ethel... and keeps listing off names in a weirdly smooth disembodied female voice. Ed has to suppress the urge to poke like, eight at once and see what the results sound like, because that’d be childish and kind of morbid, and also they have bigger problems to worry about.

Fifteen minutes later Ed would like to go back in time and slap himself for clearly cursing them all with understatement. Mustang tells them about the mind control. And the shapeshifting potion. And the fucking memory erasing. No fucking wonder he was cranky. Ed is now exactly as cranky as Mustang is, only they passed cranky eight altitude markers ago and are now well up the slopes of Mt. Pissed.
“So we’re taking their guy, right?” Ed demands. “The Malboy guy? The one where they know where he lives?”

“As soon as you have a workable version of your proposed array,” Mustang confirms.

Al raises a hand slightly. “Who…?”

“One of the terrorist main players. They know who he is,” Hughes says, grinning way too wide. “They know his name, his face, his affiliations, they have eyewitness testimony of his involvement in the murder of a child at the very least and they know his home address. Do you want to know what they’ve done about it?”

“Nothing?” Al guesses.

“Nothing!” Hughes exclaims, wide-eyed and venomous with incredulity.

“They claim they’ve had him watched,” Mustang says, “but it remains to be seen if that will yield anything useful in any way whatsoever. If your array works as intended, Fullmetal, it may not matter what exactly the details of his magical protections are, but we are going to be very sure and very thorough in its efficacy before we rely on it.”

“Yeah. We need to have them show us that mind control shit tonight,” Ed says grimly. “Fuck no to the memory thing though. Is that even reversible?”

“They did not hurry to assure us that it was,” Mustang says with acid cynicism. “So we’re going to preclude that entirely. As they also routinely use it on those without magic who they feel know too much, I trust I don’t have to encourage anyone to be on their guard.” His eyes travel across them and end on Ed. “Or that we need the array as soon as possible.”

“No fuckin’ kidding,” Ed says flatly, right hand flexing. “We got some ideas. A day, maybe two days tops. It’ll need a \textit{fuckton} of testing, though, I’m telling you now, because this one will kill people if we don’t calibrate it right. Though - hey, we can try it on Lemons, flip it on and see if his stupid tattoo falls off. Then we can try it on the kid.”

“Potter?” Mustang says.

“Yeah, should be a one step cure for all his possession problems.” Ed nudges Al. “You saw something there. Spill.”

Al doesn’t do anything so obvious as look at Jones and Arget - he looks at Mustang instead, who gives a single impatient wave that manages to convey \textit{it’s fine, everything’s fucked anyway, they are now also firmly strapped into this fucking sleighride, that whooshing sound you just heard was their security clearances skyrocketing and we’ll deal with the fallout as it comes.}

“There’s definitely something there,” Al says, on this confirmation. “I… don’t know that I could definitively call it a soul - the Colonel mentioned to you that the, ah, magic seems to be manifesting as qi, yes? Well, it’s not behaving like any ambient qi I’ve encountered before. People read about the same, but everything here is very… saturated, concentrated? Sorry,” Al adds a little sheepishly. “All the qualitative terms I know for qi are in Xingese.”

“You’re doing fine,” Mustang says, less reassurance and more \textit{keep talking.}

“Right. What I’m sensing from him feels distinct from his life force, but it’s not really… it doesn’t feel like two people in one body. Wizards don’t feel different from us, though, and the magic-qi is… well, everywhere. I can’t identify if there’s anything specific binding the two disparate qi
“It’s not bound by anything else,” Ed says, then amends, “that we can tell right now.”

“Discorporealized souls are kept on the plane by the containment field created by a blood rune,” Al says. “Alchemically speaking. So if it’s magic as a localized energy field that’s doing the work here, the principle is the same. There shouldn’t be a need for more of a disruption than just eliminating the field.”

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“If the array doesn’t work to remedy the boy’s specific problem,” Mustang says. “What are our options?”

Al taps a finger slowly on the head of his cane, thoughtful. “We’re trying very much not to kill him, yes?”

“Duh,” Ed says as Mustang nods.

Al shrugs slightly, making a small equivocating gesture with one hand. “We could interrupt the qi flow to the brain, but that’s an option on a timer. It’s not as bad as cutting off oxygen, but we’d have maybe three minutes before there’s a risk of brain damage.”

“You can do that?” Ed says, mystified.

“Yes,” Al says. “It’s very unpleasant.”

“How?”

“Needles.”

Ed shudders. Xingese medicine is way too fucking into porcupining people in the name of healthcare. “What’ll cutting off the qi do?”

“If it’s bound to the qi itself, the malignant presence may, hm, starve, essentially, if cut off from the main life flow. That may cause it to die off and disperse, or maybe not.” Al sets his mouth slightly. “If this is a… piece of soul, as posited by the wizards, then human transmutation would also bring about a scenario where separating the souls is possible. The last thing we want to do is try the Gate, though. Medically speaking.”

“It’d probably kill the kid, stick the evil soul chunk in the driver’s seat and then send him back to us as a mini lord vaudeville, full on possessed this time,” Ed says flatly. “And all that’s apart from him not being an alchemist, so one of us would have to activate the transmutation and get our asses joked too. No fuckin’ Gate.”

“Quite,” Mustang says, humorless. “Is there an option without a brain damage disclaimer?”

Al hmms. “I could stop his heart.”

“That’s better?” Ed says incredulously.

Al shrugs. “It wouldn’t be brain death. I have enough experience with defibrillation via alkahestry to be able to restart him without tissue damage. There are ways to keep oxygen circling through the blood as well, but - this would essentially be a way to trick his body into thinking it’s dead, and
hoping the shock ejects anything non-native to his qi system. That would likely require simulating conditions of cardiac arrest as realistically as possible.”

“So we either choke his brain or give him a heart attack?” Ed says. “Fuck.”

Al shrugs again. “Any interruption to the body’s qi system is a shock. The malignant qi on him is localized, which makes me hopeful that it’s not bound or integrated in any way to his overall system, but it’s in a place that’s very difficult to isolate without tissue collateral. On balance, stopping his heart would be the less risky option.”

“Better make the array work, then,” Ed decides.

“I’m going to take a closer look at him as well,” Al says. “There are some diagnostics I can run that require contact to get a better read on his qi system. From what I understand we can’t really tell him anything, yes?”

“Yeah, tell him you’re treating him for snake nightmares,” Ed says. “Don’t tell him we suspect lord vasectomy is listening in via his brain, though, that’s hushy hush.”

Al tips his head to the side. “Mm. Psychosomatic trauma as a cover will work, yes.”

“We got that damn demo thing tonight. We can start work on the array after, though. Gotta be a room around here we can use as a lab.”

“For all our sakes I hope we don’t encounter any other magical revelations tonight that we’ll have to account for,” Mustang says. “Though recent experience indicates we shouldn’t bet on it. Havoc, Hawkeye - with me, let’s talk transport. Fullmetal, go find your lab space.”

“And we have all these wonderful new fatalities to pore over,” Hughes exults, spreading his arms to encompass Jones and Arget as he turns back to the softly glowing map. “Isn’t our job wonderful?”

“We should probably check that nobody’s fucked off with the kid yet either,” Ed says to Al as they exit the map room. “The wizards keep trying to shunt him off to his relatives, because I’m pretty sure their solution to his haunted brain problem is to kill him. The relatives live right where he got attacked by the fuckin’ dementer thingies - shit, if he hadn’t been in the park then they probably would’ve come after him at home.”

“I’ll find him,” Al says, sounding thoughtful. “I should speak with him anyway. Especially if I end up having to do anything as intensive as simulated cardiac arrest. It would be inconvenient to discover he has any pre-existing medical conditions while we’re in the middle of trying to convince his body it’s dead.”

“Fuckin’ tell me about it,” Ed says as they head down the stairs. “That’d be awkward as hell.”

Chapter End Notes

al: i care about my brother & want him to find happiness & love but i know he is Big Stupid so i have to help him out

al: edward elric why the fuck do you always look like shit
Chapter 34

While life has certainly gotten very interesting with the addition of the Unplottables to Grimmauld Place, with Dumbledore here it becomes a choice of whether to eavesdrop on him or on them. With Mum back and Fred and George’s opportunities to attach themselves to anything interesting with impunity diminish significantly, and Dumbledore is almost certainly headed her way; on the other hand, it’s going to be harder to eavesdrop on the Unplottables with them constantly striding around and going from room to room and regularly creating entirely new rooms just for the hell of it. Elric especially likes to rearrange his surroundings without warning, and they only have so many Extendable Ears.

Everybody else is clearly thinking along the same wavelength, because after Sirius gives them a Look, claps Harry on the shoulder and heads off after Dumbledore Hermione huddles them all in the eaves under the staircase on the second floor landing. “They’re going to do something tonight,” Ginny says. “Another Order meeting?”

“They said they’d begin when Bones gets here,” Hermione says. “And I heard Dumbledore ask about whether the backyard was extendable. That’s not an Order meeting. Why do they need to be outside?”

“Reckon we can use the Extendable Ears?” George says. “They might not think to ward the back door, if they’re going outside.”

“Oh, bollocks,” Harry says with serious feeling.

“What?”

“It’s at the Dursleys,” Harry says, now kind of sick-looking. “With the rest of my things. I didn’t even think about it, since Hedwig was out of her cage and found us right away…”

Ron and Hermione exchange looks. “Maybe we can ask Lupin to go get it?”

Harry’s jaw clenches. “He wanted me to go back there.”

That is true. “And if you ask Lupin to go and get it now, he’ll probably ask why you need it so bad, and that’s not going to be a good answer, is it,” Ron says grimly.

“What if you just Accio Cloak?” Ginny says.

“Ginny, it’s in Surrey,” Hermione says.

“Harry Accio’d his Firebolt from inside the castle last year,” Ron says.

“Yes, but Surrey is a lot farther than Hogwarts was from the grounds.”

Ginny frowns in concentration. “What if we all Accio Cloak at the same time?”

Hermione opens her mouth, then pauses and also frowns in concentration. “If we all do it on three…”

“Tried it,” Fred says.

“Doesn’t work,” George says.

“The spells don’t compound -”

“- they compete. The object gets summoned -”

“- to two different points, essentially.”

“Nice thought though.”

“Yeah, good thinking outside the box, Gin.”

“You might be a Weasley after all.”


That makes all of them pause. Fred and George look at each other. Harry had given them the Triwizard earnings. They’re the only ones who can apparate, the only ones who can cast any spells without the Statute getting sicced on them. They’re also least likely to be missed for, say, half an hour.

“Leave it to us,” they say.

Harry’s eyes go big, like this is completely out of the realm of what he expected could be possible. “You’re going to go get it?”

“Why not?” Fred says.

“We got you that one time,” George says.

“Might as well get all your things.”

“Don’t have the Ford this time -”

“- but Weasleys make do.”

“Will you be able to take all his things with you when you apparate?” Hermione says.

“Please,” Fred says.

“How do you think we cart all our merchandise around?”

“Not to mention hide it from Mum’s searches.”

“Shrinking Charms are our specialty.”

“Are you packed, Hazza? Or are we going to have to prance around the house picking up your laundry?”

“I - all my stuff is already in my trunk, yeah,” Harry says, tense but starting to sound cautiously hopeful. “Everything important, anyway.”

“Then it won’t take fifteen minutes.”
“In, out, there and back again.”

“It really will have to be quick,” Hermione warns, because she’s a Prefect to the bone despite being surprisingly open to certain kinds of criminal activity. “We don’t know when Madam Bones will get here and they might lock all the doors and put Impermeable Charms on everything again. Wait! Do you know how to Disillusion yourselves?”

“You think we need to?” Fred says.

“What if someone’s watching Harry’s house?” Hermione says. “I’d post a watch if I thought somebody might come and see what happened to the dementors, at the very least. And if there’s an Order member watching it like Mundungus was supposed to, we’ll be caught. It won’t work against Mad Eye, but Disillusionment should cover you from anyone else.”

“How does this disillusionment work exactly?” a voice says behind them.

Hermione gasps. They spin around. It’s the other Elric, the tall one, leaning against the wall with both hands over his cane, looking at them with polite curiosity.

Fred and George have not gotten this far in life without developing certain reflexes. We just got caught pinballs them down a lightning fast decision tree - which really only has three options, but still. Can they deny it? Looks like he’s been there too long for any plausible bluffing. Can they run for it? Not really, not anywhere within the house, and it wouldn’t stop him from telling whoever he liked and bringing Mum and Lupin and possibly even Dumbledore down on them. The Map is not something they want to lose access to, and Dumbledore knows about both cloak and Map and would almost certainly figure out what they were trying to go after.

If this had been the Dumbledore of last year they wouldn’t have worried - would have expected the Map slipped back to them later with a wink, frankly - but this Dumbledore had forbidden anyone from contacting Harry, and left him in the muggle world with You-Know-Who on the loose and without a guard. They have no idea what this Dumbledore will do.

Fred and George reach a decision. “Bye!” Fred says, as George reaches out, grabs Alphonse Elric and apparates out of Grimmauld Place.

Chapter End Notes

fred: when you can’t run

gorge: and you can’t bluff

together: increase the mayhem.
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Al’s first thought is Teacher’s gonna kill me, because the correct response to anyone grabbing your anything is not to blink at the offending hand and think oh dear. Teacher is not going to be impressed by any excuses about being occupied with qi, either, but in the second between Fred’s hand connecting with Al’s shoulder and the jerk of motion taking hold, the flow of the world began to warp in place, and he could feel it taking him with it.

Stepping across the Divide was like being dropped in an ocean, and teleporting when Remus Lupin held out a magic coffee mug had been a high-speed punch of sensation that Al could only describe as a single packaged “unpleasant”. This is different. The ambient flow of qi flexes, hooks into him and starts to spin - and then inverts, right in place, and Al blankly thinks oh, toroidal, that’s interesting right as they twist out of physical space.

It’s an airless splice of nothing in between, and then they land on their feet without having moved at all. The first thing that registers is that the entire qi landscape has changed, which is still disorienting even though he knows to brace for it after his previous magical travel; he has to shut his eyes briefly to sort through the input. Qi is so much heavier here: it’s like coming down from a life of high altitude into superoxygenated sea level air.

“Wormholes,” he manages, a little breathlessly, bracing his cane on the ground. “It’s not particle flow and reassembly. You’re opening wormholes.”

“What?”

“Nothing.” Al says, swallowing to settle his stomach. “Never mind.” He reaches up, catches Fred’s hand just moving from his shoulder, and twists it first into a thumb joint lock - a yelp - and then until Fred’s back is to his chest, acting as a body shield against anything his twin might decide to do. “Why did you just teleport me, exactly?”

“Whoa!” Fred says, jerking slightly and finding it is not in his best interests to do so. Al is very good at joint locks.

“Easy, mate,” George says, wand still out but raising his hands up in nonaggression. “Look, it’s just for a few minutes - we’re just getting Hairy’s things, yeah? We didn’t want anyone making a fuss and maybe stopping us.”

“Your brother told us to help Hairy out and not trust anybody.” Fred says, standing very still with his arm twisted up and across his body. “We’re just going to grab his stuff and then take you right back. He doesn’t even have any spare underpants right now.”

Al glances around - they’re on a street in a residential area, a row of houses on the right and a park visible on the left. Pools of light dot the sidewalk from streetlamps; nobody in sight and nothing in qi either. “You all seemed very interested in retrieving a map.”

“It’s a map of hog warts,” George says. “Our school. It’s dead useful. Leaving it with muggles would be a huge waste.”

“And Hairy’s relatives are as like to toss out his things as not,” Fred says. “They don’t like him much.”
“Hope they haven’t binned them already,” George says. “Not like he left a forwarding address.”

“So we’re just showing up to ring the doorbell and ask for his things?” Al says skeptically.

“Doorbell? Oh, no, mate,” Fred says.

“That’d get the door slammed in our faces for sure.”

“His family’s one of those nutter sets. Hate magic like anything.”

“Religious, maybe?”

“Never asked. Plus last time we were there -”

“- Dad kinda blew up their chimney. Hope Diffindo works on the window bars.”

“You’re proposing to break in,” Al says, to clarify.

“Well, yeah,” George says. “Like we said. If we show up and say we’re here for Hairy we’d probably get the muggle police called on us.”

This does not paint a very reassuring picture of a home life, but it’s not exactly a wholly reliable source. “You seem very sure of this,” Al says.

“His cousin was there, when we got attacked,” Fred says. “He was walking home and ran into us, and then the dementers showed up. He passed out -”

“- then when he woke up he thought Hairy was the one who’d attacked him. Raved a bit -”

“- told us we’d all be locked up and if Hairy showed his face at home his uncle would call the police -”

“- and then he ran off home. So yeah. Doubt ringing the doorbell’d get us much.”

The pieces click into place, far later than they should have. The relatives live right where he got attacked, Ed said, and I’m pretty sure they’re trying to kill him. Al immediately drags on his qi-sense, straining outward: all the lifesigns around them big enough to be people are stationary or making small movements within the houses, and Al can’t feel any focused intent anywhere near them. That’s no guarantee they aren’t being watched, but he’ll have to take it for now.

He’s gotten the situation as understood by Hairy’s teenage friends. This is not the situation as is controlled by a vigilante group, a corrupt state and a terrorist organization all willing to use lethal force. Al may not have been in the military but he was generally the one listening when soldiers talked, and a situation where a target’s personal possessions - containing magical valuables no less - are left at the target’s known address, the situation is what’s known as a tactical opportunity.

Option one: the wizards just haven’t had time to pick up Hairy’s things. From what Al understands the attack happened yesterday, and Hairy - the most likely target - had been moved to the safehouse abruptly and not according to any plan. Maybe nobody’s had time to swing by and retrieve his belongings.

Option two: the wizards realized that Hairy’s belongings could serve as a trap. Ostensibly Hairy would want to return for them, and if the public cover story is that he had run away and disappeared, then for anyone wanting to catch him this would be the first place to stake out. Consequently, anyone hoping to catch such a stakeout would be staked out here too.
Safer to assume it’s option two. Safer still to turn around and go right back to the safehouse.

Problem. Al’s not sure he’ll be able to convince the twins to immediately take them back without resorting to violence, and standing around arguing about it is a wonderful way to get attention. Violence is no guarantee anyway: there’s two of them, and they can both teleport. Moreover, they’d known this would be a dangerous situation, and they’d gone anyway. He is more or less at the mercy of two superpowered teenagers that make the kind of decisions that think nothing of charging into hostile territory with a side of spontaneous kidnapping.

Oh, bother. This is going to have to go very quickly, because if Ed comes down the stairs looking for him - and he will - Al is going to come back to Number Twelve Grimmauld Place dissolving into the mouth of an active volcano.

“Could you let go of my hand now?” Fred asks, very polite.

“Ah, yes,” Al says distractedly, releasing Fred to step back, tap his hands together and alchemize a wristloop for his cane out of his left sleeve. (The embroidered leather one Mei made for him years ago snapped last week, and since she wanted to make him a new one by hand he, like a mildly lovestruck imbecile, hadn’t replaced it). He hasn’t used any alkahestry yet and doesn’t plan to until he can do some quiet testing about the behavior of this side of the Divide’s oversaturated qi, and he’s likely to need his hands free first and foremost if it comes to a fight.

And it may very well become a fight. Hermione had been speaking about the need to conceal themselves from any watchers posted when Al had slipped up behind them, and if this were the exact location where two of his unkillable weapons vanished without a trace he’d be watching it pretty damn closely and not with just a couple of rookies with binoculars, either.

“Do the disillusionment,” Al instructs, using his Honored Patient, you will obey me or experience some exciting new fluctuations in your health voice. “You know where the house is?”

“This way, I think,” George says, sounding relieved that Al is at least nominally on board. “Dudley ran that way - that house there, maybe?”

“Privet drive,” Fred says, squinting up at the street sign at the intersection. “Right street, at least. Forge -”

“Yes,” George says, and taps his wand on the crown of Fred’s skull.

Qi flexes around them, focusing through the wand. Fred shimmers, invisibility dribbling down his body like the magic is liquid. (It isn’t. Though the toroidal formation caused by teleportation did look like fluid dynamics, which is a thought for later.)

“Here,” George says, turning to Al and making a cautious gesture of approach. “I can do you too.”

Al allows it, waving George forward and not grabbing for the wand when it taps lightly against his head. “We’re going to do this fast,” Al says, as coolness trickles down the nape of his neck in a deeply distracting tickle. “We don’t know who’s watching or what kind of security measures are in place. We’re going to go see if that house is the correct one, and if it is, we are not getting close until we can scout the perimeter. Understood?”

“This is a muggle neighborhood,” Fred says as George taps himself over the head and disappears in a watery haze. “They won’t be able to put up any serious wards without it sending all their radios and things on the fritz.”

“They had someone watching it,” George’s voice says. “Mun dung us left, though, and I don’t
think the order has enough people to keep a watch on a house Hairy’s not even in.”

“Someone might realize he left all his things, and might come back for them,” Al says quietly. “Or if not Hairy, then someone who can be followed back to him. His family may not even be in the house anymore. We could be walking directly into a trap.”

It feels like Fred and George glance at each other. “Nobody’ll see us if we’re careful, mate,” Fred says.

“We’re pretty good at sneaking around.”

“Though now that you mention it…”

“- dumbell door might’ve put up some kind of protection, yeah.”

“But it’s only been a day.”

“Dunno if anyone’s had time to set a proper trap.”

“Which is why it’s best we go now.”

“Should be fine.”

Oh, fiddlesnocks. Is this what it felt like to be an adult dealing with Ed at seventeen? Given it’s a lot like dealing with Ed now, the answer seems to be yes, probably. He feels ancient. “We’re going to go look,” Al says steadily, channeling Colonel Hawkeye as much as he can. They’re here; he might as well see what he can find out and report back to Ed and General Mustang. “If the people in the house aren’t his relatives, or if there’s more of them than there should be, we will leave, because that’s a glaring red sign that it’s a trap, and we aren’t equipped to handle that. Are we agreed?”

“Makes sense,” George says.

“Alright, yeah,” Fred agrees.

Al supposes that’s the best he’s going to get. “Let’s go.”

They set off down the sidewalk. It’s a little strange - Al knows exactly where they are via qi, but visually all three of them are hazy, rippling blurs of air, functionally undetectable in the dark. There’s a faint tingle running over Al’s skin that he assumes is the spell, though nothing is interacting with his own qi system. It’s deeply weird. Is it actually qi? Is it just the same frequencies, so to speak, that are picked up by however human senses process qi? Because the spell is clearly affecting his body, moving with him, but it’s not connected to him.

He can’t afford to focus too much on the qi, useful as it is, because it really is just too much here and he’s already been unaffordably distracted from even before they landed. He’s gotten very good at sensing, sure, but most of his experience is with exploring minute changes in the system of a patient who is usually sitting still and in no way trying to hide or attack him. He’s really got to step up training after this. He spars with Mei as regularly as his clinic rotations and her class schedule allows, but both of them tend to spend more time studying and while Mei is very good she’s not an expert in reading qi in combat.

Maybe he can request some mat time with Lan Fan when they return to Dàdū. If Ed keeps getting sent to different countries to solve horrible soul terrorism problems, he’s going to need it.
The twins seem pretty sure of which house it is, and they slow as they reach the neighbors’ meticulously landscaped shrubbery. Al frowns as they creep closer: there’s nothing in the flow of qi that marks it as different from any of the others on this street, and there’s nothing like any of the shifting, branching webs of shaped qi that moved through the wizards’ safehouse. He really wishes he’d had more time to study those; he can roughly identify magic right now, sure, but he’s pretty certain the shaping has to do with that the ‘spell’ does and he’d like an idea of what corresponds to what.

Right now he can pretty much only tell there’s no magic around the house. That’s something, at least. Unless it’s hidden. But the safehouse would be a very hidden magic building, yes? So it stands to reason that if he’s not seeing anything here that he saw there, then there’s nothing here to see.

They’re going to have to run with it. Al concentrates. “Three people in the house,” he murmurs. “All on the ground floor, towards the back. Do you know where his room is?”


The only window with bars on it. When the twins had mentioned bars previously Al had assumed them to be a whole-house security measure, like plenty of city houses had in Central. Al sets that aside - to the growing little pile of observations and offhand mentions and conjecture - and evaluates the house.

They’re more or less invisible. It’ll be faster and more discreet to slip inside and go up the stairs inside the house than climb up or alchemize any steps out here, especially with the lightshow from any transmutation discharge. It also looks like there’s a backyard to the house. The lifesigns of the three people in the house are clustered more to that end - in a living room or kitchen, maybe. “Let’s go around back,” Al whispers. “We need to see through the windows.”

They have to climb a gate to get back there - “Here, mate,” Fred and George whisper and offer their cupped joined hands as a step-up, which Al finds charmingly polite enough to accept - and they land with quiet thuds in short-trimmed grass. Al holds them crouched there for a minute, listening, sensing, but there’s nothing but a quiet neighborhood and a distant sound of cars.

They stay low as they edge up to the back patio, Al’s knees complaining as they settle close enough to see inside. The windows are squares of yellow light in the darkness, the curtains not yet pulled to. A woman and a man are visible through the window, sitting down at the table and eating dinner; they match two of the presences Al can feel in qi. “Are those his relatives?” he whispers, feeling uncomfortably voyeuristic.

“Yeah,” Fred whispers back. “Looks like. Don’t see his cousin though.”

Al can sense the third person near the other two, not really moving - out of sight of the window but likely sat with them as well. If they’re terrorists magicked via shapeshifter potion to pretend to be the family, they’re doing a pretty good job of sticking to their roles. “That’s fine,” Al whispers. “I’m going to get the layout. Stay here.”

Moving slow and careful, Al steps up to the back wall of the house and presses his palm to the bricks. Ed’s better at this sort of thing - his habit of absentmindedly fixing everything from rotted porches and broken windows to rusted moonshine stills as he travels gives him a lot of practice - but Al can get a rough idea of where things are.

He retreats back to the twins after a minute. “There’s one staircase, and it’s at the front,” Al whispers. “The good news is that if we go inside through there they won’t see us. The bad news is
anyone watching the front door is going to see us come through.”

“Front window?” George suggests. “No, better make it side window. There, in the bushes.”

“I see it,” Fred whispers. “Yeah, we could do that.”

That’s not a bad idea. Al would sigh at these ready criminal minds, but Ed was a way more unrepentant B&E artist at half their age and as accomplice Al has no leg to stand on. “This way,” he whispers, leading the creep back to the side of the house.

The end up crouched deep in the bushes. Al considers the window. Transmuting the latch would create a small enough flash that he can cover it with his body, but - oh, hockeysnocks, they’re invisible. Would light just pass straight through him? No, right? The photons would just bounce off him, the invisibility must be working on an active mirroring principle, chameleon style. This should work fine.

Al brushes his hands together and carefully transmutes the lock out of the latch, keeping the discharge as contained as he can make it. He waits a few seconds, then cautiously tries the sill - only George grabs his shoulder. “Wait,” he whispers, and then, “Silencio.”

“Just in case it creaks,” Fred whispers behind them.

“Good thinking,” Al whispers back. When he tries the window, it slides up without a hitch.

He goes in first, wary of disturbing anything or otherwise triggering some kind of trap, but qi continues to flow unchanged around him and the distant clink and murmur of dishware remains steady. There’s what sounds like a radio on in the dining room, studio soundtrack laughter filtering through; Al stands listening for a few more seconds, cane clasped up off the ground in one hand, then reaches back and taps George’s arm to follow him through.

Al slides the window shut behind them but doesn’t lock it. If they end up needing a hasty exit they’ll most likely be going through the wall, but no need to double his own work and risk another transmutation flash being seen if they do end up leaving the way they came in. They tiptoe to the hall and ease up the stairs; Al goes last for that and is mildly impressed at how the twins know to stick to the outsides of the steps, putting their weight on the more supported joists to try and avoid any creaking. This is really starting to feel like it’s not the first time they’ve broken in somewhere - though to be fair, Al and Ed used that trick mainly to sneak around the Rockbell house at night and eat cookies where Granny and Winry wouldn’t find out.

Fred and George seem to know where they’re going once they reach the upstairs hall, so Al stays behind them and focuses on reading qi. There’s still the possibility that they’ve triggered some silent alarm and he’s going to have to arrange a high-speed exit under fire, which he will invoice the General for. And Ed, possibly. Crinklessticks, Al’s going to have to give these twins a good talking-to when they all get back, isn’t he. It’ll have to wait until Ed is safely chained down and sedated, probably, but Al find he does feel inclined to give the twins a piece of his mind. You can’t just kidnap people.

Everything seems fine so far, at least. No lifesigns are approaching the house; Al’s range is only about twenty meters or so from his epicenter, but it’s better than nothing. Colonel Hawkeye had explained the dementers as described by both wizards and Ed, and apparently the effective approach is a generous application of thermite and rage; Al genuinely has no idea what the hell that might feel like in qi or whether he’d be able to feel those things coming at all, but he supposes he’ll get an early warning via sudden onset irrational panic and dread anyway.
One of the lifesigns starts moving downstairs, and Al freezes, grabbing Fred and George to still them - but it just moves back and stays put after a few seconds. Someone standing up to get the salt shaker or something, maybe. Al lets go. Then the low murmur of voices raises in volume briefly, then again - and then a teenage voice yells “It’s fine, mum!” before abruptly turning into stomping - headed right for the stairs.

Someone’s coming up. The cousin. They’re invisible, though, and the corridor is just wide enough that if they press themselves against the wall and do their best statuary impressions they shouldn’t have any trouble. As the cousin thunders up the stairs, Al grabs George and pulls him back sharply against the wall.

But Fred is further down the hall, and since they’re all invisible he doesn’t see them move. Al feels him turn as the footsteps thunk rapidly up the stairs - and then Fred moves towards Al and George: away from the door he’d been about to open, but also directly towards the stairs.

The cousin hits the landing just as Fred is crossing the hall. For a second Al thinks they’re going to make it - the boy looks preoccupied with his own consternation and Fred is already dodging back - but then he feels rather than sees the moment where the boy trods heavily on Fred’s foot.

The resulting collision sends both of them careening into the wall. Fred is tall, but the cousin must weigh two of him and sends them crashing to the floor. Given Fred is still invisible, it’s probably that which makes the boy give a terrified, high-pitched and very loud scream.

Chapter End Notes

al: i ain’t done one dumbshit thing yet for as long as i’ve been here

al: time to earn my right to use the name Elric
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The two lifesigns downstairs immediately start moving, coupled with a clatter of dishware and a thunder of running feet. “Make us visible,” Al hisses to George, striding forward to pull Fred upright and away from the still-screaming boy; their chances of successfully hiding are almost none, and people can be understandably very wary around alchemy; magic is likely no different. It’ll be easier to deal with this if they aren’t obviously up to something spooky/against the laws of nature-illegal.

The boy scrambles to get his back against the wall and continues howling to the full extent of his lung capacity. It occurs to Al that the fact that there’s no magic on this house means there are no protections if someone - some thing - does come looking to start trouble. A commotion from inside is going to draw attention if anyone is watching. He doesn’t want to have to shut this down the fast way, but he might have to.

“Get behind me,” Al orders the twins as George hurriedly taps him with his wand; he wants them out of the way if he has to transmute anything. The three of them wobble into the visible spectrum as a heavyset man and a bony woman crest the stairs, the woman dropping to her knees by her son and frantically demanding “Dudley! Dudley - Duddykins, what is it -”

She falls silent as she catches sight of Al and the twins, her mouth dropping open as her husband’s face goes mottled and his fists clench in horror, disgust, shock. “You!”

“Hello!” Al says to preempt whatever that’s going to be, giving them a friendly, nonthreatening wave. “We’re very sorry for the commotion - we’re just here to pick up your nephew’s things and didn’t want to disturb you!”

The family gapes like they’re a trio of tentacle-thrashing aliens that have just come busting out of their linen closet - which, in some ways, they are. The cousin’s screams have subsided into gasping, his eyes almost perfectly round as he stares. Al smiles reassuringly at him. “Give us just a few moments and we’ll be out of your hair.”

“You - you - you’re them,” the uncle sputters, different parts of his face starting to turn different colors in a way that speaks to a possible heart condition. “What did you do to my son!”

“Nothing!” Fred exclaims. “He ran into me.”

Al doesn’t point out that they’re technically home invaders because he’s supposed to be arguing the opposite end of that equation, and anyway the uncle is starting to look apoplectic. “My arse! You assaulted him, chased him all the way from the park to the house - he saw you - we know what you did to him with your drugs, your perversions -”

“Oh, right, the ton tongue toffee,” George says casually. He and his brother are utterly unconcerned when faced by a furious grown man twice their size; then again, why should they be? They can teleport at will and have what are essentially stick-shaped multi-purpose guns. “His own fault for slurping up anything he finds on the ground.”

The uncle’s eyes bulge. “Ah, that reminds me,” Al says, holding an arm out to shut George up and take the reins of the situation before things go even more pineapple-shaped. “While we’re here, do
you think you could answer a few questions regarding your nephew’s medical records?"

That successfully derails things at least a little. “What?”

“Anything you have will do,” Al says politely. “Your nephew has some medical procedures coming up. Documentation of any allergies or pre-existing conditions would be ideal, but we’re looking to build a comprehensive profile so the more the better.”

“How should we know? His - his magic keepers should be dealing with all of that!” the aunt bursts out.

Al glances at Fred and George. “Ah… is the medical stewardship situation different here? I assumed next of kin would have the primary responsibility, especially if the individual is underage.”

“Uh… dunno,” George hazards, also looking a little thrown by Al’s topic. “Hairy prob’ly wouldn’t have told them anything that happened at hog warts, but…”

“Usually it’s your parents that take you to the healers, yeah,” Fred says.

“I see,” Al says, turning his gaze back on the aunt and uncle, who are now staring at them like they’re escaped zoo tigers that showed up in their upstairs hall and started discussing accounting policy. “No medical records of his here whatsoever?”

“Worried whether he’s had his shots?” the uncle snarls. His hands are shaking. “The normal schools took care of that, don’t you worry. God alone knows what he’s done at that place -”

“Are you one of their - are you a doctor? Can you undo this?” the aunt demands, gripping hard at her son’s shoulders. “Tell me what they’ve done to him. Tell me.”

Right. Her nephew had disappeared yesterday. The uncle is clearly not a fan, but perhaps her outlook is different. Al can’t exactly in full honesty tell her that he’s safe, but he isn’t exactly in immediate physical danger. “He’s in a secure location -”

“Not him! Dudley!” She thrusts her son forward, or at least as much as is possible when he’s trying to meld with the wall and weighs three times what she does. “What did they do to him?”

Right. Al looks closer; the boy looks terrified, yes, but not especially ill. Looks can be deceiving, however, and the wizards had said that their mind control spells didn’t leave a trace. Between memory erasure and overriding someone’s will there could be any number of invisible damages done to him. “Is there something wrong?”

“He was assaulted!” she says shrilly. “He was beaten unconscious, dragged in the street, god alone knows what they did to him while he was defenseless -”

“Are you referring to the incident yesterday?” Al tries. He’s pretty sure Ed would’ve mentioned beating someone unconscious and dragging them in the streets, especially if it was a minor, but then again it had been a fairly unusual encounter and Ed might not have tracked everything that was going on. Is there a way to implant false memories? Had someone done that to them, to overwrite the memory of an attack by something supernatural?

“Of bloody course yesterday!” the uncle erupts, jabbing a finger at the twins. “Those two were there, with the rest of their gang -” A thought seems to occur to him. “Dudley - was that one - was he involved too?”
“Ah, no,” Al says with finality before this can turn into another case of being mistaken for his brother. “I was out of the country at the time. But I did get called in to consult on the problem.” He assesses the way the aunt is clutching her son; well, this will be as good a distraction as any. “I can take a look if you like,” he offers, drawing his notepad out of his pants pocket. “Fred, George, go and fetch Hairy’s things.”

The twins don’t need telling twice, peeling off straight for a room down the hall behind Al, but the uncle makes an aborted jerk forwards. “Where do you think you’re going!” He exclaims, clearly caught between haranguing the twins and staying between Al and his wife and son. “Get back here - you can’t just -”

“You’re talking to me right now,” Al says, stepping forward, brooking no argument. “What are your son’s symptoms?”

The uncle actually shies back at Al’s step, a jerk like a spooked horse, but the aunt, at least, knows her priorities. “They did something to him,” she insists, once again trying to drag her son forward. “He came home inconsolable, he’d been unconscious, he was all scraped up, he didn’t eat a thing all night and all day -”

That sounds like someone had fainted and fallen and had the standard reaction to being assaulted, i.e. anxiety and paranoia and general upset. If he’d gone into shock on the scene Ed would’ve mentioned it, because that he at least knows how to recognize and treat for, and this boy seemed to be moving around and responding normally until he ran into an invisible wizard.

Still, no need to be sloppy. “How’s your pulse?” Al asks the boy directly, focusing a bit to get as much of a read on his qi as he can from over here. “Any vision problems? Nausea, headache?”

The boy looks fairly taken aback to be addressed in the doctor voice, and, in the interests of sparing them all some hogphooey, not the one Al uses for little kids, either. His qi looks fine; he just feels like a normal lifesign and his internal circulation seems to be in order, with none of the flow Al can identify as magic on him.

After a second the boy shakes his head. “Well, if you experience any of that, or any irregularities in your heartbeat, go to the hospital right away,” Al instructs. “I don’t see any magic on you, so you should be alright. Rest up, drink lots of water and try to avoid stress for the next two to three weeks.”

Neither aunt nor cousin look like they expected this to be his response. Well, they do think he’s a wizard, so perhaps they were anticipating a wave of a wand and one of their untranslatable magical voice commands. Al would honestly like a closer look at the boy, if only to see if a narrow scan of his qi system would pick up any traces of memory tampering or mind magic, but the way they’re all still huddled like a pack of enraged lemmings faced with a fox tells him he’s unlikely to be welcome.

He shouldn’t even be here anyway, and he’s once more acutely aware of the clock ticking down on Ed’s personal brand of pipe bomb. Might as well get what he can. “As for your nephew’s records -”

The uncle reaches the end of whatever complex mental pilgrimage he was on that allowed him to keep silent. “We don’t have any of that! Talk to his school!”

Well. Al had his suspicions, given what the twins told him, but this encounter is more or less proof. “Then you can answer my questions verbally,” he tells them steadily. “To the best of your ability. Tell me, does your nephew have any allergies?”
“Allergies?”

This time it’s the boy, still wall-eyed with fear but now shading fast into incredulous and angry that his potential medical emergency has been usurped by his cousin’s paperwork. “You broke into our house! You were invisible! And now you want to talk about - about his allergies -”

“Yes,” Al says, tone unchanging, and fixes his gaze on the aunt. “Does he have any allergies? Yes or no.”

“No,” the aunt says, leaning in front of her son. “No, no allergies. No, nothing, he - he wears glasses,” she says rapidly. “We don’t have his prescription, he must’ve taken it with him to his school.”

“Has he had any surgeries?”

“No surgeries,” she says immediately; she seems to be catching on that giving him as much information as possible will make this go faster and get them out of her house. “He had the chicken pox when Dudley did, at four, the doctor looked at them together. Nothing else. The schools require all the vaccinations, you can’t attend without them,” she adds stiffly, defensively, like Al had expressed doubt.

Another quiet mental note on the pile of observations. “No other infections?” Al asks. He doesn’t know what ‘chicken pox’ refers to but it sounds common enough that he should be able to get a symptom description from one of the wizards later on. “Any blood transfusions? Serious injuries? Broken bones?”

“No,” the aunt says, still stiff. “No, no broken bones.”

“Any family history of immune system disorders?”

“No - no, nothing like that.”

Al writes it down. “I understand his parents are dead,” he says. “How long has he been living with you?”

The aunt’s eyes dart briefly to her son. “Since he was one,” she says, clipped. “Or thereabouts. He’s a month younger than Dudley.”

“He’s been off at that school of his since he was eleven,” the uncle says harshly. “Nine months out of the year. You want to know what he gets up to, you ask them.”

The aunt’s gaze skitters away from Al, to the floor. Her grip tightens further on her son.

As part of his qualifications to be admitted to the Imperial House, Al spent thirteen months with Master Yunxian as one of three medical assistants in her traveling clinic. Most of western Xing is heavily mountainous, making railways rare outside of the largest cities, and their freight transport is usually either by oxtrain or boat. Settlements in the mountains tended to be small, and unlike in the lowlands clans tended to band together for survival instead of claiming separate and distinct territories. A few of the most populous villages had someone with some medical training, maybe a herbalist or an alkahestrist that didn’t want to leave home, but for many of the settlements the traveling clinic was the only formal medical care they received in months.

Thank goodness almost everywhere had at least one midwife, and that Master Yunxian went out of her way to build good relations with whoever was the local healer or equivalent. A big chunk of the clinic’s work ended up being vaccination and education, and Master Yunxian tended to divvy up
their roles according to demographic appeal - Lai and Jia to the young women, Jinhui to the working men, herself to the elders. And despite having the worst Xingese out of the four of them and having no familiarity with regional dialects whatsoever, Al was usually directed to working with the children - they loved his bright hair, didn’t mind holding still for a checkup if it meant more time to stare at this odd-looking foreigner, and kids wouldn’t be using long or complicated words to describe their medical problems anyway.

Ed’s better with kids by nature - the inexhaustible energy, willingness to dangle them upside down by the ankle and fourth-grade sense of humor make him well suited - but Al learned quick. He is now one hundred percent confident in his ability to wrangle even the most egregiously violent of toddlers into a successful vaccination without hurting either himself or the child. He can accept flowers or shiny rocks or rice cakes from furiously blushing and/or giggling preteens with minimum embarrassment on either side, and he can burp, change and feed babies like a pro. And as he got better, Master Yunxian started bringing him to the more complicated cases.

There are no state child services in rural Xing. If both a child’s parents are dead, they become a ward of their clan, staying with whatever immediate family has the room. If the entire clan is gone, the children go to whoever will take them. It’s a system that works, more or less. But when it doesn’t work, there is very, very little recourse.

By now, Al can recognize the signs, though in this particular case it’d be hard not to. This isn’t hearsay from adolescent wizards or whatever Ed inferred; this is behavior directly from the source, and it’s not subtle.

Plausibly deniable, though. To press further now is to get them to start lying.

“No further questions,” Al says, closing his notebook.

The aunt’s eyes dart up to him again. “What are you going to do?”

“Leave,” Al says. He knows he’s got no expression on his face right now; he doesn’t bother to ameliorate. “Unless, of course, you would like to share any other information.”

“No,” the aunt says quickly. “That’s it, that’s everything -”

“Leave?” the uncle exclaims, having found his steam again. “After just breaking in like this?”

“All done!” George says brightly, popping back into the hallway with his brother on his heels; their pockets are bulging. “Don’t worry, we didn’t break anything.”

“Those bars on the window did mysteriously just fall off, though.”

“Yeah, it was dead weird, how they just popped off like that -”

“- and now we’ll be popping off too.”

They flank Al, grinning at the family. Al nods at them; he finds he is not inclined to bow. “Thank you for your cooperation,” he says, getting a grip on his cane, holding out his forearm to Fred and preparing himself to get sucked down the toroidal qi tube ripping through the very fabric of reality again. “Let’s go.”

Chapter End Notes
just wanted to take the time to say, in one gulp of breath inbetween hoovering up inch-thick coke lines, that if you’ve commented ever even once on this fic then you’re my spouse now and we are married and i will defend you with an axe in mortal combat
They all stare at where the bigger Elric now isn’t.

“How did he sneak up on us?” Ginny hisses.

“I don’t know! He was just there!” Hermione says frantically.

“And now Fred and George have gone and taken him who the hell knows where!” Ron says.

“Don’t be dense, they took him to the house!” Ginny says. “If they left him here he’d tell, so the fastest way to deal with it was take him with them - he can’t apparate, he knows he’d have to do what they say to get brought back home.”

“So now he’s going to tell after they get back?” Ron demands. “What the hell are we going to say? Don’t be a grass or we’ll apparate you somewhere nasty?”

“We’ll convince him,” Hermione says, sounding mostly like she’s trying to convince herself. “I’m sure we can work something out - Alphonse seemed very reasonable -”

“Al? Found us a decent room,” Elric’s voice calls down the stairs. All of them freeze. “Though maybe we want ground floor, dunno that we want to work directly on wood - Al?”

Harry stares at Hermione, who’s glaring at Ron, who’s alternating between staring up, glaring back and staring at Harry. “Oh, great,” Ginny says, faintly. “Nice going, Gred, Forge. Left us to deal with the un reasonable one.”

“Al?” Heavy booted footsteps start thumping down the stairs. As one they all quit staring to exchange wide-eyed glances. What do we do? Hermione’s eyes scream. Harry frantically looks around - maybe they can run for it? But Elric would hear them. They’re stuck in this house and it’s not all that big, and Elric does not seem like the kind of person to stand by when someone runs away from him. He doesn’t look slow, either.

"Al? What the hell’s taking so lo...”

Elric rounds the stairs and stops. He stares at their frozen poses. He does not look like he likes what he sees.

“Elric!” Hermione says, her voice squeaking slightly. “Hello!”

“I really,” Elric says, in a slow, dangerous tone, “do not like the looks on your faces.”

“Well, back at you, mate,” Ron says, offended.

Elric doesn’t even glance at him. “Where’s Al.”

“In the bathroom?” Ginny tries.

“Try again.”

“He’ll be right back!” Hermione says quickly. “They just - I mean, he -”
“What did you do to my brother?”

“He wanted to know about apparating,” Harry blurts.

“Right!” Ginny says immediately. “So he - asked Fred and George to show him! They’ll be right back.”

“Back from where,” Elric says, in a voice that indicates he’s not only not buying it but overturning the merchandise tables and setting fire to the shop. His hands are flexing like he wants nothing more than to choke Ginny unconscious, and not for the first time Harry can’t help but be aware that even though they’re the same height Elric’s built like an ox. “They could’ve teleported inside the house for a demonstration. Where did they take him?”

“It was for me!” Harry snaps, stepping forward and clenching his own fist around his wand. “Leave her alone.”

“For you,” Elric says, leveling his burning yellow stare on Harry. “What the fuck are they doing for you, exactly?”

“They’re getting my things,” Harry says tightly.

“You’re telling me,” he says, in a voice that starts out strangely distant but rapidly, rapidly gets harsher and louder, “that your brothers, took my brother, and they all went back to the scene of the attack. Your fucking house. Which is one hundred percent, definitely under surveillance, and the first place the fucking terrorists would go to TAKE HOSTAGES -”

“Stupefy!”

Elric’s eyes roll back and he crumples to the floor.

“Hermione!” Ron exclaims.

“He was going to tell!” she says, slightly higher-pitched than normal. Her eyes are huge and her wand is still pointed straight at Elric. “Or - or do something - They’ll be back in just a few minutes, we’ll just - tell him it was all a big misunderstanding -”

“Tell Elric that? Fred and George kidnapped his brother! The brother he’s mad as pants about! What’re we gonna say when they get back?” Ron waves wildly at Elric’s prone form. “And when he wakes up? What then?”

“Memory charm him?” Ginny says.

Hermione sucks in a breath. “I don’t know how,” she says. “No, we can’t, a botched Obliviate is dangerous. We could do serious damage - remember what happened to Lockhart?”

“You’re worried about damaging him? You just dropped him like a sack of dungbombs!”

“I panicked!” Hermione snaps. “He was going to get his officers involved, and they’d get your parents, and then the cloak and the Map would get confiscated -”

“So you stunned him?”
“That’s better than memory charming him! What will the rest of his people say when he wakes up missing the last twenty minutes?”


“We’ll say it was an accident,” Hermione says decisively. “Accidental magic, we didn’t mean it, we’re very sorry and it won’t happen again.”

Ron gapes at her. “You think he’s not going to remember you pointing your wand at him and saying *aaAAAARGH* -”

“Stupefy!”

Elric, who had stirred and immediately grabbed Ron’s leg, slumps back again. Ginny slowly lowers her wand; it’s her turn to look kind of bug-eyed. “That was fast,” she says, breathing a little harder than usual. “Did that seem fast to you? A stunner usually lasts longer than that.”

“That’s what you’re worried about?” Ron demands, but he’s backing away from Elric’s sprawled out arm. “Now we’ve stunned him *twice!* He’ll never believe that’s an accident! And neither will Mum!”

“What if we pretend we all got stunned?” Ginny says.


“Kreacher?”

“Ginny!” Hermione snaps.

“You have a better idea? Look, they keep warning us the house is full of cursed things - we find some piece of junk in one of these rooms, drop it next to us and pretend we all passed out.”

Hermione is nodding. “I can cast Somnium on us, then myself, so we wake up naturally. That’ll make it more convincing.”

“What if they do Priori Incantatem?” Harry has to say. “That’ll show the last spell the wand cast. If they do it they’ll know we stunned him.”

“Not if we find a cursed enough object,” Ginny says determinedly. “They won’t think a stunner was involved at all, they won’t check our wands.”

Harry feels his legs go out from under him, struck by something hard, and it’s only after he tumbles into Ginny and lands heavily on his side does he realize that it was Elric - Elric’s leg, swept out in a scything kick, and Harry doesn’t see more than a blur of blond and black before there’s a *clap* and the floor is writhing. Harry’s wrenched flat onto his back by living floorboards, circling his arms and legs and pinning him down, and he hears Hermione cry out in shock and Ron shout “*Hey!*” as Ginny’s also dragged past his field of vision, limbs sinking into the wood.

“You little fuckers,” Elric grinds, rolling to his feet and towering above Harry. “That’s fucking *it*. I’m *done*.” And he goes straight for Ron.

Harry struggles madly, but the wood around him is cinched tight. His wand is in his jeans; the most he can do is buck up with his hips with his calves and forearms trapped inside the floor. If only his wand was in his hand - wasn’t Ginny’s? - Hermione gasps - he can’t see what Elric is doing -
“Hey!” Ron shouts, outraged. “You can’t - that’s mine! Give it back!”

“Like fuck,” Elric snaps, and then he’s crouching over Harry, two wands - Ron and Hermione’s wands - in his grip. Harry tries to thrash away, but Elric just plants an iron hand on his stomach and effortlessly plucks the wand from his jeans. “Ginny!” Harry shouts.

“Reducto!” Ginny answers, and Harry hears wood crack.

“Nice try,” Elric says derisively, out of Harry’s sight again, and then there’s the crackling sound of his wandless transfiguration. Ginny grunts and Elric steps back into Harry’s sight; he’s got four wands in his hand now.

Ginny sounds like she’s trying to break free of her wood shackles, and also furious. “You can’t just take our wands!”

“Fucking watch me,” Elric snarls, not even looking at them. There’s another blue crackle as he smacks the four wands lengthwise against one of his forearm gauntlets, and Harry sees the metal ripple and absorb them without a trace. “These are mine now. You get them back when I fucking feel like it, you little psychopaths. Are you all fucking crazy? Sending your brothers back to that house? The first thing I’d do is put up every fuckin’ one of those anti-teleportation wards in the world and then booby-trap the fuck out of everything. Your brothers might be fucking stuck there, if they haven’t already fucking teleported their way into a fucking hostage situation! And they took MY brother with them.”

Elric slams the side of his fist into the wall - oddly the least threatening thing he’s done; it’s like physical punctuation rather than any attempt to intimidate, and Harry’s strangely reminded more of Hermione tossing her hair than any of Dudley’s gang’s posturing - and roars “Mustang!”

No one yells back, but there are some distant noises that might be people moving. Elric claps his hands together and presses one to the wall - and the wood comes alive again, slithering off Harry and leaving him free to scramble to his feet. He doesn’t know what they’re going to do - especially since what he said about the Dursleys’ house made a horrible kind of sense. Why wouldn’t Death Eaters set up anti-apparition wards and try to trap anyone who came by? It’d be a good way to kidnap someone from the Order...

The second the wood’s off her Ginny jumps up next to Harry, fists clenched. “You took our wands!”

Elric’s eyes flick over her the way Aunt Petunia’s flick over small yappy dogs. “What wands?” he says flatly.

“Wh - our wands!” Ron exclaims, pointing with one arm and the other pulling Hermione to stand. “You transfigured them into your - your arm thing!”

“What arm thing?” Elric says, folding his arms so that the gauntlets gleam dully across his chest, pointedly obvious.

Ron’s mouth opens and shuts once; Hermione next to him also looks incredulous, and it doesn’t look like they know what to do in the face of the blatant denial. Frankly Harry doesn’t either. “They’re right there!” Ron tries, waving his arms. “They’re our wands.”

“You never had any wands,” Elric says, taking a sharp step forward, voice deadly. “Because if you did, then you used them to attack me. Do you want that to have happened?” He spreads his arms again, showman-style, gesturing at the corridor. "Doesn’t look to me like there was a fight here.
Was there?"

“You just don’t want to tell your soldier friends a bunch of kids knocked you out,” Harry snaps, fed up.

In two steps Elric is suddenly right there, inches from Harry’s face, and all Harry can see is sixty kinds of rage in blond and brown and gold. “If I tell Mustang you knocked me out, you become a threat,” Elric says venomously, eyes glittering. “You’re already up to your neck because of kidnapping my brother. You want to tell him what else you did? Attacked one of his men? You don’t want to make this worse for yourselves. You’re going to help us get Al back, and you’re going to be grateful you don’t have your little magic sticks, because assaulting me makes you a hostile. His team eliminates hostiles. Not unarmed civilians. Stay fucking unarmed.”

“All metal?”

That’s the Snape-Lockhart officer’s voice. The Unplottables are coming down the stairs. “Yeah, get down here,” Elric replies, not taking his eyes off Harry. “We got a motherfucking situation.”

“Another one?” Chaos’s voice comes, half joking half weary.

“Yeah another one. Those fuckin’ twins just kidnapped Al.”

That gets everyone downstairs in a hurry. “What happened?” the Lockhart-Snape man says sharply, gaze flicking over all of them in turn; the blonde woman with the dead eyes has her hand hovering by one of her holsters. Elric opens his mouth, snarl in place, just as with a crack Fred and George appear right in the middle of the hall, Alphonse between them.

Elric immediately dodges towards them. “That happened - Al, grab ‘em -”

And suddenly Alphonse has Fred and George by the wrists of their wand arms, and Elric is right there to yank the wands out of their hands and skip back before they can do more than exclaim in surprise. And Alphonse is now a good few feet away too, cane hanging off his wrist, ignoring the twins’ simultaneous “Hey!”

“Hello, everyone,” he says. “I’m fine, brother, nothing happened. General, I believe I have a bit of a surprise report for you?”

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“I... see,” Roy says, gaze jumping from Edward’s hands - full of confiscated wands - to Alphonse - pointedly out of arm’s reach of the twins - to the rest of the children, who are all in a hostile little huddle angled mostly at Edward, though half are now gaping fairly singlemindedly at Alphonse as well. “And where exactly did you just return from?” Roy asks, trying to figure out just what the hell he’s walked into that has managed to happen in the ten minutes between Edward leaving the room and bellowing his name from downstairs. He wishes he could be more surprised.

“His relatives’ house,” Alphonse says, gesturing to Hairy. “They wanted to fetch some of his things, which included items they didn’t want their adults knowing about. I walked in on their… planning session, and got - involved.”

“Stop getting kidnapped,” Ed stresses, clapping - and pushing the two wands in his hand against one of his bracers, sealing them into the steel. “You’re not fourteen anymore, and it wasn’t cute then either -”

“Oi! Elric! That’s our wands!”

“Not anymore,” Edward hisses at the twins. “Now you two are gonna apologize, or I’ll bounce your faces off this wall twice for every fifteen seconds Al was gone, and you’d best believe I can do that fucking math -”

“Brother, they’re kids,” Alphonse says reproachfully.

“And? They want to play in the big leagues and kidnap people, they can go ahead and get what they’re asking for -”

Roy should probably end this - or at least get it out of the godsdamn stairwell - before it spirals even further. Exclamations along the lines of “what the hell?” or “it was only ten minutes,” or even “kidnapped? By kids?” are going to be entirely unhelpful here, no matter how much the situation might demand them. “Alphonse,” he says, cutting over Edward’s building steam. “You had something to report?”

Alphonse looks directly at him, gaze serious - then his eyes flick away to the children, to Hairy, almost imperceptibly. “There is no qi on that house,” he says carefully. “Nothing like what Ed and I see here.” He gestures slightly at one of the empty picture frames on the wall. “We did not have any difficulties entering or leaving.”

Alphonse can’t detect any magic on the house they just visited, which means there is none. No protections like this house has. And if two teenage wizards could get in, anyone can.

“Ohhhh that is not good,” Maes says into the ensuing silence.

Roy had been fairly certain that Edward would punch a wizard by the time the day was out, and it would probably be all Roy could do to ensure it looked if not accidental then at least justified. He’d been resigned to it. Now it looks like he’s going to have to get resigned to punching some wizards himself. This is unfortunate, because Roy doesn’t like punching and in any case Edward hits a lot harder. “Were you seen?”
“Only by the family,” Alphonse says carefully. “We had a brief conversation. I don’t think they’ll decide to call the police.” Or otherwise alert anyone as to what happened.

“No?” Maes says. “I’m assuming you didn’t get in by ringing the doorbell.”

Alphonse half-smiles, grim. “They’re terrified of wizards.”

Riza shifts beside Roy in the way that means he might have to get in line in regards to the matter of punching. Make trouble and you’ll forget this ever happened, along with who knows what else - oh yes, that’s quite the threat to be living under. And this situation is now time-sensitive to boot, because even if Alphonse didn’t notice any watchers doesn’t mean there weren’t any, and if there were, he just proved to them that invading that house is essentially consequence-free.

“Well!” Maes says, icy-bright. “Looks like we’re going to have some conversations.”

Which will be Roy explaining to the wizards what hostages are, because apparently they have no godsforsaken fucking clue. Telling them that will entail explaining that his medical specialist just experienced a mild case of abduction at the hands of two seventeen year olds, and while Roy is unfortunately somewhat of an expert on stupidly dangerous teenagers, even Alphonse hadn’t been able to teleport, and clearly this bunch cannot be left unsupervised for even ten minutes before they’re committing felonies.

“Can you give us our wands back?” one of the twins says, in a cordial, controlled sort of tone that entirely fails to read the room.

Edward already spends most of his time looking bored and hostile, but the aggressively apathetic look he turns on those two is really something else. “What wands?”

“You can’t just keep saying that,” the redhead possessed girl snaps. “You’re going to have to give them back sometime!”

“Why?” Edward says mockingly. “So you can attack me again? Or maybe my brother? They can knock you out in one hit, by the way, they just point the stick and say the word and down you go,” he adds in Roy’s direction. “Instant blackout, ask me how I know.”

“They knocked you out?” Havoc says incredulously. Roy can’t help but feel some alarm himself; Edward has a skull like a cinderblock, reflexes like a cobra and a pain tolerance that’s not impressive so much as it is ridiculous: blacking him out is an achievement.

“You said you weren’t going to say anything about that!” one of the redhead boys says accusingly, as if that is the biggest problem here.

“Well, sure, I wasn’t gonna,” Edward says in his most annoying I’m Being Reasonable And You’re A Capering Baboon voice. “But then I thought, hey, if you did it to me, what’s stopping you from getting someone else with that shit? What’s stopping some other wizard from doing it? So yeah, they point one of these things your way, duck.”

“But you can’t just keep our wands,” the brown girl says, eyes darting to Roy. “We need them for school.”

Cute. Roy was not in a good mood to start with, and now all he has left of his better nature is a big shovel and a deep urge to spread it around. He is generally against armed children in principle and right now even more against arming these wizard children in specific, because all of them need to be safely shackled in some basement and not running around completely loose in this joke of a vigilante ‘safehouse’. “Fullmetal can eat them for all I care,” Roy says, smiling very sweet. The
girl’s eyes go round. “So he may as well take custody for the time being. Now we’re all going to
go downstairs and have a little chat about what just happened. Not you,” he adds, looking directly
at Hairy. “Alphonse, you wanted to have a closer look. Now is a good time.”

“Certainly,” Alphonse says, beckoning to Hairy. “I have a few questions about your medical
history that I hope you can answer for me.”

“Now?” Hairy says, almost physically shying back.

“No time like the present,” Alphonse says brightly, then, not looking at Ed, “You have other things
to do, brother, go with the General.”

Ed looks briefly mutinous, but visibly realizes he’s defanged the children as much as they’re going
to get by taking their wands and settles slightly. “Third floor, second room to the right off the
staircase,” he grunts. “Was gonna use it for lab space. There’s chairs.”

“We’ll be in there, then,” Alphonse says. “Is there a guardian or other adult you’d like in the room
with you?” he adds to Hairy politely. “You’re a minor and this will technically qualify as a medical
appointment.”

Hairy does hostile just well as Edward does, though his is baffled rather than bored and he keeps
glancing from Alphonse to Roy to Edward and back again. Edward snorts. “Amestrian medical
privacy law doesn’t have jurisdiction in wizard world, Al.”

“Still,” Alphonse says serenely. “It’s the right thing to do.”

“Serious,” the brown girl says rapidly when Hairy still doesn’t answer, stepping closer to him.
“Take serious.”

Hairy’s jaw clenches, not looking away from them. “What’s qi?” he says tightly.

“Alphonse will explain,” Roy says, straightening his gloves and walking forward, finished with the
conversation. “We will fetch Black for you.”

“Downstairs now, everyone, let’s go,” Maes carols, catching up everyone in his usual inescapable
manic forcefield and ushering them down the stairs; Edward looks like he might duck under Maes’
arm for a second, so Roy says “Fullmetal, get the convict for your brother,” which gets him to
stomp along and leave Hairy with Alphonse behind.

Leak taken care of. Time to figure out if the boy’s relatives are intentionally being used as bait, or
if this is just one more of those charming little oversights that just happen around these parts. Roy
is genuinely starting to wonder exactly how much is genuine civilian inexperience and cultural
blind spots and what is, at best, deliberate strategic writeoffs. Is the boy’s family merely
considered expendable? These wizards put one flighty guard on a principal target, and they claim
they haven’t gone on the offensive because they fear civilian casualties in reprisal - and then they
do not put any protections whatsoever on what are the most likely targets of retribution for Hairy’s
failed assassination in the park.

Threatening someone’s family is arguably the most effective way to get someone to stop, come out
of hiding, turn themselves in. The fact that the target is a minor not in charge of his own
movements who doesn’t seem at all close to his relatives does not change the fact that this entire
situation is just begging for something to go wrong. The children currently elbowing and hissing to
each other in Roy’s wake have just proven that things are already going wrong, in the stupidest
ways possible, as is only natural when teenagers are introduced to any scenario. It’s not safe to
leave this brat posse unsupervised but apparently even more unsafe to do the supervising, which is why Alphonse is the only one being left alone with one of them. He may not be two and a half meters of immortal steel anymore but he’s the only one who can sense qi - and thus any magic, as well anyone trying to sneak up and catch him by surprise.

And the convict wants to remain in the safehouse so as not to get arrested, so he has a vested interest in not teleporting off anywhere, with Alphonse or no. Roy personally does not see how he would get caught if the primary means of tracking someone is by their wand - if he could teleport, he’d be laughing in policemen’s faces as he popped in and out of their squad cars and station breakrooms - but as evidenced by the children’s reactions, they’re very deeply attached to the little sticks. Dependent, even.

Fullmetal has not failed to notice. Good.

And right in the main hall, just downstairs, is a familiar stocky, short-haired figure that must have just arrived, judging by how Albus is sweeping up from the opposite direction. “Madam Bones,” Roy says as he steps off the stairs and in between them, shaping his face into something moderately less vindictive. “How good to have you join us. Your timing is impeccable, as a matter of fact - we were just about to discuss security measures and why it seems as though the Potter boy’s immediate family doesn’t have any.”

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ed: u dont like arming kids, huh. That’s a thing u disapprove of, huh

roy: firstly, i didn’t weaponize you, you were like that when i got there. Secondly, when we met you were pretty thoroughly disar-

[technical difficulties screen]
Bones narrows her eyes very slightly. “The muggles?” She turns to Albus. “You said you had people watching the house.”

Roy will say this for Bones: she doesn’t waste time and she’s so far taken anything in stride. And while she may defer to Albus, that doesn’t stop her from acting suspicious as hell, about everyone, all of the time. “What brought this on?” she asks Roy, not waiting for Albus to answer in true police fashion. “Did something happen to them?”

“Your magical children are teleporters,” Roy says blandly, gesturing at the gaggle of teenagers now frozen mostly on the stairs. “They decided to take a little field trip and bring along one of their new friends, whether he liked it or not. Since this new friend happened to be my contractor, he assessed the house - Potter’s house - and found it entirely lacking in security while the twins collected Potter’s belongings. He didn’t find any protections whatsoever, in fact, as evidenced by two seventeen year olds breaking in. Given that Potter is considered a valuable target by our enemies, it seems to me that hiding him while leaving his family undefended is somewhat of an oversight.”

“Who is watching the house right now, Albus,” Bones says tersely, still watching Roy.

“Arabella fig,” Albus says, which makes Bones swivel to him incredulously.

“The Squib?”

“She is not watched in turn by any in the ministry, and blends seamlessly among muggles,” Albus says.

Bones now sports a look that might be called horrified on a less severe face. “Albus. She can’t cast a patronus.”

“And has not needed to, in all the years she lived in the house neighboring Hairy’s, until now,” Albus says.

“Excuse me,” Maes says. “Squib?”

“A witch or wizard who doesn’t have enough magic to cast,” Bones says, still staring at Albus with an increasingly challenging expression. “Many of them don’t even have wands.”

“Really!” Maes looks like he’s about to start laughing and never stop, which is never a good look to see on your Intelligence officer, and Riza’s starting to take on the slightly glazed expression that means she’s having some fairly graphic fantasies about pistol whipping. Roy personally finds that he is, at this point, wholly done; he doesn’t care what Albus’s goals or motivations any longer: what matters is that if things continue like this someone’s going to get killed.

“This is perhaps not a conversation for the hallway,” he says, listening for where the murmur of voices down the hall is coming from and then heading for it. This needs an audience. “We need to speak to Black as well.”

“And these kids need to go back to their fuckin’ playpen,” Edward growls, snapping his fingers at
the teenagers to harry them forward. “You got toddler leashes or something? How the fuck do you keep ‘em from zapping off when you don’t want them to?”

“That is a question for their parents,” Bones says crisply at Roy’s shoulder, which makes at least one of the children swallow audibly. “Why Black?”

“He is the adult requested by Potter to be present during his medical evaluation,” Roy says. Bones is following him - a good start - and Albus is following her, though he has less of a choice with Maes and Edward pushing everyone via sheer psychic pressure from behind. “I understand they’re close.”

“Medical evaluation?” Bones says.

The door to the kitchen takes that moment to spring open, Roy still half a meter away, and once again there’s no one near it on the opposite side; Molly and her husband and Remus are there by the table, the convict and a redheaded man with a ponytail as well, and they all turn in surprise. Roy briefly raises a hand in greeting and strides through, because so far the doors themselves haven’t been traps and he can’t deny it’s created an entrance for him.

“Knock it off, housie,” Edward growls as he passes through, rapping his knuckles once on the doorframe. “I’m not pissed at you. Though keep this shit up and I will be. You, psycho,” he announces, pointing at Black. “You’re coming with me, the Hairy kid wants you.”

“Firstly,” Roy says, halting that with a palm up and looking directly at Bones. “Madam. How are we addressing the lack of protections on that house?”

Bones turns on Albus. “What wards are there?”

“Wards are detectable, save if they are covered by the Fidelius,” Albus says, in the manner of picking his words carefully but speaking without pause. “Anything warded in a muggle neighborhood stands out quite starkly, especially if one is looking, and thus makes itself a target. Muggles cannot be secret-keepers and thus the Fidelius cannot be used on their homes without a witch or wizard in residence, and in this case to ward them with anything less would mark them as a target in the eyes of Voldemort.” He spreads his hands slightly. “As it stands - any death eaters will see nothing protected there, and assume there is nothing worth protecting.”

They all stare at him. Roy briefly feels a little bit possessed himself, as the souls of every one of his sisters momentarily enter him and manifest as the overwhelmingly strong urge to ruin his manicure on Albus’s face. “This seems an approach very heavily dependent on luck,” he points out, very even. “You already had one wizard watching that house: the guard that was absent when the dementers attacked. Why did you not have him live with the family and use the Fidelius ward through him?”

Albus sets his mouth under the beard, but at least meets Roy’s eyes squarely. “Mun dung us is the freest of us, and he has other duties and demands upon his time,” he says. “We do not have the resources to dedicate someone to guard that home that way. We are an organization outside the law, regarded as dangerous by the current minister. Discretion has kept us safe and given us room to maneuver that we would not otherwise have, if we’d taken more overt steps and brought attention to our activities.” He sighs in something like regret. “In addition, a witch or wizard would likely find themselves… uncomfortable, in that home, and the family themselves quite discomfited.”

“You said there were blood wards,” the convict says intently. Remus is standing with him, hands at his sides but closed in fists, and he’s silent but no less focused on Albus. There’s something
slightly off about that one, for all that he seems to be the resident peacemaker; Maes watches him very closely when they’re in the same room, and that means Roy isn’t going to engage there whatsoever until Maes finds out what it is. His instincts are, unfortunately, too often right on the money.

“On Hairy, yes,” Albus says, nodding to the convict. “His mother’s protection. She did not tie it to any location; it is proximity to his blood relatives that strengthens it, though it is unclear whether that aspect of the ward is in effect given Voldemort has overcome the interdiction against touch.”

“This blood ward acts on the family as well?” Roy says. “And it is weakened when the boy is away from them?” That would be one explanation for why Albus was eager to get the child back to his relatives.

“Lily Potter cast the spell on her son,” Albus says, which is not quite an answer. “The magic was powerful and may have had some transference, especially with Hairy living with them, but its primary focus was on him.”

“So that family is indeed expendable,” Roy concludes, not bothering to look around and check the wizards’ expressions. He doesn’t need to. “And you are not concerned about their becoming hostages because they are not valued enough for you to negotiate.”

It’s ruthless, as decoy tactics go, but that’s about all it has going for it. If the enemy thought he’d captured valuable bargaining chips when what he really had were sacrificial lambs, well, there are plenty of ways that can go wrong and even done effectively it’s a timewaster at best. You don’t negotiate, the hostages are executed, the enemy goes after another target. What did you gain? It’s a technique to use in extremis only, and frankly there are far better ways to distract an enemy and buy yourself a day or two of time.

“The threshold to action becomes a question of numbers for you, then,” Roy says clinically. “You said you feared retribution from Voldemort in the form of mass killings. How many casualties makes an unacceptable number? A family of more than three, I’m assuming - is it double digits?”

Albus is looking at him almost sadly, but Bones’ face has gone tight. She draws her wand - Roy tenses - and waves it at the air, saying “Expect o Patronum,” in a harsh voice. A silver shape bursts out of the end and turns in midair, translucent and shimmering; like Moody’s messenger shark, Roy realizes.

This one is a wolf, standing on nothing as it shakes out its ghostly pelt and looks attentively at Bones. “Shackle bolt. Post an Auror team on the potter muggle house,” she orders it. “Do it now. If anything else turns up - if anyone visits, if anything happens - we need to know. Go.”

The wolf shape dips its head, spins and vanishes mid-leap like an optical illusion winking out. “They’ll be guarded now,” Bones says directly to Roy. “Shackle bolt will pick Aurors we can trust.”

And Albus’ grip is loosened on these vigilantes. “Thank you, Madam,” Roy says sincerely. “Your quick actions may save lives.”

Bones barely grunts to acknowledge that, her gaze still fixed on Roy like she’s trying to read his thoughts off the inside of his skull. Albus is watching him too, impassive with something evaluating around the edges. Roy’s half certain Albus knows what he’s doing, but there’s no countermaneuver whatsoever being put in play, which could mean that he’s decided to defer in this specific arena of strategic expertise or that he’s planning to kidney-stab Roy the second the playing field angles in his favor.
Roy’s happy to deal with either option: they both put time on his side. “Serious,” he says, addressing the convict directly. “Hairy has asked you to join him upstairs to help him answer some medical history questions. You knew his birth family, I take it?”

“Yeah,” Black says, looking slightly confused by this but mostly highly agreeable to going to where the boy is. “Yeah, I’m going. But this isn’t over,” he adds suddenly, to Albus. He has the look of a man who hasn’t fully processed all current events but what he has processed he’s increasingly sure about. “No wards on that house - Hairy isn’t going back there. He’s not staying anywhere without a Fidelius on it. Not with Voldemort sending dementers after him. I’m his godfather, for merlin’s sake - no. I’m putting my foot down.”

“I must agree,” Bones says, her squared-off face heavy with disapproval. “The boy should never have been placed with muggles, but as things stand - he can’t go back there in any case. We’ll have to find other accommodations.”

Albus inclines his head. “As you wish.”

“No wards,” the convict repeats, not quite an outburst: he still looks a little too surprised for that, staring at Albus. “And he was there all summer - I - just - what the hell, dumbell door?”

“This isn’t about blame,” Roy says, stepping forward slightly and raising a hand to gesture for calm. “Hairy is here and safe now. Let’s focus on how we’ll handle security going forward.”

And he has her. He can see it in the way Bones shifts herself more fully to face him, an almost subconscious change in posture: her regard of the room’s players has shifted, fully. Maes catches it too, which is as good as peer review and confirmation - as does Edward, judging by his sudden minute eyeroll.

Roy has to resist the urge to roll his eyes right back. It amuses him no end that Edward thinks people ‘like’ him for his looks. If only pulling the levers were that simple.

“Your contractor,” Bones says. “He’s a wardbreaker?”

“A medical specialist,” Roy says. “His diagnostic techniques are applicable to more than the human body, however.” Roy’s not convinced he wants to tip his hand as to the extent of Alphonse’s qi sensing and what he can do with it, but these wizards are allies and his goal here is to build trust as well as instill some competency. Bones may recognize some measure of authority in him now, but he has to build on it. “We can confer with him as to the specifics later, if you wish - they’re on the third floor, Serious, second door on the right.”

“I’ll take you up,” Edward says, which prompts a ripple through the teenagers.

“What about our wands?” the redhead girl says quickly, edging forward and darting a glance at her mother. Roy is mildly impressed; it’s a risky move and she knows it, judging by that quick look, but she must be betting on it to pay off or at least outweigh the consequences.

“What about your wands?” Molly says, eyes sharpening. “What did you - Ron! If you’ve broken yours again-!”

“I didn’t break it!” one of the boys exclaims.

“He’s got them,” the redhead girl says quickly, pointing at Edward. “He took all our wands.”

“Why?” the man with the ponytail - presumably also a redhead relative - asks, as Molly blinks in surprise at Edward, seemingly nonplussed.
“Because they kidnapped my fucking brother,” Edward says pointedly. “And then knocked me out when I walked in on their little circle - just for funsies, I imagine, because I don’t even wanna think about what the fuck their plan was gonna be for when I woke up. So yeah I took their wands. Be grateful that’s all I fuckin’ took.”

“You knocked him out?” the ponytailed man says, staring at the teenagers. “Why? What did he do to you?”

“It was an accident!” the brown girl says hurriedly, turning big, apologetic eyes on everyone. “We panicked, and - he just showed up so suddenly, and we’ve all been so on edge, since the dementers - we really didn’t mean to -”

That’s not the worst card to play - could even be the best one she has available - but the facts aren’t on her side and neither is Edward. “You knocked me out twice,” he says incredulously. “Once is an accident, twice is enemy action -”

“You grabbed Ron’s leg! It was like a zombie coming to life!” the redhead girl says defensively. “Hermione panicked the first time, and then I panicked the second - we’re sorry, alright?”

“If you fire off whatever the hell magic you feel like whenever you panic, then you shouldn’t have wands,” Edward retorts. “This shit is dangerous.”

Roy is not saying anything whatsoever about pots, kettles, glass houses or throwing stones, because he wants to live. Besides, to Edward’s favor, he doesn’t panic and didn’t even as a twelve year old - lost his temper, certainly, but never panicked. “I’m doing you flower kids a fuckin’ favor,” Edward continues. “If you can’t control yourselves, don’t fuck around with live fire shit until you learn some fuckin’ trigger discipline.”

“Yes, but,” Molly says, slightly wide-eyed in a way that pretty clearly communicates to Roy that she didn’t take in half of what Edward just said; her husband mostly looks anxious beside her, occasionally glancing worriedly at Albus. “Taking their wands - they aren’t criminals.”

“Ha! Grabbing someone and teleporting them against their will, that’s not a crime here? Do they gotta be tied up and gagged for it to qualify as kidnapping?” Edward’s lip curls. “Your twins took my brother somewhere he didn’t wanna be, lady, and that somewhere just happened to be where the rest of your kids nearly died a day ago. Why they thought this was a good idea, I can’t fuckin’ imagine, but they did it and now they’re living with the consequences.”

“You left the house?” Molly demands of her sons, voice rising in pitch but not yet volume.

“And they’ll be getting a hiding for it,” the ponytailed man speaks up again, leveling a stern look on the twins. “But taking their wands is a bit harsh, for something that turned out alright in the end - no harm, no foul, hey?”

“Their wands are their primary means of defense,” Albus adds gravely, looking at Edward. “Should anything happen, they will need them to protect themselves.”

The wizards all look expectantly at Edward, who pointedly looks at Roy. Roy knows Edward only does that when he’s trying to infuriate some third party with how much they aren’t the boss of him, but it’s a nod to the existence of a chain of command nonetheless and Roy works with what he’s got. Rewarding good behavior is the way to see more of it, after all. “Your thoughts, Fullmetal?”

Edward shrugs, elaborately casual. “I guess if they act up I can always take ‘em away again,” he says coolly. “Though if they want to play repeat offenders maybe next time I’ll just melt ‘em for
“Why not,” Roy says, equally negligent. “Touching fire is the fastest way to learn, after all.”

The teenagers - and Molly - all look deeply alarmed by the aphorism, but Edward snorts, claps and presses a hand to either bracer. The thick metal oozes back and drops a handful of wands into either palm, which he collects into one and drops onto the kitchen table. “Consider these out on parole,” he says sardonically as the teenagers all scramble to snatch up their sticks. “You’re fuckin’ welcome.”

“Pretty dependent on those things, aren’tcha?” Maes remarks cheerily to Bones as Edward claps again to reseal his bracers. “What can you do without ‘em?”

“It takes a powerful wizard to cast without a wand,” Bones says, watching Edward. “Lucky for us most death eaters aren’t anywhere near that. You wanted to see what those cockroaches can do - well, mad eye can show you a few things. Snape can probably tell you a few more.” She’s still examining Edward, who finally catches notice and turns enough to narrow his eyes right back. “You are the all metal alchemist?”

“Fullmetal, yeah, sure,” Edward says, wary.

“Olivier speaks highly of you,” Bones says.

“What, seriously?” Edward says, taken aback, just as Roy says “No she doesn’t.”

Bones snorts. “She said you were slightly less of a waste of air than most men, and that you had managed to make yourself passingly dangerous for a runt with more vanity than brains. That’s high praise from Livvie.”

“Runt,” Edward manages, then, bodily thrown off track, “Livvie?”

“That sounds like Olivier,” Roy allows. Olivier, like all of the heritably rich, respects nothing that doesn’t have as much weight to throw and willingness to throw it as she does; Roy was raised in a brothel and Edward’s from a town people have only ever heard of through suggestive jokes about lipstick and sheep, but both of them made enough of the wrong kind of choices to be able to talk big and back it up with the worst of them. “It seems you’ve remained quite close over the years.”

Bones barks a laugh. “Close enough to yell for help when the broomstick’s stuck in the churchhouse chimney and the muggles have just opened up the flue,” she says, as Edward goes through a small but dramatic face journey that starts with him mouthing Livvie? and then coloring abruptly. It’s a good thing his hair is down to cover the way his ears go burgundy. “You wanted Black upstairs, didn’t you? Go on. We’re waiting for mad eye and Snape in any case. I hear we’ll be doing this in the backyard.”

Chapter End Notes

Ed: oh my god royald they’re lesbians

Roy: good of you to finally notice
“Your brother,” Hairy says hotly, “is a maniac.”

“Mm,” Al says, opening the door to the room Ed specified; it’s small and contains a dusty couch, a rickety desk and some chairs. It’s not exactly the cleanest of environments, but it’ll suit. “I thought his reaction to things was pretty tame, personally. Did it not seem that way to you?”

“He took our wands,” Hairy says tightly, but he’s followed Al into the room even if he’s mostly stuck by the door.

“You attacked him,” Al points out mildly. He’s interacting with Hairy in a professional capacity and it’s in both their best interests for Al to build some trust, but Hairy and his friends knocked Ed out and took Al for an extremely ill-advised joyride. “If two strangers grabbed one of your friends with no warning and disappeared with no way for you to follow, what would you have done?”

Hairy sets his jaw. “Fred and George shouldn’t have grabbed you,” he says grudgingly. “But he trapped us in the floor, and he went right for -”

He breaks off, still glaring, hands in fists. Al sighs. “Did he hurt you?”

“... No.”

“What did he do?”

“.... Pinned us. Took our wands.”

Al spreads his hands in a small there you go gesture. “Ed disarmed you without hurting any of you. He may have seemed scary, but he’s a professional, and his reaction was very reasonable. He’s a State Alchemist. He is part of an official delegation that came to help you, as personally requested by your national chief of police, and you attacked him.” Al fixes Hairy with a look. “This incident could have been much bigger than it was. We all got very, very lucky that there were no more dementers at your relatives’ house, or something even worse. Fred and George could have been captured, or injured, or even killed.”

He lets that sit for a moment. Hairy doesn’t look chagrined, exactly, but he’s biting the inside of his cheek. Al gentles his tone slightly. “None of us want to see any of you get hurt. When you and your friends make decisions like that, you don’t just put yourself at risk, you risk the people who care about you, who come after you to help you and bring you back. Right now it’s part of my brother’s job to make sure everybody is safe, and if you’re knocking people out and running off into dangerous situations, you’re not only distracting everyone from the main objective, you’re making it an active hazard to be around you. Having your wands confiscated doesn’t hurt you, and it helps you not hurt other people, even by accident.”

That’s a lot longer to say than Ed’s getting a cookie for not tearing your heads off, but is arguably better received. “You’re not going to be without your wands forever. Right now, though, this is the safest option for everyone. I think we can all agree on that, yes?”

Hairy still looks thoroughly muleheaded about things, but the body language is that of someone who realizes there’s not much they can do right now. He glowers uncertainly at Al for a bit
anyway. “And now you’re going to look at my scar too?”

“Among other things,” Al allows, nodding.

“Your brother already looked at it. He didn’t find anything.”

“My brother is a lot of things, but medically trained is not one of them,” Al says dryly. “Do you want Mr. Black present for the entirety of the session? It seemed a little bit like the choice was made for you.”

“Yeah, he’ll be here,” Hairy says, like he expects that to be challenged. “What’re you going to do?”

“Mostly establish your medical history. Normally a lot of this would be filled out on paper, but due to the language barrier and lack of forms on hand I think it’ll be easiest for us to just have a discussion,” Al says. Then he sighs again. “Now. As my brother mentioned, Amestrian medical law isn’t applicable here - Xingese either - and your case would be an exception even if it were. Ordinarily, as your doctor, I am bound by patient confidentiality, which means your medical information is private, and anything you communicate to me as your medical provider is confidential and I cannot divulge it to anyone without your express written permission. In your situation, however, there are things I may have to share with my team as well as potentially several adults on your end.”

Hairy doesn’t look like he would benefit from an explanation that right now he is technically considered a civilian asset part of an active military operation and that General Mustang can order Al to count Hairy’s nose hairs and announce the results via bullhorn if he wants to, or tell his adults and guardians nothing whatsoever about what they’re doing to him and why. As a military contractor Al has some leeway to exercise his judgment when given orders, but there’s a reason he never takes such a contract unless it’s with Ed and the General on the other end. When the Amestrian military takes a situation over, they take it over, and it’s only the discretion of individual officers that makes things like privacy and bodily autonomy occasionally more than a vague theoretical concept or joke.

“However,” Al says aloud. What Hairy needs to know right now is that in this case, Al can and will treat him as much like an ordinary patient as he is able. “While we will be going over your health holistically so as not to miss any potential complicating factors, I am only going to share information that is strictly relevant to your… scar, as and if the situation demands, and nothing else. For example, if you tell me when you were six you licked a frog and had an embarrassing rash all over your tongue for two weeks, that’s important to know because it indicates you may have certain allergies, but that’s not something I’m going to discuss with anyone, as it is not relevant to the greater situation at hand and not necessary for anyone else to know. Does that all make sense?”

Hairy looks a little fishslapped by the wall of information, but after a few seconds of Al’s politely expectant look he nods.

Eyeing Al like he’s a potentially venomous species of lizard seems to be Hairy’s default; Al doesn’t take it personally. “Good,” he says. “If there’s anything you’re uncomfortable discussing in front of another person, you can send out Mr. Black at any time, and we can bring him back in after.” Al considers adding a version of his the more you tell me the truth, the faster and better I can help you speech that he usually only needs for younger children in similar situations, but decides against it. Hairy has no obvious incentive to lie or omit the specific information Al’s looking for, and at this age drawing attention to something you don’t want him to do would be practically guaranteeing he’d try it.
Al opts for an encouraging smile instead. “Let’s sit down. Do you have any questions for me while we wait for Mr. Black?”

“What’s qi?” Hairy says immediately, staying by the doorway as Al sits on the couch and lays his cane across his knees.

“It’s the energy that flows through all living things,” Al says, deciding that, in this particular situation at this particular moment, mystic pighockey is the way to go. “With training, it can be sensed, and it’s a very useful tool to investigate illness and other imbalances in the body. Qi comes later, though, we’re starting a little more basic first. You’re fifteen years old, yes?”

“Yeah,” Hairy says.

“You’re out of school right now for the summer? Are you specializing in anything?”

Hairy’s brows lower further in confusion. “Specializing?”

“Do your schools do that? Around fifteen is generally when most people pick apprenticeships or specific fields of study. Plenty stay on the general track, of course,” Al says; he knows intellectually that this can be a question with a lot of stress attached for teenagers around this age. “A lot of people wait to specialize until university.”

“We can pick classes and stuff,” Harry says warily, still looking a little like Al’s cornered him in a back alley and he’s not sure whether it’s to mug him or try to sell him a bootleg watch. “At hogwarts. There’s exams this year. Oh double you els. If you don’t pass those you have to retake the classes. I think. Maybe they just don’t let you go on to the next level.”

Not an individual overly devoted to the scholastic arts, then. Understandable, given the circumstances. “Anything in particular you’re interested in?”

“Flying,” Hairy says shortly.

“Flying,” Al repeats, steady. Teleporting wasn’t enough? They teach flying at school? “How, exactly…”

Al breaks off as he feels a couple of lifespots approaching, and a second later the door springs open and freezes, juddering slightly, against the wall.

This is generally what happens with doors when Ed is involved, but usually he’s got to make physical contact with them first. “Oh, that’s what he meant,” Al says aloud, as stomping approaches from down the hall. “About the house.”

A second later Ed shows up in the doorway, Serious Black scowling behind him. “Here’s your convict,” Ed tells Hairy as he strides through the door, in a similar tone he used to tell the General-then-Colonel here’s your damn report. “En-fuckin’-joy.”

“And his wand,” Black says pointedly, stepping around Ed to get into the room.

Ed gives him a look of scathing derision and tosses a wand to Hairy, who snatches it immediately out of the air. “You’re giving it back?” Al says, genuinely surprised. “What did the General threaten you with?” And why? He hadn’t seemed any happier than Ed was about the teenagers running amok teleporting and firing off knockout magic, and the General is a lot more vindictive than Ed is.

Ed shrugs, showing teeth in a pointed predator grin at Hairy. “No threats. They fuck around again,
I get to just get rid of their little sticks permanently.”

Then the General must be fully expecting the children to overstep again, in order to make Ed’s subsequent destruction of property seem reasonable and justified. Or maybe he just wanted to look generous and forgiving and not vindictive at all in front of the wizards? Whatever it is, Al’s not entirely sure he approves: Hairy looks pretty defiant at this proclamation, and Al kind of wants to remind Ed how he would’ve reacted at age fifteen to what is essentially a taunt of ‘try it again, I dare you’.

“If he does, I’ll buy you a new one,” Black says to Hairy, because he’s also apparently got the response of a teenage male with six to eight hundred things to prove. “But maybe don’t go around stunning soldiers, yeah? Seems like they’re pretty easily upset about these things.”

Al feels the winds of the lowest nether hells start to gather around his brother and stands up smartly to intercept things. “Why don’t you go downstairs and see about where you’ll be doing your demonstration?” he says, trying to block Ed’s view of the two wizards; it’s a lot harder now that he’s only half a head taller instead of twice Ed’s height, but sometimes Ed can be tricked into cooling down if he can’t see whatever it is he’s mad at.

“It’s outside,” Ed growls, looking like he’s gonna step around Al, only then some other thought visibly enters his head and immediately bulldozes whatever he was thinking about before. “Here,” Ed says, much more cheerful, and claps, touches his bracers and peels them off in a crackle of discharge. He tosses both to Al. “Hang onto these for me for a bit. I’m gonna try something new.”

Al gives him the deeply questionable look that statement deserves. “And what’s that going to be exactly?”

“Oh… just the next generation of arms race technology.” With a maniacal cackle at his own dumb joke, Ed’s gone.

“If you blow your arm off I’m not reattaching it for you again!” Al calls after him, exasperated, then shuts the door and turns back to the wizards. “Sorry about him,” he tells their dubious looks, going back to sit down on the couch and put Ed’s bracers beside him. “He just gets excited sometimes.”

“You… reattach arms?” Black says skeptically.

“Yes,” Al says, because, well, technically… yes. “In certain circumstances. But I would prefer not to. Please, sit down - are you a relative of Hairy’s, Mr. Black?”

“I’m his god father,” Black says, picking a chair across from the couch and sitting down; only then does Hairy sit, scooting the chair a little closer to him.

“God father?” Al says politely, deliberately suppressing his own personal associations with those two words both separately and together; it may actually just be one of those translation mishaps, though he can’t guess as to what term it might be mangling.

“It’s - somebody you name for your child, to take care of them if anything. Happens to you,” Black says, his expression fracturing very slightly mid-sentence. He coughs a little. “It’s a muggle term. Came from one of their religions.”

“Oh, I see,” Al says, cautiously optimistic. A convict currently wanted by the state is not the absolute best of options, but it’s an alternative to the aunt and uncle and there seems to be some formality to the arrangement. “Does it give you any legal guardianship?”
“Not - directly,” Black says. “Ordinarily, yeah. I’d be first in line for custody, but -” He blows out a frustrated breath and gestures. “Got to clear my name first, and all that.”

“I see. I hope for a successful resolution to your appeal,” Al says, and only once it’s left his mouth does he realize the rote wellwishing came out automatically in Xingese. Oops. Black is nodding and grimacing in a grateful sort of way, though, so what Ed said about the translation rocks not distinguishing between languages must be accurate. “You’re here accompanying Hairy in your capacity as god father, then, as a stand-in for his parents,” Al says, deciding they might as well begin. “We’re going to go over his medical information and establish what we can about family medical history as well, so anytime you feel you have information that may be relevant, please don’t hesitate to add what you know. At some point there may be some topics Hairy is uncomfortable discussing with you in the room, however, so we may ask you to step out for a moment or two, but on the whole this is very much a conversation between the three of us.”

“What kinds of topics?” Black asks suspiciously.

“Are you sexually active?” Al says brightly, turning directly to Hairy.

Hairy’s eyes go huge and he sputters as Black roars with laughter. “No,” Hairy manages, mortified, looking like he wants to turtle into his shirt and disappear as Black gives him a couple of jovial backslaps. “No, I, I’m not, no.”

“It’s alright if you are,” Black reassures inbetween cackles. “Just make sure you’re polite, say please and thank you, girls like that, and never do a thing without protection -”

“Serious!” Hairy complains, turtling further in his seat, but Black just slings an arm around his shoulders and gives him a friendly shake. “Don’t worry about it, kid,” he says happily. “It’ll happen when it happens. I wasn’t kidding about the protection, though, alright? You don’t want to be sitting across from a doctor like this explaining how you thought it was just dragon pox, honest, and you have no idea how it got on your -”

“Serious!”

“Just saying,” Black says cheerfully, as Hairy squirms under his arm but makes no move to actually get it off. “Better safe than sorry.”

Al coughs slightly into his fist, amused. “That’s broadly correct,” he says, smiling at Hairy’s wince, “and he’s also right, that’s not something we need to worry about right now. We’ve established you’re fifteen - are you mixed as well?”

“What?”

“Mixed parentage. Like my brother and I,” Al says, gesturing at his face, then belatedly remembers their looks probably don’t signify anything to them. “Our mother was East Amestrian but our father was from the desert. The coloring is from Dad - Easterners tend to look either like General Mustang or Captain Havoc,” he adds for reference. “Usually either pale and blond or mixed Xingese, what with being so close to the border.”

Hairy eyes him like he thinks this might be a trick question. “My mum was white,” he says after a moment, almost cautiously, glancing at Black; Black’s mostly still squinting at Al like he’s trying to figure out which parts come from which parent. “I look like my dad. Except the eyes.”

“He does,” Black says, looking back at Hairy immediately at this and nodding encouragingly. “Spitting image. Very much lily’s eyes, though.”
“That makes sense,” Al says. Presumably white is the slang for Hairy’s aunt and uncle’s ethnicity, if the word is even translating correctly; Black’s as well, probably, given he looks fairly similar: dark hair, very pale skin, dark eyes. “I understand you’ve been living with your aunt and uncle most of your life - are you close with any other relatives?”

“No,” Hairy says shortly, knuckles tightening on his knees. “They’re all dead.”

Black grips Hairy’s shoulder, face darkening. “I’m sorry,” Al says, meaning it. “I don’t mean to pry, but any information on your relatives’ health helps us build a clearer profile on your own. Cardiac and neurological issues - heart and brain - are often hereditary, and if there any… symptoms -” Al pointedly lets his eyes flick up to Hairy’s scar - “this may help us determine what may be your normal background pathology and what may be caused by… outside influences.”

It’s also the best way Al has right now to fish for information that might help him resolve Hairy’s living situation. He doesn’t even know if they have social workers here, and the case is already convoluted enough; given there seems to be a vested interest in keeping Hairy with his aunt and uncle for some reason, approaching things head on may not be the way to get results.

“Wait, wait. Heart and brain?” Black says, leaning forward, glancing between Hairy and Al. “What’s wrong with his brain?”

“Potentially nothing. I believe headaches and intermittent pain specifically in the scar were mentioned, when your case was outlined to me,” Al says. “Is that correct?”

“Yes,” Hairy says tightly, glancing at Black again. “It hurts when Voldemort’s close. Or when I have the - dreams.”

“Mm. Between the size of the scar and the placement, the scar tissue alone wouldn’t be causing that sort of thing, though lingering psychosomatic symptoms from past trauma have been known to cause migraines,” Al says consideringly. “If you’re having certain kinds of dreams, there may be other factors affecting your brain, but either way we’ll get a clearer idea of what may be happening when I examine your qi. Did either of his parents get migraines, do you know? Regular headaches? Any other illnesses?”

“No,” Black says, slightly bewildered. “No, nothing like that. James did get dragon pox, once, when we were sixteen, but that’s - it cleared up no problem, spent hardly two weeks in the infirmary. His parents both died of it later on, but they were both very old, it wasn’t a surprise… No, he and lily were both perfectly healthy, far as I know.”

“That’s good,” Al says. Whatever dragon pox is sounds a lot like pneumonia, in terms of mortality: a healthy sixteen year old can shake it off but an elderly couple might succumb. “What about you, Hairy? Any health issues? Any hospital stays?”

“No... really,” Hairy says. “I... usually I’m in the infirmary because I got hurt. Not sick.”

Al hmms. “What kinds of injuries have you been treated for?”

“... My leg got bit by an Acromantula in the try wizard tournament last year,” Hairy says after a second, grimacing. “And I got all the bones in my arm regrown one time. And... when I got bit by the Basilisk. That was mostly healed by fox, though.” Hairy shrugs, rubbing his right elbow and looking at his knees. “And - dementer exposure. A couple of times. I guess.”

“Exposure to dementers requires hospitalization?” Al asks, concerned. Ed had seemed fine, if a little on edge, but Ed can seem fine while actively getting his leg chewed off by a crocodile. “Are
there long term effects? Delayed reactions?"

Black is grimacing now as well, but it’s a hollower, more distant look than Hairy’s, the lines deepening on his face. “Depends,” he says, voice rough. “Some people have - sensitivity. And the longer you’re exposed, the more dementers there are… it can get. Bad.”

“What kind of bad?” Al says. “Physical complications, or…?”

Hairy’s gaze flicks back up to Al, some of his earlier hostility returning. “You’re stuck there and you can’t really move. I fell off my broom once because a lot of them got too close to the pitch at hog warts. And I passed out another time when we - when the dementers all swarmed on the grounds again.”

“Dementers feed on souls,” Black says quietly, a little hoarse, before Al can ask what exactly falling off one’s broom refers to. “But they’ll drain your magic as well, if they’re close to you. And it’ll affect your life force too if it’s for long enough. You’re weak for a long time after. Nightmares, nerves… even short term exposure can put you on bed rest. All you can do, really,” he adds, to Al’s intent look. “Rest up, eat chocolate - try and cheer yourself up.”

That is… doable, as prescriptions go; getting Ed to eat chocolate is like asking water to flow downhill, though Al would like some more information. “You mentioned some individuals have a sensitivity,” he says, because with Ed’s luck he might end up dropping on his ass from this a week from now and Al will have better luck convincing him to take it easy if he can brandish some medical facts in his face. “Do we know what factors into that? Is it physical?”

“They make you relive your worst memories,” Hairy says shortly. “If you’ve got bad ones, it’s worse for you.”

Ah. Al’s going to stuff Ed full of chocolate until he chokes. Black looks at Hairy with a kind of helpless empathy; Hairy glances at him and looks back down at his lap. “My parents dying,” he says, an answer to an unspoken question Al’s not sure Black actually wanted to ask.

Black hisses in a breath through his teeth. “You remember that?”

“The dementers brought it back,” Hairy says, almost listlessly. “I guess without them I wouldn’t have known what my mum and dad’s voices sounded like. So.”

Black grips Hairy’s shoulder, tight, then seems to remember Al’s in the room too, glancing over at him. “James and lily were murdered,” he says curtly. “By Voldemort. Personally.”

“I didn’t even know they were murdered,” Hairy says distantly. “At first. Until I was eleven I was told they died in a car crash.”

“A car crash?” Black says incredulously, rearing back before reigning it in a little as Hairy startles. “That - well, I suppose no one would have told muggles…”

“They knew,” Hairy says, terse, uncomfortable. “They don’t like magic. They thought they could make me normal.”

“That’s…” Black squeezes Hairy’s shoulders again and steals a glance at Al, once, his expression slightly lost. “You are normal,” he says. “Don’t let it get to you. Muggles can be a bit….”

He trails off. It’s clear that he doesn’t know what else to say to this, or what more to do.

There’s a tiredness in Hairy’s eyes that Al’s seen before, in the faces of children, husbands,
mothers, wives, and it’s not much to do with remembering his parents’ murders. There was so very little Master Yunxian and the clinic could do, in the end. They stayed in a village hardly a week, maybe a day more, occasionally two if there was a bout of illness going around or the weather was really bad. They could offer no resources beyond healing what was currently injured and having some quiet conversations that they had very little way to follow up on. Al had very nearly broken a man’s arm once when Master Yunxian caught up to him and shared some very sharp words about who exactly the retribution for the broken bone would fall on.

Everyone knew the clinic would move on. Master Yunxian’s travel route was seven months total: seven months before she returned to Dàdū and started to cycle through again. A lot can happen in seven months.

Sometimes they get lucky, and the village they’re at is either built around or nearby an imperial garrison. Master Yunxian is an Imperial Physician and her clinic work is state funded; she technically has rank in a military context if there’s a medical or public health matter at hand. In two cases she was able to ensure regular home visits for the family in question from a garrison sergeant and a few of their more sympathetic soldiers, but even that was done as an exchange of goodwill and favors, largely off the books. Sometimes there’s a relative the next village over that’s willing to take on a ward. If a child can make it to a city, a temple or a trade school generally takes them in - many receive imperial stipends specifically for orphan care - but that requires them to get there in the first place.

Some do; Mei told him it was unusual for her to have traveled by herself all the way to Amestris, but more for the distance and border crossing than for the fact that she was eleven and alone: freight caravans pick up farm kids all the time, taking them to the nearest town to sell or buy whatever their clan sends them for and taking payment in barter as much as money. Mei’s an alkahestrist, however, and Chang is one of the clans that teaches everyone to fight practically from birth, seeing as they lived in bandit country and weren’t large enough or rich enough to stratify into soldier castes or take on bodyguard clans as retainers. Her situation was not the norm.

Hairy is fifteen. That’s not nothing: he can likely work a job, if necessary, and will reach the age of majority in two years if Al understands the wizards’ legal adulthood standards correctly. Two years is even longer than seven months, however, and Hairy is caught up in a situation run by players that have already proven that they’re not exactly prioritizing his health.

In four cases, Master Yunxian offered the child a choice to go with the clinic and be dropped off at the nearest temple. Two of the children had taken her up on it - one eight, one ten - and they’d escorted one to a Thousand Palms monastery and the other to one of the Great Cycle schools that trained scribes and accountants. The other two children had chosen to stay with their families. Al can’t blame them. Being asked to leave everything you’ve ever known - survivable so far - and strike out into something totally unfamiliar with no guarantee it’ll actually be any better… that’s an immensely difficult choice to ask any adult, let alone any child.

Not every parent loves their children. Not everyone is even capable of it. That’s a certain kind of tragedy, to discover that about yourself only after the damage is done. And that’s not even the worst of it. You can love your child and still hurt them, Al learned, hurt them intentionally, brutally, repeatedly. You can find out that love doesn’t have to mean anything at all.

Al sometimes lies awake and thinks about how he’s experienced more deeply fucky shit - to put it Ed’s way - a lot more often and more regularly as a medical professional than as a haunted suit of armor swirling in a waist-high soup of genocide, human experimentation and state violence. It’s different kinds of fucky shit, of course - much more mundane. Much more endemic to the human condition. Nothing as easily solvable as a near-immortal alchemy-negating homunculus.
Al misses Ed pretty regularly these days, first with traveling with the clinic and now studying in Dàdū, but at the same time he’s glad Ed’s not there with him, doing the rounds. Ed hasn’t got the circuits for this kind of stuff. He’d get madder and madder with nowhere for it to go, and for all that medical alkahestry can do some incredible things there’s still so much that just isn’t fixable. Ed doesn’t do unfixable. Ed sees solutions that no one else does, runs risk calculations that don’t add up if it were any other person, and at the core of it all he’s still the boy that looked at death and decided he wasn’t going to buy into all that propaganda about it being permanent.

It’s part of why Al didn’t put up much of a fuss when Ed decided to stay with the military. Solving problems directly is good for him, and with the General and his team backing him, Ed’s a lot less likely to die taking on the kinds of things no one else would dream of daring to touch. He’s doing good work, important work, with a guarantee he won’t ever be used as a weapon the way the General and the others were, and while he might be exposed to things like dementers in the course of that, it keeps him very far away from the very dangerous place known as bored.

And while Ed is sorting the terrorists, Al can take care of situations like this. “You attend a boarding school most of the year, yes?” he says, keeping his tone casual. Hairy nods, eyeing him warily. “And in the summers you stay with your aunt and uncle?”

“He won’t be anymore,” Black cuts in resolvedly, straightening in his seat but not removing his arm from Hairy’s shoulders. “He can stay with me. I - may not have much now, but - Grimmauld place is warded, at least. And I’ve got funds. There’s that. Hell, we could - stay in Spain, maybe. Turkey. Grease. They don’t give a damn about what’s happening in Britain, they won’t care I’m a wanted man. But you’re not going back there, Hairy. I already told dumbell door. With dementers after you - you can’t stay with muggles. And anywhere without a Fidelius isn’t safe.”

Hairy looks like he was just told the winter solstice came early this year and that his presents are all out back since the truck hauling all of them won’t fit through the garage door. “You mean it?” he demands, twisting to Black. “What did dumbell door say?”

“He said it’s alright,” Black says, looking cautiously happy and relieved. “Said it just now downstairs in front of everyone - even director bones, you can ask. And we’ll hold him to it, yeah? What do you say?”

“Yeah,” Hairy says animatedly. “Yeah, that’s - I’d like that. Let’s do it. Here or anywhere, I don’t care,” and Black grins hugely and shakes him again and pulls him in for a one-armed hug. Hairy, apparently not one to put much stock in maintaining teen boy cool, wholeheartedly throws both arms around him and squeezes enough to make Black oof and laugh again.

Al sits back, quietly satisfied. The situation may not be entirely resolved, but this is a very good start. He’s not sure what Ed or more likely the General just did downstairs to facilitate Black’s claim to custody, but it sounds like it’ll stick: if he heard Black right then Bones, national director of law enforcement for the wizards, was party to the discussion, and if she didn’t take issue with the presence of an ostensible mass murderer then she may if not support then at least not object to Black submitting some kind of appeal for amnesty.

Hairy and Black separate, Black still grinning and Hairy smiling, looking almost like a different person without the deep pinch between his brows. “Congratulations,” Al says, meaning it. “Now, shall we take a look at your qi?”

Chapter End Notes
sirius, squinting at al: didn’t the crazy one say your dad was some kinda immortal whatever

al: mhm

sirius: so… is that why he’s….. Like That

al, turning Trisha Elric’s Nothing Fazes Me Not God Not You Not The Devil smile on him: oh no we get our best qualities from our mother alternatively

harry: so yeah i was like abused or whatever. Idk how to really talk about it tho

sirius: yeah no same. Wish i could give u some advice on how to like. deal or whatevs but i have one (1) coping mechanism and that’s turning into a dog
Ed would’ve kept the wands, if only for a couple days to make a point, only this entire situation is so much of a thrashing, foaming clusterfuck that giving them back somehow turned out to be the least shittiest option. The adults wizards are useless, they clearly have next to no authority with the kids themselves, and yesterday the lot of them almost all fucking died via dementer because Beardy and whoever the fuck else decided that security sure was a cool sounding word but not a concept they needed to worry themselves with.

There was a shapeshifting fear monster inside their safehouse. They didn’t even clear the safehouse before they warded it up with their fidelly-whatever. There could have been a rabid bear in the attic for all they knew, and they just barricaded themselves in anyway, kids and all. And the kids might be all friendly with the chimera, but it went after Arget and Ed’s not gonna bank on a large, dangerous animal behaving safely and predictably at all times.

So the kids need weapons. Little fuckers. Ed has to console himself with the fact that the sticks themselves weren’t all that hard to take away, and Mustang gave him explicit, public permission to fuck the wands permanently if any of the kids try shit again. Which should be somewhat of a deterrent, even if they are a pack of fuckin’ fetuses with their good decision making brain bits still barely half-built and not moving especially fast down the production line. They try some shit, Ed’s most likely just gonna take their sticks away again, but they don’t need to know he’s not gonna woodchipper those things into toothpicks unless he really has to.

In the meantime, he’s got shit to do. Ed ducks into the map room to pick up his jacket and finds everybody else already in there, Hughes pointing stuff out to Bones on the map. It sounds like he’s also giving her the whole your government is compromised, if you get any execution orders treat that shit like a live grenade and watch out for batches of prisoners disappearing talk; Beardy, Baldy and Ponytail Guy are there too, though Mustang’s a little off to the side of them talking quietly with Hawkeye.

They both look over at him as he crouches by the packs and swaps out his white gloves for the black ones, which makes them eye his hands for a second too long, faces impassive. Ed just knows they know the gloves are lined with lead shot - Breda’s gift to him on his eighteenth birthday, “so you can punch just as hard as you used to, but this time with both hands” - but neither of them have said anything, and so far they’ve both signed off on any report Ed submits that posits he has no idea why the target’s kneecap just broke like that. They’re not saying anything right now, either, which means they probably won’t care if Ed dislocates a wizard jaw or two.

Ed shakes his hands out to settle the heavy gloves, then looks around. Jones glances up inquisitively at him from the table, so Ed jerks his chin in a question. “See any coal around anywhere?”

Jones’ eyebrows draw together. “Coal?”

That gets Mustang’s attention enough for him to step over, leaving the wizards entirely to Hughes; Hawkeye follows him. She’s tracking everyone in the room in that mildly terrifying 360 awareness thing she does, Ed can tell; she was in the room when Mustang started reaming out Beardy and flipped Bones, and the fact that she’s sticking so close now means she’s probably gonna bodyslam any wizard that steps within arm’s reach of him. Shadowing Mustang is more Havoc’s job these
days now that Hawkeye runs Internal Security, but Ed doesn’t blame Havoc for stepping back on this one. Mustang’s their heaviest hitter and Hawkeye’s got the best track record at keeping him focused, functional and alive.

Besides, if somebody hits Mustang with a mind control whammy, they won’t even have time to yell *abracadabra* before they’re all cooked. Hell, Ed will jump in front of that magic zap thing himself if he has to. He’s gonna have to ask Bones or whoever to use the mind control on him so that they can at least figure out how it works; if he gets compromised Mustang can just pull his oxygen long enough to black him out and get Havoc to sit on him or something. Fucking mind control. Wizards are insane.

Mustang looks as lackadaisically ignorant of any risk as ever as he comes up, glancing at Ed’s bare arms and tapping two fingers against his own forearm. “Where’d these go?”

“With Al,” Ed says. The bracers are kind of a necessity, because blocking with his right arm is an unbreakable habit at this point and wearing just one is stupid. He usually transmutes the lead in his black gloves into spiked knuckledusters or armor plating, depending on the fight, and between that and the bracers he generally gets almost full coverage on all the high-contact surfaces of both arms. For this, though - Ed had only caught a glimpse of what those kids had fired out of their sticks before it hit him, and while it felt like being kicked by a mule, it looked like a bolt of light. It’s a supporting point to the qi-as-magic-as-light-frequencies model, but Ed’s more concerned right now with how to defend against it if he can’t just shut it off.

Fortunately, Ed had an idea - or rather Greed did: you want stopping power, you fuck around with some carbon.

“I’m gonna try something,” is what Ed says aloud, so as not to tip off any wizards. “Dunno what the fuck else they’re fucking with around here, and maybe steel’s not gonna be enough. I got some ideas to deal with it. Just in case.”

“Edward Elric, exhibiting caution?” Mustang says, eyebrows rising all amused over the satisfied look in his eyes. “Colonel, could you check out the window for me? I suspect hogs may be trying to fly.”

“That’s very funny, sir,” Hawkeye says tonelessly, because she’s the only person with common sense who still voluntarily gets within a mile of Mustang. “How much coal do you need?”

“Like a kilo?” Ed grimaces at the imprecision, but he has no idea how much he’ll have to extract to get what he actually needs. “Carbon content varies and for all I know the coal here is actually just unicorn shit or something.”

“We also need chromoly steel,” Mustang says, gesturing slightly at Hawkeye. That throws Ed for a second until he remembers that she doesn’t have any of her rifles with her and they’re sure as shit gonna need at least one. “Or at least chromium and molybdenum separately, as I’m fairly sure you’re capable of transmuting any kind of steel to exact percentages.”

“You got an array for that?” Ed says, because he’s never transmuted a working firearm before - though, hell, if Hawkeye disassembles one of her pistols and lets him have a look he can probably put something together from first principles. That would definitely not be his first choice, however, and probably not Mustang and Hawkeye’s either if there’s a more proven option to hand.

“He’s made weapons for me before,” Hawkeye confirms.

“If you can provide the appropriate steel grade, I can take care of the rest,” Mustang says.
“Yeah, okay,” Ed says. “Like two, two anna half kilos of carbon, then. Let’s hope they have coal.”

The wizards do not fucking have coal. What they make their fires out of, apparently, is wood logs and magic. Ed is told this when he finally gives in and asks after a quick circuit of the house (kids are in the kitchen, getting reamed by their mom; Ed gets a dirty look from Not A Twin and Miss Redhead that he ignores in favor of checking the empty fireplace. Havoc, back on babysitting duty, gives him a please save me look that Ed also dutifully ignores.) Ponytail guy isn’t balls deep in Hughes’ interactive seminar on So Your Government Is Super Compromised, Here’s What Not To Do, so Ed goes up to him and asks what they burn around here.

“You just light some logs with an Incendio,” Ponytail says, bemused. “If you want a real fire, I mean. A standard everlasting conflagration charm’s safer, usually, and gives off heat and light just the same.”

Well that’s spectacularly unhelpful. “Do you have gasoline?” Ed demands. “Methane? If I have to pull it from the fucking trees I’m going the fuck home.”

“I… don’t think we have either,” Ponytail tells Ed, at least having the decency to look apologetic.

“What’s methane?” Baldy asks interestedly, cropping up at Ponytail’s shoulder.

“Cow farts,” Ed says sourly, thoroughly disgusted with wizard uselessness. “It’s also like ninety percent of natural gas and blows up. What?”

He says the last to Mustang, who’s eyeing him from where he’s on the outskirts of Hughes’ presentation again. Mustang just shrugs with his face, but then he tips his head in the slightest bit towards the door in a way that means let’s talk privately.

“Cow… farts?” Ponytail says delicately.

“Don’t worry about it,” Ed says, turning to follow Mustang out of the map room and into one of the empty ones across the hall. Hawkeye lets them go - Beardy and the others glance at them curiously as is, better she stays and listens - but not before catching Ed’s eye and giving him the watch his ass look.

“What,” Ed says, when Mustang closes the door behind them.

“I’m going to assume you can work with gases, since you asked for methane,” Mustang says, crossing the room to open one of the windows all the way. Then he stands to the side, taps his fingertips together and pulls his hands apart, palms up like he’s praying for rain.

Ed barely hears the crackle of transmutation, subtle and almost soundless the way all of Mustang’s discharges are, and then he feels the air change, an artificial breeze coming from the window as the local gas composition of the room starts dancing to Mustang’s tune. He’s - oh, what a bastard. Ed glares at the side of Mustang’s focused, blue-lit face as he concentrates carbon dioxide in the air between them; in seconds it’s coalescing into grey mist, then roiling white fog. Mustang fuckin’ transmutes it solid in midair, the block of dry ice thudding into the ground as the reaction ends.

“When did you get good?” Ed says accusingly.

Mustang narrows his eyes. “I’ve been good, Fullmetal,” he says, some peevishness in his tone as he lowers his hands. “I was the youngest State Alchemist ever to pass before you came along.”

“Don’t bullshit me. That was a full state change, which you can’t do to CO2 that fast without controlling the pressure and temperature,” Ed says. The Gate gives you a lot, sure, but some stuff
you just can’t pull off without studying and practicing your ass into a ditch. “That’s a three-stage concentric array. I’ve barely seen you clap since the Promised Day and you specialized within an inch of your life to make more room in your head for all the politics.”

“I specialized in atmospheric transmutation,” Mustang grumbles. “Which is not so narrow a field that you can only blow things up with it. It may also be possible, Fullmetal, that when I practice I do so in private, not on the parade grounds in front of everybody and their aunty in Command. Hurry up before it sublimates entirely.”

“Yeah, thanks for making me fucking freeze my fingers off to touch it,” Ed complains, crouching down.

“It’s the most stable form of concentrate without maintaining an active transmutation, and while you might decide that introducing another array to someone else’s already active is a grand old time the rest of us are a little more careful with our lives,” Mustang says pissily.

“What are you talking about, me an’Al transmute shit together all the time,” Ed says, kind of distractedly since the temperature variable here is so whacked. The surface of the dry ice is in a constant state of boiling away back into the air, and he needs to concentrate more when he can’t keep ongoing physical contact with whatever he’s transmuting anyway. The block starts layering into coal, the excess oxygen releasing into the air, and while the whole thing isn’t as fast as Ed’s usual it still comes out as a nice tidy chunk of carbon, edges clean and corners geometrically perfect.

Ed has to smile: if he’s thinking about Al when he transmutes he tends to channel him; Al was right when he said he’s the one who’s good at neat details while Ed generally just wants everything to hurry the fuck up already. Very privately Ed can admit to himself that up close his gargoyles can be kinda blurry, which is a fact that Al uses mercilessly when he wants to bitch about Ed’s taste, style, skill, behaviors, sexual preferences and all past and current life choices.

“What do you mean you transmute together,” Mustang says.

Right, he’s still here. Ed flaps a hand, lifting up the chunk of coal onto his shoulder. “I mean our arrays overlap all the time. Not on everything,” Ed admits, because okay, when they’re transmuting anything combustible or reactive or really delicate they tend to stay out of each other’s way. “But carbon’s stable, I could have totally pulled it from your concentration in gas form.”

“I’ll keep that in mind for next time,” Mustang says, back to sounding amused. He’s a fucking freak. “Of course atmospheric transmutation is also just another card in your repertoire.”

This makes Ed stop, put the block back down on the floor and turn to confront Mustang with his hands on his hips. “Okay, what do you have to be jealous over? Especially now? You’ve seen the fucking Gate too.”

Mustang blinks. “Did I sound jealous?”

Ed opens his mouth and hesitates. Mustang didn’t sound jealous. Mustang’s never been jealous - between every report and op dissection and case walkthrough, Mustang’s arguably the person who knows Ed’s scope best after Al, and he’s never made those little comments and gestures that Ed’s come to realize he should expect from most other alchemists. Though honestly, why should he? What Mustang wants out of alchemy, he’s got. There’s nothing in Ed’s yard that Mustang might be tempted to lean on the fence over.

Doesn’t mean he’s not up to something, though. Ed narrows his eyes. “Then what’s your deal,
“bastard?”

Mustang smiles. “I’m simply admiring what a talented subordinate I have, Fullmetal.”

“Gross,” Ed says, picking his coal back up. Then he squints at Mustang. “You gave me food,” he says suspiciously. “A bunch of times. Good food. And you only lectured me like once. And that for hardly five minutes. You’re being nice to me. The fuck is going on?”

Mustang looks back him, smile fading but his usual bored bitch look not phasing in to take its place. It leaves him blank, unreadable, his expression as vacant as a mannequin’s. “You deal with a lot, under my command.”

He means this whole Promised Day againsies bullshit. Ed bares his teeth, the grin half-incredulous. “And? They don’t call us out for the kiddy shit, General.”

“No,” Mustang says thoughtfully. “No they do not.”

“So don’t start babying me now, bastard, you’ll freak me out. Wait, what the fuck am I saying? Have whatever the fuck moral crises you want so long as it keeps the food coming.”

Mustang rolls his eyes. “I’m starting to worry about the integrity of my command, what with the bribery standards for the Fullmetal Alchemist being so low.”

“Bribery? You already owe me three weeks of lunch, and don’t think some day old noodles counted to your ledger. Callin’ me cheap on top of that, that’s a full month you owe me now, Mustang.”

“Yes, yes, steak and lobster tail every night and a cabaret show after,” Mustang says, like he doesn’t think Ed’s gonna hold him to it. “What else do you need for the chromoly?”

Ed resettles his coal on his shoulder. “Chromium I can get from any stainless steel, molybdenum… probably gonna have to knock some protons offa some silver, that shit’s a lanthanide.” The fork he’d transmuted at lunch had been almost pure silver; for the amount they need even one of those chopsticks will do. “You need it now?”

“If what you’re planning with your carbon requires testing, then let’s say tomorrow,” Mustang says, with a half-lidded look that means you had better do some testing if we’re going to use it at all. “Hawkeye has other firearms she can use until then, if necessary.”

“Did Havoc bring his shotgun?” Ed says. “Or like… anything?”

“This was initially going to be a wholly diplomatic excursion, with the terrorism entirely your purview,” Mustang says, dry as sand. “Showing up covered in grenades and body armor would have sent entirely the wrong message.”

“So… did he?”

Mustang’s mouth curves slightly. “It’s disassembled at the bottom of his pack.”

“Nothing long range though,” Ed observes. “You know how to make explosive rounds? Like what they use to trigger avalanches up in Briggs?”

Mustang narrows his eyes, thinking. “I imagine I know what you’re referring to, yes. Hawkeye would know better than I what kind of modifications her weapons can handle, however.”
“Bear hunting ones, then,” Ed decides. “The cartridge size is practically the same as her Kerchatka, like this big. If we’re making it from scratch we can make ‘em fit perfect anyhow.”

“Arming for homunculi,” Mustang says, not a question.

Ed grimaces. “There’s only eight of us. Three alchemists. Hughes can’t really run. If people get separated, everybody who’s shooting better be able to land a real fuckin’ hit with the first shot.”

Mustang’s face goes all frosty again, the way it usually does when anyone does a round of Remember How Hughes Almost Died? “I can provide the charges if you do the casings.”

“Ya,” Ed says shortly, then amends, “Yeah. We can do that tomorrow morning. What are the wizards doing tomorrow? More sitting around caramelizing in their own idiot juice?”

“We may yet get to see the proposed ambush site,” Mustang says, voice light again, a smirk growing at the corners of his mouth. “Though perhaps they may get caught up in their own affairs again. You don’t have to bother with the accent, you know. It’s not as though I’m unaware of where you’re from, ya?”

Ed glares. What an asshole. “Y’ain’even using it right, Central boy, you can keep East outta your mouth,” he says, deliberately slurring into full hick. “Lessyou wanme talkin’ right all the time, brass an’all, leave off all everybody complainin’ to you how nobody can unnerstan me.”

“I was stationed in East for seven years,” Mustang says, mock offended. “I think I have some right to the regionalisms. Havoc doesn’t bother with his accent, you know, and no one’s ever complained about him.”

“Havoc’s from a town with a general store,” Ed says pointedly, dropping the hickness. “They have a post office. They have a sign with their population on it and it’s three whole digits, wow. Resembool’s two more hours east of there on the train. Compared to me Havoc doesn’t have an accent.” Mustang looks like he’s desperately trying not to laugh now; Ed glares, copies Mustang’s pose and flicks his bangs out of his eyes, taking one hand off the coal to gesture airily with it. “If I didn’t sound standard from the start your ass would’ve been all ohhhh, Fullmetal, do at least try to sound some semblance of civilized, we work in an office not a cattle yard, ah ha ha, what would the brass say. Don’t even try to claim otherwise, bastard.”

“I would never dream of it,” Mustang says, visibly biting the inside of his cheek. “You are of course entitled to speak however you wish. If this is how you choose to comport yourself in professional settings then far be it from me to keep you from cultivating your reputation.”

You wanna be a hick, act a hick, Fullmetal. “Ah, put a cock in it, horsefucker;” Ed grumbles, turning for the door; if they go any more like this they’ll be stuck in here for another hour and it’ll be a shouter in no time.

“Anything to keep my people happy,” Mustang says, because he just has to get the last word.

“I’ll be happy when we get to leave,” Ed retorts.

“Indeed. Isn’t it nice when our objectives align?”

“Oh yeah. Super nice for you.” Ed snorts, steadies his coal and heads back for the map room before Mustang can pull him any further into a verbal slapmatch. The guy might not be a totally unrecoverable asshole, but that doesn’t mean Ed’s gonna let him get a swelled head about it.
Ed: yeah this guy’s not a totally unsalvageable fuckhead, it’s whatever

Al: ah. i’ll just go get the betrothal contract, shall i
“Here.” Al holds both hands out, palm up. “Put your hands on mine. This won’t feel like anything to you, but it lets me take a closer look and check your lungs and heart.”

“How’s that work?” Black says curiously, as Hairy glances at him and then puts his hands in Al’s, still wary but willing enough. “Your brother put his hand on Hairy’s head and - well, didn’t seem to do much, and he said he didn’t find much either.”

Ed must have read Hairy compositionally, though Al can’t imagine what he thought that’d get him. He very professionally refrains from rolling his eyes. Black’s not looking his way anyway; “Did it feel like anything?” he asks Hairy.

“No,” Hairy admits, a little grudgingly, looking at Black again and then back to his hands in Al’s. “Is this alchemy too?”

“No quite,” Al says. “Ed examined your chemical makeup to make sure nothing was obviously wrong with your body. I’m taking a look at your qi. Think of it as him taking a look with binoculars while I’m using more of a microscope. Or… well, a stethoscope. But a very big one.”

“...What?” Black says confusedly, but Al’s concentrating. His eyes half-close as he sinks deeper into the qi-sense, automatically falling into meditation breathing to compensate for the thick, oversaturated feeling of this land’s qi. Hairy and Black are two bright columns right in front of him, Hairy’s slightly smaller but… heavier, thicker, and very unbalanced. The miasma around his head is just as bright as the rest of him, but feels very, very off in a way Al really doesn’t know how to quantify. The disruption to normal qi patterns isn’t the only thing off about it; tumors feel like that, like eddies and whirlpools where there shouldn’t be any, the body’s nutrients being diverted off course, but this just straight up feels wrong.

Al’s never had a living qi system ever feel so off like that, even in very sick patients. About half of any given illness is the body’s own attempts to correct the imbalance, after all. Medical qi sensing is like any other kind of diagnostic process; you learn what’s “normal”, or at least the average, and you look for patterns and clues and things that stand out or don’t quite behave like they’re supposed to. The only way Al can think to describe this, though, is that it looks like how nausea feels.

And it’s warping the qi flow around it. The good thing, though, is that Hairy’s native qi seems to be - Al performs the extrasensory equivalent of squinting - diverting around it, rather than tangling in. The malignancy doesn’t seem connected to the rest of Hairy, but qi flow can change: pregnancy, for example, causes all sorts of fluctuations in qi paths, and the changes come in flavors of Permanent, Not Permanent or Sometimes Permanent Depending On The Individual. If this is another soul attached to Hairy, supported by his own distinct systems, pregnancy might be the closest parallel to how it’s affecting his qi.

In fact, if Al had to create a somewhat medically accurate analogy, the qi flow kind of mimics that of maternal-fetal blood transfer through a placenta. Nutrients and waste are exchanged and the fetus is dependent on the parent’s circulation, but both sets of blood supply remain distinct and separate. As metaphors go this one is… mildly horrifying, if hopeful in regards to the possibility of eventual separation, only in this analogy that would happen via a birth and Al would like his oh so smart
brain to stop thinking right now, please. Also, the synesthetic nausea is starting to give him a headache.

He focuses away from the scar, shifting his attention to Hairy’s lungs and heart. That’s circulating normally, at least, the heartbeat steady and the breathing even. Al spends a minute confirming there aren’t any defects in the valves or irregularities in the rhythm and then spreads his attention back outward, looking for any trace of that same malignant qi anywhere else on Hairy’s body.

He doesn’t find any, though a final pass determines that the malignant qi occupies a decent chunk of the front of Hairy’s skull, right in the frontal lobe. If Al recalls his introduction to neuro studies correctly, that was described as the place that hosts high-level cognitive controls like emotional regulation, problem solving and personality. He has absolutely no clue what kind of effects a foreign qi presence might have on the area’s development and functioning. Wonderful.

“When was the last time you experienced pain in the scar?” Al says, letting go of Hairy’s hands and using the question as a chance to center himself. The headache is growing; qi here is really quite intense.

Hairy shifts, face tightening again as he puts his hands back in his lap. “When Voldemort brought himself back.”

Six count breath in, six count breath out. “And this fits into the pattern, as I understand it? Proximity to him causes it to flare up?” Al says, briefly factoring some primes; the *name one thing you can see, hear, smell* grounding trick doesn’t do him any good when the problem’s sensory overload.

“And dreams,” Hairy says. “Sometimes.”

“How frequently do you have the dreams?”

Hairy furrows his brow in thought. “It’s… the dreams only really started last year. They’ve been… every few months, I guess.”

Not very often, then. “What else happens when you experience the pain in your scar? Dizziness, nausea?” Al asks, his own secondhand nausea slowly fading. “Do you feel anything anywhere else? Any muscle weakness, tremors, disorientation…”

Hairy hesitates. “Just…"

“Any information can help,” Al encourages.

“In the dreams,” Hairy says, then stops again. “It’s like I’m looking through his eyes. Or - his snake. It’s like, I am h - his snake.”

Linked consciousness. Maybe. Al can’t say definitively that it *isn’t* possible, given that Ed kept his body alive on the other side of the Gate through the link of his blood in the seal that kept Al’s soul on this plane. This isn’t the same thing - they weren’t exactly sharing experiences, just nutrients, though how *that* worked Al still has no clue - but it’s the same principle. Kind of. More or less.

Either way, what’s important is ruling out purely physical causes and investigating any potential somatic side effects. “I see. Let’s take a look at your neural activity,” Al says, pulling a marker from his pocket and beckoning to Hairy, who stares at him like he’s just proposed they do heart surgery with a spatula.

“I’m going to have to draw a little bit on your face,” Al explains, holding up the marker and
smiling in a isn’t-this-silly way to put Hairy at ease. “No rude pictures, I promise. Just setting up some amplifiers so we can measure your brain waves. Could you take off your glasses for me, please?”

“You’re gonna draw on his face?” Black says in an intrigued voice as Hairy carefully takes off his glasses with a dubious look on his face. “Like… runes?”

“Not quite. Typically this is done with electrodes and a recorder,” Al says as he leans in and carefully sets the marker to Hairy’s right temple. “The test is what’s called an electroencephalogram. It lets us take a look at the electrical activity in your brain and see if there are any potential abnormalities - like if your scar is giving off waves of its own, maybe.” Al completes the array on Hairy’s right side and gently turns his chin with two fingers to show Black. “Sometimes we don’t have access to equipment, though, so we have to make our own. This array will communicate with another one here, and one here -” Al points to Hairy’s other temple, then the nape of his neck - ”and all three of them will inform a fourth array that’ll let me record a few minutes of his brain activity.”

“Huh,” Black says, squinting at Hairy, who squints back, though probably for actual ophthalmological reasons.

“You might get a little tickle,” Al tells Hairy. “That’s alkahestric discharge, though, not actual electricity. Hold your hair back for me?”

Hairy obliges, bowing his head and only wrinkling his nose slightly at the touch of the marker. “So… how does it get recorded?” Black says. “Is it like… sounds and things?”

“Like this,” Al says, finishing the array on Hairy’s neck and drawing back to pull out his journal. He flips to a clean page and draws the output array, then scribbles a bunch of ink into the reservoir space in the circle to give it something to work with. “That’s going to get transmuted into lines along the graph paper here, according to the electrical output,” he explains. It’s a very neat little array, economical and perfect for rural medicine, developed by a team of Imperial Physicians several years ago in Baozhe; Master Yunxian had gushed about that research team and their work like she was showing off her first grandchild. (She a little bit was. Her niece is an array design specialist in the Imperial University there and Al has experienced multiple instances of Master Yunxian cackling over letters that were all variations on the theme of “Auntie, please stop asking when I will cure cancer.”)

“It’ll make a picture of his brain?” Black says doubtfully.

“Kind of,” Al says, beckoning Hairy to stick his face closer again. “Electrical activity mostly looks like a bunch of wiggly noodles.”

“And that’ll tell you if his brain’s doing alright, will it?” Black says with some skepticism.

“If the wiggles look right, yes,” Al says placidly. “They’re fairly distinctive wiggles, to be fair.”

There’s a loud crash from downstairs. Al pauses as they all look around at the closed door, then resumes drawing. “What was that?” Black says.

Al sighs. “Probably just my brother.”

“Last time it was definitely your brother, and buck beak got out because of it,” Black mutters, still looking at the door like a dog that’s sensed someone outside but hasn’t yet heard the doorbell. “Maybe I should go check.”
“If you like,” Al says, completing the array on Hairy’s temple. There’s none of Ed’s distinctive raspy shouting or any gunfire and a brief focus on qi shows there’s nobody running downstairs, so whatever it is can’t be that bad. “If it’s anything important I’m sure someone will come get us. Alright - sit back, relax, close your eyes if you like. This’ll take a few minutes.”

Hairy doesn’t close his eyes, but after another checking glance at Black he does sit still in the chair and watch as Al looks at his wristwatch for the time, centers his journal on the little table and presses his hands to the paper.

The arrays on Hairy’s head begin to glow in tandem with the one under Al’s palms, the alkahestric circuit completing and creating a field with an almost subaural hum. Black’s sufficiently distracted by that to turn all attention away from the door. Not that it would matter if he went; Hairy is the leak, after all, and he’s staying right here. With the array written out Al doesn’t have to do much besides channel the energy; it’s a very simple diagnostic in any case, just a measurement, really, and after a few seconds the scribble of ink in the circle shivers and tiny lines begin to creep across the page.

Al keeps one eye on the graph and one on his watch, though they’re only doing ten minutes of this test. If anything shows up wonky they’ll do a full hour or even an overnight sleep reading later - hm, if Hairy’s reporting dreams as symptoms they may do a sleep recording anyway - but since Hairy hasn’t had any seizures or other related events it’s an outside chance that the malignancy’s effects are manifesting as significant changes in the brain’s electric activity anyway.

Al’s eyes unfocus on the paper as he counts off the last minutes of the test, thinking. For the scar to induce pain only sometimes indicates there is activity that occurs then that isn’t occurring now. Observing that activity could prove very useful. If there is anything to observe. Could it be induced? Nightmares, proximity to a powerful terrorist that murdered his parents - Al could potentially simulate some of the conditions. He could tweak the standard array used for severe allergic reactions that combines an inflammation nix with an adrenaline boost in order to open airways and bring down histamine production; the anti-inflammatory component is distinct enough to remove easily from the array. Inducing an adrenaline jolt and getting Hairy to hyperventilate would bring his heart rate up and activate the body’s fight or flight processes, but if there’s some kind of magic trigger involved then all of that could prove pointless. If he’s going to put stress on Hairy’s body like that on the off chance of more data then he may as well go directly to simulating the heart attack.

Ed wasn’t wrong about a lot of the medical arrays being isolators and stabilizers - at least, in the fields Al’s currently studying, which are rarely with problems so straightforward as lacerations or broken bones. Master Yunxian told him to spend at least a year in cardio and pathology and really get his diagnostics down before he does a stint in emergency medicine, because to help the complicated cases - people coming in seizing for no apparent reason, wasting illnesses with no clear cause, unforeseen complications in surgeries - the best thing he can offer is an accurate diagnosis, fast. The second best thing is to stabilize the patient and make sure whatever’s wrong with them doesn’t have a chance to get any worse. And you don’t have to be an alkahestrist to be a doctor, but an alkahestrist who is a doctor - or training to be one - always gets the complicated cases by default.

That was Al’s last four months, splitting his rotations between intake clinician and alkahestric stabilizer on call. He wasn’t blowing smoke up the General’s chimney when he said he was confident in his ability to resuscitate Hairy if it came to simulating cardiac arrest. Isolate the sinoatrial node, apply a stasis array, have blood circulators and oxygenators on standby to feed the brain and any other vulnerable tissues just in case, and secure him through the inevitable thrashing. Introducing anesthesia would up the risk and potentially complicate things in unexpected ways, if
the malignant qi really is a soul; Al can’t definitively say how brain waves and altered states of consciousness affect the soul and its connection to the body, if at all, but it’s not something he’s interested in exploring in this particular situation. Better a few minutes of intense discomfort than a coma risk.

Not that Hairy needs to know any of this right now. It may not come down to a heart attack at all. The most important thing is that he doesn’t appear to have any underlying complication risks and Al can tell the General there’s a viable backup plan.

His wristwatch ticks past the mark, and he withdraws power from the array. Hairy blinks squintily at him as Black straightens back up from his gradually deepening chair slump. “It’s done?”

“Yes,” Al says, scanning over the resulting sheet of alkahestically inked graph paper. No irregular spikes, no lopsidedness on the graph; nothing standing out, really. “Everything looks normal,” he says aloud, looking up with a smile for Hairy and Black. “Congratulations, all your wiggles appear to be in order. Would you like to keep the graph?”

“Er,” Hairy says, looking nonplussed enough to pause in the middle of cleaning his glasses on his shirt. “No?”

“Is that it?” Black says.

“More or less,” Al says, closing his journal on the page. “This is for brain activity as it presents outside of any kind of event. Like one of the dreams,” he clarifies. “The brain might behave differently when your scar hurts or you’re having a nightmare. Since those occur only every few months, though, and are apparently unpredictable, yes? Then there isn’t much point in making you sleep with an active array every night on the off chance we might catch some unusual brainwaves that might not even have anything to do with your scar.”

Hairy and Black both blink at this in remarkably similar ways, though Hairy with significantly more owlishness. “Then… can I put my glasses back on?” he says after a moment.

“Yes, of course. You can go wash the marker off too, we’re just about done.”

“With everything?” Hairy says, not hostile anymore but wary just the same.

“For the moment,” Al confirms.

Hairy glances at Black, then back at Al, his expression that of one slogging to the end of a difficult exam and turning the last page to find out there’s one more question left. “What about -Voldemort? Your brother said - he’s in my head. That there might be - telepathy.”

“My brother says a lot of things that may not be one hundred percent wholly accurate,” Al tells him dryly, which is a true statement in that telepathy may not be the right word. “He also tends to exaggerate.” And if the terrorists are listening in right now, they don’t want to make them think they’re aware of the leak, or at least that they’re not taking it seriously, given Ed apparently just went and told Hairy directly.

“Ed’s an idiot,” Al summarizes. “On some occasions more so than others.”

Hairy grins reluctantly at this, and while Black also cracks a smile he still looks concerned as he glances at Hairy. “But if there is something,” he says. “You can fix it?”

“The investigation is in progress, yes,” Al says, not injecting any particular concern into his voice; no need to get anyone worked up about any potential outcomes yet. “There’s no point speculating
without hard data. Now that we have Hairy’s base medical information we can do some more tests on our end, and as soon as we have some results we’ll let you know.”

That seems to be good enough for Hairy and Black both, judging by the Hairy’s glance and Black’s answering shrug; Al’s kind of unimpressed by the acceptance of such a non-answer even though it currently works very much in his favor, though he supposes he should know better by now how easy it is to get people to nod along if you act with authority. “So - I can go?” Hairy says.

Al nods. “Don’t forget to wash the ink off.”

Hairy twitches and grabs for his glasses in a way that suggests he’s completely forgotten about the three arrays on his head, then, after yet another glance at Black he makes for the door. Black nods to Al and stands, moving to follow.

Al stands with him. He knows that the General sent him to conduct this little medical intake session now so as to get Hairy out of witnessing anything sensitive. There’s going to be a demonstration match tonight - very soon, as Director Bones seems to have arrived, and here, presumably, since it’s got all the protective spells and whatnot. With Hairy potentially suffering from a case of inadvertent terrorist telepathy, it’s probably best that he doesn’t spectate.

As the only one who can sense qi, though, Al should definitely be there. Time to make sure Hairy is occupied in a way that doesn’t require Al to babysit.

“Mr. Black?” Al says quietly, as they go through the door.

“Yes?” Black turns to him, polite but still wary.

Al inclines his head at the bathroom down the hall Hairy’s disappeared into and keeps his voice low. “I think right now is a good moment to spend a little time with him. Catch up, discuss your future plans, so on. I believe everyone else will be downstairs for the moment, which will give you some peace and quiet.”

Black looks surprised by this, then thoughtful and almost apprehensive. “You think?”

“Hairy survived an attempt on his life yesterday. I think it would do him good to talk to someone who cares.”

Black stares for a second, then nods quickly, emphatically. “Right,” he says. “He - right. He’s - Hairy’s a tough kid, but…”

“He’s going through a lot right now,” Al says, his sympathy not ungenerous. “He clearly thinks highly of you, and he could use some comfort and support. Even just an opportunity to complain - if I were him, I’d welcome a chance to vent.”

“And dumbell door hasn’t really let us say anything to him all summer,” Black says, half to himself. “He’s been stuck in that muggle house. Yeah. Yeah, I’ll talk to him. That’s - yeah. Thanks.”

“Of course.” Al inclines his head. “I do have a favor to ask, however - do you know where I could find some chocolate?”

Chapter End Notes
sirius: what’s the diagnosis doc

al: his brain is soul pregnant

sirius: wh -

al: with voldemort

sirius:............. as… the father, or

al, helpfully: as the fetus

harry: [faunts]

alternatively

sirius, struggling to remember what he knows of muggle medicine from binging british house md or whatever on his Muggle Telly in his Muggle Flat that he was very rebelliously proud of: they beep, right? the machines beep? that’s how u know the medicining is working??
Ed decides to do the chromoly first, so after dropping off the coal next to a bemused Jones he detours by the rooms he saw fireplaces in. The four gratings - and two pokers he finds - are good quality, almost pure iron, so he strips off the rust and hauls it all back to join the coal. “You’ve got, uh,” Jones says under his breath as Ed swings by, then gestures discreetly at his own cheek.

“What?” Ed doesn’t have a lot of dexterity in the black gloves - or sensation either, between the padding and the lead - but he swipes at his face, which makes Jones’ expression do something gymnastic. Ed scowls. “What?”

Jones sucks his lips all the way in and bites down like he’s trying to keep them from escaping. “The coal,” he says. “It’s. Ah. You’ve got - smudges.”

There’s that gesture to the face again. Ed growls, lifts the hem of his shirt and scrubs his cheeks with it until any trace of coal has got to be either wiped off or ground in beyond helping. “Fuck this, call me Sooty the Panda Face Alchemist and call it a fuckin’ day,” he mutters, dropping his shirt, which makes Jones bite his fist and look away, shoulders shaking, as Ed collects up all his crap. He’ll wash his face when he’s done handling coal.

He drags everything back to the empty room across the hall to do his transmutations, because Baldy already looks way too interested in what Ed’s doing and he’s gonna pass on a snooping wizard audience, thanks. The floor’s as good a place as any, so he sits down and starts checking the iron for impurities to get rid of. He knows he saw the specific formulas for CroMo in steel smelting before; Winry and Granny had a shitton of treatises and manuals and books on steels and metal alloys for automail grades and he read them all while stuck waiting for his ports to heal. Grey book? No, brown book, annoyingly wide-spaced type, chromium for hardenability and corrosion resistance, molybdenum for strength and durability, averages are 0.3% carbon content by weight, good for case hardening, can handle carburization, preheat if you’re gonna weld.

Ugh, he’s gonna have to draw out the circle for this one. He doesn’t know what the fuck Mustang’s gonna do with his array; he’s pretty sure gun barrels have to be carburized, and presumably Mustang’s array accounts for that, but Ed’s gonna have to check the carbon content numbers anyway so that whatever he gives him matches the values Mustang’s set. Okay, chromoly not first; whatever, they don’t need it now anyway.

Thank fuck for Winry, honestly. Ed knows metals, sure, but Win’s a freak who’ll bark out the make and model of the engine of any car that goes past for fun and works with tiny, tiny, tiny variations in alloy ratios for medical-grade implants. Automail has always had to be at the cutting edge of materials research because inside your body is the last place you want something to start to rust, and while Win does the surgery part of automail just fine the real pinecone up her ass has always been the mechanical construction.

And it’s because of her three day long rant on experimental optical prostheses that Ed even knows what the fuck a dielectric mirror is, let alone how to make one.

Ed blows a mental kiss Winwards - if this works, he’ll get to tell her her bitching made him magic bulletproof - and starts with the carbon first. He claps, presses his hands to the coal and restructures its allotropic form from crumbly and flammable to rigid and crystalline, changing the
shape as he goes. It’s slow going; shuffling the atoms into the cubic lattice is a pretty annoyingly intensive in the attention department, but at the end of it he’s got a nice thick sheet of unpolished diamond, a little rough on the edges but clear through.

Then he claps again, pulling from a much smaller chunk of coal. This one is hard: graphene wants to layer, but Ed wants a single unbroken sheet of carbon atoms, not graphite. He gets about halfway through at an absolutely miserable speed before realizing it’d be way easier to transmute off the top of the finished diamond anyway; this shit’s gonna be have to be alchemized to the surface in any case - graphene’s soft, floppy, and while it’s tough as shit on the molecular level it conducts both heat and electricity like fuck. Diamagnetic, too. Depending on how wizard weaponized zappy shit behaves Ed might accidentally cook his own arm by blocking, and while diamond transfers heat as well, it’s at least an electrical insulator.

A graphene coating on the outer surface of a diamond bracer, though - the two layers separate but in contact - that might interrupt the signal enough to leach some power from any directed electromagnetic impulse. Light travels at less than half speed passing through crystallized carbon, what with all the electrons packed so tight in there. With a mirror coating on the inner surface, whatever light bolt hits the bracer will be slowed enough by the diamond to get reflected by the dielectric mirror. Add the graphene - potentially even more disruption of the incoming energy right at the start. If it doesn’t reflect, it can at least absorb and disperse without doing damage to the bits of Ed underneath.

In theory.

Ed fits his arm onto one of the resulting sheets of diamond, then taps his fingers together again and wraps it around one forearm, then the other. Flexing to test the fit - rigid, and with no padding it’s gonna get gross and sweaty, but workable enough - he splits it apart again and starts adding the graphene. Finishing one takes a little while, long enough that he decided to leave it off the second one so it can act as control - if a graphene coating turns out to perform markedly better, he’ll add it to the other bracer.

Then all that’s left is the mirrors. He pulls out his alchemist’s watch and carefully takes a few milligrams off the solid platinum chain - a gift from Winry for his last birthday, with the excuse that silver’s not as durable as platinum and not a word said about how platinum isn’t as durable as, say, steel - then gets to stripping protons.

Platinum and air become tantalum pentoxide, and some random ugly horse-man statue on a shelf by the windows contributes some silica for the silicon dioxide. Ed smears a couple intermittent layers of both on the inner surface of the bracers, and then it’s done; here’s hoping he did the calculations for wavelength interruption correctly. It really is an uncalibrated hack job if considered from the point of view of professional fabrication, but considered as the product of one poor alchemist stranded in wizard world with nothing but his wits to rely on it’s a fuckin’ masterpiece.

Okay. CroMo later; time to test these now. Ed claps the bracers on one more time, then goes down to the kitchen. “Hey, one of you do a spell at me,” he demands of the wizards there, which are currently just Smartypants, Miss Redhead and Not A Twin; presumably Breakfast Lady is off beating the twins with a sock full of radishes or something.

They stare back at him uncomprehendingly, then Smartypants gestures and says some total gibberish. Ed is abruptly reminded of the fact that he gave his translation rock to Al. He rolls his eyes and heads right back out of the kitchen - someone’s gotta have a rock around here somewhere. Wasn’t Havoc down here? Where is Havoc?

Right in the sitting room across the hall, it turns out, playing solitaire. “Yo, gimme your magic rock
a second,” Ed tells him, sticking out his hand and beckoning.

Havoc gives him a mournful look - the cigarette in his mouth is looking distinctly bedraggled as well; it’s not the first time Ed’s wondered why Havoc doesn’t just put an unsmoked one back in the carton when he gets interrupted right before lighting up - and produces a rock.

“Cheers,” Ed says, toasting him with it, and heads back for the kitchen. He tosses it onto the table, interrupting the conversation, and repeats, “Do a spell at me.”

“You could be a little more specific,” Miss Redhead says, narrow-eyed, after a moment where they all look at the rock and then at him. “What kind of spell?”

“Who cares? Just attack,” Ed says impatiently. “Do whatever the fuck you got me with last time. You, Smartypants, hit me,” he says, turning to her, and the only warning he gets is her eyes narrowing before red light is flying at his face.

Ed dodges on reflex, then takes the next one on his right bracer just to find out how bad it’s gonna suck. It’s the diamond one - and the red light ricochets off his forearm with a sizzle, the redheads diving out of its way as it slams into the cabinets behind them. “Yes,” Ed hisses in satisfaction, only Smartypants is on her feet now, and this time she snaps something that absolutely doesn’t translate before jerking her stick at him.

Ed feels his feet leave the floor.

Oh, he doesn’t like this. His reflexive grab for the nearest chair misses, Smartypants levitating him too high too fast for him to grab an anchor but also keeping him from the ceiling, which means he needs to get himself down, hands free, nothing to push off of. All he’s got is air.

Ed has to stop his hands halfway to reaching for his knives and bury his next three reactions because they start with chucking a blade into Smartypants’ wand-holding hand and only get more drastic from there. He’s not gonna draw a knife on a fuckin’ kid just because she got him when he was explicitly asking to be got. Smartypants isn’t even doing anything else, just has her stick trained on him, glaring. Which, okay, if she was gonna knock him out again the smart thing would be to do it already - can she not fire while she’s levitating him?

“No good enough for you?” she says coolly.

“Yeah, almost,” Ed says, then flips in midair. It works - nowhere near as fast, motherfucker, but it gets his boots to the ceiling. His hair still acts normal, hanging straight down towards the floor - how the fuck does that work? He doesn’t feel like he’s being hoisted by any particular part of his body, but if not all of him is behaving the same, then has he been uncoupled from gravity or what? Some kind of buoyancy booster? Is it a field effect? Why not his hair then?

Experimentally, Ed pulls a knife from his harness, holds it out over the table and drops it. It leaves his hand exactly the way dropped objects are supposed to and sticks point first in the wood, quivering. “Huh,” he says aloud, and manages to point his toes and push slightly off the ceiling just as Smartypants scowls and jerks her stick. The faint current on Ed drags him away from his only available touchpoint. “Hah!” Not A Twin says.

Alright, enough of this. Ed twists himself upright again - which involves a fairly strenuous ab crunch and some wiggling - and claps.

It’s hard - grabbing for tadpoles in a bucket of butter hard, roller skates on an oil slick hard - but he flails out at all the hydrogen atoms in the room like an alchemical axe murderer until he’s split
enough down the middle to ram a sizable amount of helium up Smartypants’ nose.

It takes a second, but Smartypants’ eyes go wide, her mouth opening as her lungs inform her that this shit is *not* oxygen and start to choke, and the slight current on Ed abruptly cuts out. He ends the transmutation the second he drops, landing with a crash in a crouch on the kitchen table and reeling a bit with the intensity of the transmutation and the sudden return of gravity.

Havoc skids into the room, gun drawn, then lowers and holsters it when he sees it’s just Ed being Ed. “Geez, boss.”


“What did you do?” Smartypants demands, her eyes going even wider when her voice comes out hamster-squeak high.

Ed can’t help a cackle. “Hah! Don’t worry, that’s just a side effect.”

Smartypants coughs, hand to her throat. “A side effect? I couldn’t breathe!”

“Yeah, for like a second. Versus what you did,” Ed counters, gesturing at the cracked cabinets that caught the red light rebound. “You aim that shit at people?”

“It’s a stunner,” Smartypants snarls, voice starting to return to her normal register. “It would’ve just knocked you out again.”

The redheads are all glaring at Ed with their sticks in their hands, backed up against the kitchen cabinets in half-formed ready stances like they don’t know whether it’s worth risking their wands to step in or not; Ed narrows his eyes at them before giving Smartypants an unimpressed look.

“And the antigravity thing, what was that?”

“What, wing garden levy?” The back half of her sentence is garbled in that way that means the translator rock is shitting the stage again. “That didn’t leave a scratch on you! You choked me!”

“Stop being dramatic, all I did was swap your oxygen for helium,” Ed retorts. “You could breathe fine, you just weren’t breathing O2 for a minute. You don’t have a scratch on you either. You don’t have a scratch on you either.” He’s not mad about Smartypants firing off something with actual force behind it - he *did* tell her to attack, and didn’t give any indication that he would retaliate either. Not that he knew that he was going to be retaliating, but she signed on for an equipment test, not a spar. “Thanks.”

Not A Twin looks baffled by this, but Smartypants just bares her teeth at him. “Don’t call me wiseass.”


“You just said it,” Not A Twin says.

“Yeah, and I’m telling you, it’s a translation problem.” Ed throws his hands up and turns to Havoc, who’s watching this like he can’t decide if he wants to buy show tickets or call the police just as Mustang, Hawkeye and Bones step through the kitchen doorway.

Mustang’s gaze travels over the pissed off wizard kids, Havoc’s it-wasn’t-me-chief face and the obvious bootprints in the middle of the kitchen table. “Must you do this in the house, Fullmetal?”
he says in the same way Al talks to cats that ralphed on the carpet, eyes ticking down to examine Ed’s new bracers.

“Nothing’s broken, no one’s dead, what the hell more do you want?” Ed says crossly, snagging both translation rock and knife off the table to hand off one to Havoc and holster the other.

“If you need walkies all you have to do is scratch at the door,” Mustang says idly. “No need to insult our hosts’ hospitality.”

“I thought you didn’t want property damage,” Ed retorts, but actually going outside is sounding pretty good right now - aren’t they doing their demo shit outside? Is the dinky little backyard even gonna be big enough?

“What was happening here, exactly,” Bones says, in that not-actually-a-question way Ed’s used to hearing from brass.

“He asked us to hex him,” Miss Redhead says immediately.

Ed rolls his eyes. “Equipment test,” he repeats.

Mustang raises his eyebrows. “Any interesting results?”

“Some,” Ed says critically, eyeballing the kids. “Why does some magic make lights and some doesn’t?”

“I don’t know,” Smartypants says tartly, as if he’d directly addressed her. “How did you choke me?”

Ed blows out a breath. “I didn’t choke you, I told you -”

“You took away her air!” Not A Twin says.

“No. I just replaced some oxygen. If I pulled her air, the whole local gas composition, her lungs could tear when they collapsed,” Ed says flatly. The Void Alchemist had done a lot of that. Human bodies don’t fare well in vacuum. “Swap just the O2 for something inert, your lungs stay inflated but you feel like you can’t breathe. Most people quit whatever they’re doing when they feel that.”

Not A Twin doesn’t look like he understood that but definitely like he knows for sure that it’s Bad; Miss Redhead looks similarly hostile. They don’t fuckin’ understand what bad is. A little helium, hell - hard as it was to pull off on Ed’s end, Smartypants didn’t even lose enough breath to stagger.

“Helium?” Mustang says, sounding deeply amused. Ed scowls at him. He’s only transmuted gases a handful of times in his life and never in the field until now, half because he hasn’t needed to and half because atmospheric transmutation really is Mustang’s thing and the bastard would absolutely say something smarmy about being so flattered that the great Fullmetal Alchemist would deign to copy him.

“Yeah helium.” Ed tries to convey that if whatever brewing remark along those lines makes it out of Mustang’s mouth he’ll regret it. “It’s inert, it’s harmless to biological tissues, kids at the balloon stand at every damn carnival and fair huff that shit to make their voices squeaky just for fun. She’s fuckin’ fine.”

That’s more for Bones’ benefit than Mustang’s, because while she’s got a familiar Hawkeyesque stoneface going she’s definitely eyeing Ed and the crystalline bracers on his arms with a kind of vague disapproval. “I’m good to go,” Ed tells Mustang. “Are we doing the demo outside or what?
We’re not leaving the house for it, are we?”

“Yes, best to take this outdoors,” Mustang says dryly. “Would you like to join us, Madam? While we’re waiting for the others we may as well see if the yard will suit. You as well, Captain,” he adds, and Havoc falls in behind them as Bones nods and turns for the door.

Ed follows them out of the kitchen, leaving the kids behind, and allows a little grin to himself as he looks down at his bracers. At least he can tell Win her rants pay off. He’s gonna call her the minute they get back to a phone line that can connect to Rush Valley and bitch for hours.

Chapter End Notes

ed: ok wiseass fuckin hit me

hermione, having worn the shiny off this blond buff gremlin and igniting with all the turbines of rage that made her punch out malfoy instead of just hexing him:  M Y P L E
    A S U R E
It’s dusk outside, the sky gone blue-black and the stars not quite yet starting to come out. The backyard is fenced in, full of hedges and weeds and some trees by the back, everything overgrown and gloomy; the square yardage is about that of the house, which isn’t all that large, comparatively, and for any kind of spar with spectators it’s gonna be kind of a tight fit.

Ed’s not the only one thinking that, because Bones frowns around and says, “There should be an extension charm in place. Most of these old houses do, and I know for a fact my mother always complained about the Blacks always throwing their snooty London garden parties…. Step back a bit.”

That’s to Mustang, who doesn’t hesitate and neither does Hawkeye or Havoc. Ed backs up with them as Bones spreads her arms like an orchestra conductor. “Let’s see if I remember this correctly,” she says, then waves her stick all dramatic and says a bunch of nonsense.

The yard… unrolls. Hedges slide back, benches pop out of the grass like curly wrought iron mushrooms, lampposts sprout from the fuckin’ ground - and then light themselves. It’s suddenly brighter and brighter as strings of glowing lights unfurl overhead, bringing the dusk back up to something more like late evening. The backyard shuffles and skips into a space four times its previous size, still overgrown and weedy but now looking like at one point it had been a carefully maintained fancy rich person lawn and garden.


Ed and Havoc exchange staring looks, then look at Mustang and Hawkeye, who are pointedly not exchanging any looks at all. “Perceptual filter,” Ed says aloud, as a kind of verbal self-reassurance. “Just like the house was.” Though if they can teleport, who’s to say mass compression and-or spacetime folding are off the table?

Bones is once again looking at Ed in that nebulously disapproving way, which, sheesh, give her some uniform blues and she’d fit right in back home with the brass. Whatever uptalk Armstrong told her (Ed will never, ever, ever get over Livvie. Never. That’s like giving a pet name to an erupting volcano) it’s clearly not enough to mitigate the reality of Ed. “Will that do for your needs?”

Mustang glances at Hawkeye, who nods, then Ed, who shrugs. “Anything unsuitable for this space would be too impractical to demonstrate in any case,” Mustang says. “And as we all seem to be familiar with firearms I do not think we will need to showcase any of those properties either.”

“That’s your muggle guns, is it?” Bones says. “I hear they get the job done, at least. Is it true you need to wear earmuffs to use them?”

“Ear protection is not necessary but extremely advisable,” Hawkeye says as Ed serves a wide-eyed look Mustang’s way as discreetly as he can manage. “Gunshots are very loud, especially in close quarters.”

That does not sound like this particular wizard is ‘familiar with firearms’. Still, if this particular wizard can fucking collapse and expand space on command, why the fuck would she ever need to
bother with learning about something as dinky as **guns**. Ed’s gonna have to ask about that shit as well as any weaponized applications along with the mind control, because if somebody attacks with terrain manipulation that **warps space**, teleporting might be the **only** way to get away.

All the more reason to figure out the magic cancellation array. Ed’s probably gonna drop like a rock tonight given how much alchemy he already threw around today, but he’s definitely seeing some lab work all nighters in his very near future if the magic-qi-etcetera turns out to be harder to corral than it seems.

“I see,” Bones says. “To each their own, I suppose.” She eyeballs Ed again. “I hope what you were testing wasn’t those knives of yours. We had an incident a few years ago with a mad muggle in an orange jumpsuit hurling those things every which way. Bounces right off a Protego.”

“Nnnnno,” Ed says, because he knows that admitting to even considering winging a knife at a teenage girl is unsociable behavior. “That was to help me test gravity.”

Bones looks like that is a statement one hundred percent not worth digging into, which means Ed’s said the right thing. Mustang also looks like he would rather nobody start exploring that topic, because he glances at Havoc. “Fetch Hughes and the rest, will you?”

“Yes chief,” Havoc says morosely, turning back to the house with a distinctly unexcited set to his shoulders. Mustang must have finally told him about all the fresh new Promised Day shit, **Brand New Wizard Flavor**. Probably clapped him on the back and said *try not to get paralyzed this time, ha ha!*

“Don’t bother,” Bones says briskly, jerking her chin up at the house. “I may as well go break up that lot. Arthur Weasley’s a good Chap but they’ll be at it for hours if he starts asking questions about how all your thingamajigs work and Albus only enables him. If mad eye comes out tell him to stay put, I’ll get everyone down here.”

“...Why not,” Mustang says, as Ed realizes mad eyes is what they call Pirate. Chances are that’s yet another translation chunder, but if it’s not, how wild would that be. Like if everybody called him Tin Leg Ed. Or Titanium-Aluminum-Vanadium Leg Ed, if they’re being formal.

… well, fuckin’ Bradley did name him Fullmetal, and cornered Ed into just being grateful he hadn’t tallied up the number of limbs and laughed his little homunculus ass off while writing out the **State awards you the title Half Metal AHAHAHAHAHAHA** on the fucking certificate. What an asshole.

“Go anyway, Captain, see if the Colonel needs any help carrying anything,” Mustang says, and Havoc salutes sarcastically and lopes off after Bones.

Al comes out of the back door as they head towards it, hands full of Ed’s original bracers. “Hello, ma’am - hey, Captain,” he nods at them distractedly, and for a second Bones looks like she might want an introduction, but Al’s heading straight for Ed with a very Target Acquired look and generally even bar bouncers and feral goats know to get out of the way of that.

“The boy?” Mustang says as Al passes him.

“Upstairs with Black,” Al says. “I set them to having a heart to heart together. I’m keeping an eye on things, if their qi moves downstairs I’ll know about it. Here,” he continues, sticking Ed’s bracers into his hands, then, “Eat,” and shoves something brown and rectangular at Ed’s mouth.

Ed balks automatically before catching the whiff of chocolate. He snatches the bar in his teeth,
tipping his head back to start crunching it down hands-free. “Whadda fuck?” he asks thickly around it as Al puts a hand on either side of his neck, cane hanging from his wrist.


“Wha’? Why?”

“I don’t know how biologically instantiated the effects are,” Al says disapprovingly. “But since the first aid is chocolate, I’m assuming a serotonin deficiency and potentially problems producing endorphins. Watch your mood for the next two weeks.”

“Choco’wat’?” Ed says incredulously.

“Yes. Chew more before you swallow.”

“I know how’woo eat,” Ed complains. Hospitalization? Sure, that whole shit had felt bad, as rough a bad day as Ed’s ever had compressed into thirty minutes of pigshit, but not, like, check yourself in for observation bad. “Thof’ kids’re fine,” he points out, swallowing his mouthful with some effort.

“I don’t know their baseline, but so far it seems to me that they’ve been doing a lot of rash, emotional decision-making,” Al says pointedly. “You don’t need me to tell you what trauma and stress do to emotional regulation and cognition.”

“Yeah, makes you smarter,” Ed says, cracking a chocolatey grin. “Ow!”

“Be good to your brain tissue,” Al says sternly, absolutely unapologetic for tweaking Ed’s ear. “You seem to be doing okay even under stressful conditions, but we don’t want to assume there’s nothing when there could be something.”

“Thanks. I got lotsa practice. Ow!”

“Take this seriously or I will,” Al Threatens, letting go of Ed’s neck and stepping back, apparently satisfied that Ed’s qi isn’t melting out his nostrils or whatever. “I know lots of ways to cheer you up.”

“Okay, okay.” Ed frowns, licking his teeth for the last of the chocolate and swiping the back of his glove across his mouth. “Now I’m thirsty.”

Al sighs, claps and waves his hands sarcastically over Ed’s head. Ed tips his head back quick, mouth open to catch the water droplets created by Al’s condensation array like catching snowflakes; naturally he gets splashed all over his nose. “You’re so embarrassing,” Al says resignedly as Ed sputters. “Wash your face too, you’re covered in yuck. What did you do to your bracers? Is that diamond?”

“Ya, and it works great,” Ed says, muffled a little by how he’s using the hem of his shirt again to scrub his face.

“And how does it work, exactly,” Al says, inveterate skeptic.

“Reflects their magic shooty shit. The ones that look like light behave like light, to an extent,” Ed says, dropping his shirt and holding up his graphene-free arm. Mustang and Hawkeye, who had backed off when Al started medicating him like a truculent sheep, deem it safe to approach now that he isn’t literally being force fed and meteorologically watered. “I told Smartypants to hit me, and one of her shots got reflected here - left a scorch, look at that - but hit the kitchen cabinets and
“There are those that don’t behave like light?” Mustang asks, examining the small scorch mark on Ed’s arm.

“Yeah, she hit me with one of those next, just said some words and suddenly I’m levitating. The girl’s got good instincts,” Ed adds grudgingly, because on the post-mortem he can see that Smartypants didn’t waste any time on another light attack when she saw he could dodge or reflect it, she just went for something completely different that would seriously impair his ability to evade her and disorient him to boot.

“Levitating,” Mustang repeats.

“Yeah, whoopsie doodle and up I went. That’s why the helium,” Ed adds sourly. “She had to concentrate to keep me up there. Which implies a beam effect, actually, or a field, just not in visible light…” The spells that look like lights leave their sticks and that’s it, one and done, but the other stuff requires active maintenance in energy and focus, maybe? Kind of like the difference between activating an external array drawn on something and using yourself as an array with all the variables potentially in flux. If that’s even how the magic works.

Al picks up one of Ed’s forearms and examines the bracer, returning him from the speculation. “One good hit and these are going to shatter,” Al points out, hefting Ed’s arm demonstratively. “And you don’t have any padding or anything. Why not just do a mirrored diamond layer on top of your steel ones? That way when it cracks you’ll still have the metal underneath.”

Ed stares at him. Like, obviously Al’s smart, but sometimes it really hits that he’s so smart.

“You’re a genius.”

Al sighs. “So they tell me. You’d have better coverage if you just make a shield out of this stuff.”

“Less maneuverability, same fragility problems,” Ed counters, because some of Al’s solutions still orient around being two meters tall and incapable of tiring. “Metal backing on a shield doubles the weight problem and I’m only using these if I’m fighting close up anyway. Midrange it’s gonna be throwing up walls and other terraforming shit.”

“As with dealing with any ranged weapon,” Mustang says.

“Yeah. If those shitass wood cabinets in the kitchen can absorb that kinda crap then dirt definitely can.”

“Yeah.” Al blows out a breath. “Cancellation array’s still the best bet.”

“Obviously,” Ed agrees. “But! This definitely proves we can treat magic like light. When it comes to the calculations, I mean.”

“Mm.” Al leans on his cane, thoughtful, then looks at Mustang. “What are we giving them?”

“They are our allies,” Mustang says, somewhat dryly. “We are dependent on them in more than a few key ways and we do, of course, want to see them succeed. This is a chance for us to learn more about each other and determine the scope of their capabilities as well as how they might supplement ours.” His face goes even further into his press-darling decorated-veteran you’re-gonna-vote-for-me-as-soon-as-we-have-elections smile. “You’re here as a medical advisor, of course. If anyone shows interest in your healing techniques I don’t see any harm in explaining the basics.”
No need for the wizards to learn all the ways alkahestry isn’t about patching booboos and flowing with the mystic currents of the world. “I’ll stay in a corner and keep an eye on qi, then,” Al says, then looks back at Ed. “You should probably go stretch.”

“Nag,” Ed says comfortably, but hey, that is a good idea. If he’s trying to see what kinda combat styles they’re working with chances are he’s gonna have to at least run around the yard a bit and present a moving target.

He hefts his metal bracers consideringly, but Al takes them back out of his hands. “I’ll do these,” he says, beckoning for the diamond. “I’m better with details anyway. Go on, shoo.”

Ed decides not to fight it, clapping to unseal the carbon around his arms and handing it over to Al. Besides, the back door is opening again and Jones and Arget are coming through, Hughes and Havoc behind them. They aren’t followed by any wizards, so presumably they’re all off having a handholding ceremony of vigilante togetherness or whatever. Which Mustang really should have done their own version of, because it’s not like the guy to wade into so much as a kiddy pool without an action plan. Unless he’s already talked with everyone else and it’s just Ed who’s been left to wing it.

Which proves Hawkeye’s theory - shared with Ed one evening when they’d both had to stay late at the office obfuscating a couple of paper trails - that Mustang can be taught. Not like giving Ed orders works out for anyone anyway.

Ed grins to himself, rolls out his shoulders, crosses one leg over the other and bends down to press his hands to the ground, stretching his abbreviated hamstring first. His hair takes the opportunity to get in his mouth and remind him it’s still fuckin’ everywhere, so he takes advantage of being upside down to put it up in a high tail. Turning his head to the side shows him Mustang and Hughes stepping aside to do the thing where they stand too close with their arms crossed and mutter bitchily to each other; a moment later Hawkeye steps away from Arget and joins them, and their huddle becomes an equilateral triangle of scowls. Havoc’s finally lighting up a couple yards away from them, looking like he wishes there was way more than one cig in his mouth.

Ed switches legs and looks over at Al, who’s got both sets of bracers in one hand and is cautiously examining one of the magic new ironwork benches for bird shit and other impediments to sittability. “Don’t bother,” Ed calls to him through his own knees, still upside down. “Those weren’t there five minutes ago. Hey, do they look weird to you? Like, y’know.”

He sticks one hand out to the side and wiggles his fingers to helpfully illustrate qi. Al looks at him, then at the bench with redoubled skepticism. “Everything does,” he says, disgruntled but deciding it can’t be that bad given he sits down. “At least you didn’t make these.”

“Hey!”

Al sniffs as he puts his palms together and lays them on the bracers in a light crackle of discharge. “This house really doesn’t need any more ugly decor that’s somehow flamingly aggressive and depressing at the same time.”

Ed makes a disgusted noise and pointedly turns away from Al, which gives him a view of Jones, upside down. Upside Down Jones looks at him switch to stretching his adductors, then comes over and starts doing the same.

Ed squints at him from around his kneecap. “Yeah?”

“What’s the secret to skipping the natsec staff briefings? I don’t think I’ve seen you at any of them.”

Ed grins. “I’m field investigations, I don’t get dragged to those unless I’m in Central.” And since those briefings are on a regular weekly schedule, Ed always makes sure to be out of Central unless he absolutely can’t avoid it. He can speed-read the notes from that shit in a fifteenth the time it takes for them to say it and that’s the way it should be. “Or unless Mustang’s feeling a real asshole.”

“That bad?” Jones says jokingly.

“Eh,” Ed says, more meditative. “It’s a lot better now that he’s stopped being all ‘why was the mayor found naked and glued upside down to the water tower, Fullmetal?’ and ‘can you explain why I’ve received seven letters of complaint regarding the destruction of priceless historical monuments, Fullmetal?’” Ed rolls his eyes. “Now he’s just like, ‘fuck it up, Fullmetal’, and thank fucking god. The micromanaging wasn’t doing him any favors.”

“Micromanaging,” Mustang says from behind them, sounding kind of strangled.

Ed straightens up directly into a backbend so he can grin at Mustang upside down. “Yeah, you know,” he says, enjoying the stretch. “Where were you on the night of the thirteenth, why didn’t you call the second your train pulled into town. Back it up, I’m coming up.”

Mustang grimaces at him and steps back as Ed kicks up and over to a handstand and then back to his feet. “If you had been capable of submitting reports with slightly more information content than the average mud pie, I would not have needed to expend resources to ‘micromanage’.”

“Whatta’re you talkin’ about, mud pies are fulla information,” Ed informs him. “You can spend a whole day just learning about mud. Just ‘cause you don’t understand the data doesn’t mean it’s not in there.”

“You used to write reports entirely without punctuation or capitalization on the justification that it ‘saved time’.”

Ed narrows his eyes. “You’re right, that did save time. I should go back to that.”

“Let me just go start drinking,” Mustang mutters. “Sergeant, Corporal? A moment?”

There’s the handholding moment. Hughes chivvies everyone closer, away from the back door of the house, and Mustang gives them all a round of eye contact. “This is mostly going to be Fullmetal and Colonel Hawkeye’s show, as alchemical generalist and security specialist, but if anyone has a question for our wizard counterparts, don’t hesitate to ask it. On our end, however, let’s allow some discretion in volunteering information, hm?”

“That means let Roy answer shit,” Hughes translates. “He can lie better than all of us put together. If you got something urgent, sign it or come and whisper to me or Colonel Hawkeye, but if it can wait let it wait.”

“That’s not to say we shouldn’t share anything,” Mustang says. “We are friendly, open, honest people, after all.” Havoc snorts. “We want them to be friendly, open, honest people in return. They, however, are civilians. You all have clearances. You know how to talk to civilians.”

“If you’re unsure about something, better to sit on it,” Hughes says. “Let’s not have to try and
“As you know, the wizards have mentioned certain weaponized techniques that it would be best for us to experience in a controlled environment, as we’ll likely encounter them in the field,” Mustang continues. “Fullmetal is the usual guinea pig of choice -”

“You're welcome,” Ed grumbles.

“- but some of these are not going to be optional. Our objective above all else is to every of us return home in one piece, and the more prepared we are the better.”

“I know we don’t say the nasty V-word in the army, but seriously, better to volunteer and see if we can handle their mind control or whatever than find out in a live situation,” Hughes says.

“For reference, that’s one of the non-optional ones,” Mustang says dryly.

“Yeah, we’re all gonna have to do that, it’ll be buckets of fun.” Hughes pushes up his glasses. “Other than that, watch. Listen. We’re all going to be writing up reports before we can go to bed tonight. See, didn’t I tell you field work is exciting and glamorous? Aren’t you glad you were assigned on this op? Of course you are. Alright, my lovelies, let the circus commence!”

“And here come the clowns,” Ed says under his breath as the back door opens again and wizards start coming through. Al, of course, elbows him.

Chapter End Notes

bones: yeah we had to apprehend some chap named naruto a few years back but it turns out he was just lost on his way to a different crossover

bones: some place called comicon
Chapter 45

Chapter Notes

It’s not that Sirius doesn’t think talking to Harry is a good idea, or that he doesn’t want to. He just doesn’t quite know how to start. Alphonse Elric made it sound so easy and straightforward when he said it - let him know you care. Comfort and support, right. What Sirius associates with comfort and support is mostly a mug of Firewhiskey and the shoulder of a friend to keep you upright on your way home, but somehow he’s pretty sure that’s not what he meant. He can’t give Harry Firewhiskey. Not for another few years, anyway.

He ends up beckoning Harry back to Buckbeak’s room, because Harry likes Buckbeak and it’s about time to check on him anyway. Something for them to do while Sirius cobbles the right words together to let Harry know - well. That he’ll always have a place with Sirius, at the very least.

Harry seemed excited about living with him, which is a hot, revolving coal of a feeling in Sirius’s ribcage. He can’t cock this up. He’s going to have to talk to Moony - shit, he really needs to talk to Moony, given he sort of promised to move them to another country if that’s what it took to get custody. Hell, werewolves are barely known as a phenomenon in Greece; if they empty the Black vaults and sell whatever’s left they should have a nice tidy sum, enough to set them up somewhere decent on one of the islands. Sirius can talk him around. Moony likes the sun, and there’s all that history and archaeology and whatnot there lying around.

Buckbeak is in a decent mood when they enter, shaking his wings at them and stretching luxuriously before returning to his favored leisure activity of shredding the daylights out of the Black master bed. Sirius experiences deep spiritual satisfaction every time Buckbeak deprecates several thousand Galleons off the 12th century hand-carved heirloom via fresh clawmark, and he gets the feeling Buckbeak can tell. He is very generous with his clawing.

Harry’s still wiping at his smudged temples and dripping around the hairline from washing off the runes Alphonse Elric had drawn, but he goes directly to Buckbeak and bows. Buckbeak heaves himself up and bows back, rattling his beak and preening when Harry pets his neck. “D’you ever go outside with him?” Harry asks, craning to look back at Sirius over his shoulder.

“Used to,” Sirius says. “We stayed near Badcall for a bit - remote old place, it’s up on the coast way up north. Lots of islands about, so he could have a bit of a fly sometimes. Though it was a devil keeping him off the muggles’ sheep.”

Harry grins a bit, scratching under Buckbeak’s chin. “Bet that was fun.”

“It was,” Sirius admits. “I’d go dog and chase him all over the place while the sheep tried to headbutt us both. Mad little bastards. I’d have let him eat them all if it wouldn’t have the muggles up in arms. Those farmers up there don’t have any sense of humor.”

Summering in Scotland isn’t bad at all, objectively, even when on the run, and the few months they’d spent living up there - even with a hippogriff to corral - felt too short by far. The place itself was remote, muggle, and rent by the week; it was also named Twafflebury Cottage, which Moony would sigh over ever time Sirius cackled like a hag. He did not entertain Sirius’s very brilliant suggestions of setting up their next outlaw hideout at Wetwang, Cock Bridge or Sandy Balls, though he did charm a muggle postcard to flash Greetings From BITCHFIELD/COCKSHUT/PENISTONE in turns, even if he did consequently refuse to let Sirius
“Would you…” Harry trails off, looking down at where he’s scratching at the joint of Buckbeak’s wings. “I mean. If you’d like to go back. I could come with you, if you want. Help take care of Buckbeak.”

“Absolutely,” Sirius says, the hot-coal feeling expanding upwards to join the balloons of relief and joy. “Anytime. He doesn’t belong in this rotting dump, yeah? And neither do we.”

Harry grins as Buckbeak chirps and rattles his beak some more as if agreeing, and Sirius has to grin too. “I was serious about Greece, you know,” he tells Harry, maybe speaking a little too fast but needing to get it out in as many of the right words as he can. “We’re going to try and clear my name, obviously, but - that could take a while, and in the meantime, well, we’ve got to live somewhere, right? I’m not the Secret Keeper of this place, we don’t have to stay here - and hell, I bet me and Moony could figure out how to put a proper Fidelius on wherever we end up. Might not have sheep to chase, and it’d be away from your friends, but - what do you think?”

“I think that’s brilliant,” Harry says without hesitation, looking up at Sirius with such a painfully familiar face - James’ shining excitement, Lily’s smiling eyes. “I’m away from Ron and Hermione in summer anyway, and holidays too mostly. And they can come visit - right?”

“You bet,” Sirius, practically floating in happy relief. Would it be alright to hug Harry again? He seemed to like hugs; Sirius is about to risk it when the door opens.

It’s Ron and Hermione and Ginny and Fred and George, and they all zoom into the room at light speed and cluster around Harry with Ron in the lead. “Harry!” Hermione exclaims. “What happened? What did they do? You look -” she glances him over, stumbling slightly in confusion. “-damp?”


“Humongous, is it?” Fred or George says.

“Spiffing colossal?”

“Biggest he’s ever seen,” Sirius assures them, holding his hands apart demonstratively.

“Shut it, you lot,” Ginny says, elbowing to the front. “Is that it, Harry? Did he say anything about Voldemort?”

Harry glances at Sirius, which Sirius isn’t quite sure how to interpret. But whatever Harry sees must satisfy him because he says, “He didn’t find anything for sure, but he said my brain is - normal. So.”

“He didn’t seem worried about it,” Sirius offers. “Can’t be too bad.”

Harry nods in a not-quite-convinced sort of way but pushes his glasses up with an expression that says he’s going to make the most of things. “What about you? Did you get your wands back?”

“Yeah, Bill talked that git around,” Ron says. “Would’ve looked bad if he didn’t give them back, honestly. And then they all went out back and Bones with them, and then the big Elric came and asked Mum for chocolate and then went out too so we figured you were done. Everybody started coming downstairs, so -“
“We told Mum you were cleaning up after Buckbeak, and she told us to go help you,” Ginny says brightly. “Because she knows how smelly and unpleasant we think it is. Or loudly complain it is, anyway.”

“Yeah, after bellowing our curls straight,” Fred or George says, wincing.

“Steaming mad, she was.”

“Told us she should’ve let Elric keep our wands and that another stunt like that would have her taking them from us herself.”

“Dad was just really disappointed,” Ron says. “And then asked us about how it was riding the Pipe.”


“Yeah, that.”

“Lucky brats,” Fred or George says. “We do all the work for you -”

“- and you get off without even a hiding.”

“Should have you hung by your ankles, Ronniekins -”

“Hey! You were the ones who decided to grab Elric -”

“Yeah, mate, I’m with him on that one,” Sirius says, because from what he understands of the situation that had been kind of a blunder. “What were you thinking? I mean, sneaking out is one thing, but taking that bloke with you?”

“If he was with us, he couldn’t go tell anyone who’d stop us,” Fred or George points out.

Sirius stares at them. “What about after?” he says. “What was the getaway plan?”

Fred and George look at each other and shrug. “Run away?”

“Deny it ever happened?”

“These Unplottables aren’t Filch, mates,” Sirius tells him, because that stuff only works because professors hardly listen to Filch and he can’t hobble too fast with his bad feet when it came to catching students red handed. “You can’t Obliviate them either, they’ll know something’s wrong. And they’re a little hex-happy, this lot - you’ve got to be a little smarter about how you do things, yeah?’

Ron and Harry nod and even Fred and George look vaguely like they agree; Sirius is vaguely amazed to find he’s just given a lecture on good behavior like some kind of authority figure, but he figures James will forgive him this trespass since it’s for the sake of his sprog.

“The important thing is we’ve got the cloak,” Ginny says. “We’ll have to sneak past Mum downstairs, but she’s in the kitchen, we can get past.”

“The cloak won’t fit all of us,” Hermione says in the businesslike tones of a girl who knows she’ll be one of the people under it regardless. “Getting into the backyard might be tricky, they’ll notice a door opening and closing… Ginny, what if we pretend like Crookshanks got out and you’re chasing him, and we go after you?”
“Wait,” Harry says. “Mad Eye. If he’s there, his eye can see through the cloak.”

Ron hisses through his teeth in disappointment but Hermione’s expression just goes militant. “We’ll have to hide behind something else, then,” she says. “Something he can’t see through. Whatever they’re doing, it involves Harry, and we need to know what it is. We have to get in the yard.”

“Oh you could just… look out the window,” Sirius says slowly.

They all stare at him. Then they all rush to the window he’s pointing at. It looks out on the backyard - which startles him for a second, because he hasn’t seen it unrolled since dear old Mum kicked it - but offers a clear view of the Unplottables, ranged in little clusters around the yard.

“Brilliant,” Ron breathes. “We don’t need the cloak at all!”

“We would have needed it eventually,” Hermione points out, eyes rapt on the blue uniforms below.

“Yeah, but for now we’ve lucked out for once. Fred, George, give us an ear, would you?”

Fred and George glance at Sirius, who shrugs. “Hey, I’m all for you lot being in the know,” he says. “You-Know-Who’s after Harry. Doesn’t do anyone any good to keep him in the dark. You two are adults in any case, Weasley and Weasley, what are you looking at me for?”

They grin at him and simultaneously pull tangles of fleshy-colored string from their pockets, nudging the other kids aside to get at the window. Sirius looks back out over their heads in time to see Elric - currently doing some strange upside down contortion on the ground - come up backwards into an effortless handstand, golden ponytail brushing the grass.

That’s one harpy-voiced shouty little git but Merlin, he’s fit. Sirius wonders if Moony thinks so too. Him and Prongs back in school went through a phase of loudly proclaiming their ‘type’, but Moony never really did and in any case Sirius’s was invariably a load of bollocks given it had more to do with cup size than any other human characteristic. That’s a bit sad, probably. Hard to tell with most things being a bit sad lately. Or a lot sad. Or bloody fucking awful. Things being a bit sad is actually bloody great, comparatively.

Maybe Moony likes blonds, is the point. Sirius hopes not. He looks terrible as a blond.

He refocuses on the yard just as Dumbledore and Bones appear, filing out of the back door followed by the other Order members. He’s got to admit he’s curious about what exactly the Unplottables will show, given the wandless magic they throw around and whatever explosive thing Mustang did to the boggart. Elric destroyed dementors, after all. Maybe he’s going to show everyone how.

Chapter End Notes

the Kidz: we're gonna spy on the order real quick mmkay

sirius, who has Not Been Told that harry does indeed have a brain full of Voldemort: o yeah totally go ahead lmao. feel fuckin free. pshyeah. this cannot backfire. i'm not like other moms, I'm a cool mom
Bones leads the wizards out with Beardy and Lemons in tow, Pirate stumping along behind him with Ponytail, Baldy and Mustache. There’s other ones with them too, a tall dark guy and the pink-haired lady who’d helped Baldy interrupt Ed’s street food dinner yesterday. The top hat guy who was so fuckin’ gung ho about werewolves is also in tow, along with a lady around Hawkeye’s age that Ed doesn’t recognize. No sign of Breakfast Lady or the twins; them fucking around with kidnapping might’ve given her the excuse she wanted to keep their oh-we’re-adults-already noses out of the vigilante business.

Ed wants to stamp that with a big ol’ definitive good, but those little fucks are probably gonna try and fuck around on their own some more without active supervision. Breakfast Lady better be sitting on them, for all their sakes, because where the fuck they’ll teleport next and who the fuck they’ll yoink along with them, Ed does not want to find out.

Al whistles low through his teeth, and Ed turns and catches the bracers tossed at him. A clap to get them back on his arms and all of the wizards are looking at him again, expressions ranging from curiosity to distaste - though to be fair that last one’s all Lemons. What a relentless little joy he is. Ed resists the urge to stick out his tongue at him as the wizards all gather around in front of them in a semicircle.

“Director, Moody Albus,” Mustang greets all friendly. “Hello everyone. Thank you for taking the time to indulge us - it’s late, I know, and hopefully this won’t take too long. We both have questions as to how our respective groups operate, I think, and would benefit greatly from sharing methods and techniques.”

Mustang steps back a little, leaving Hawkeye and Ed at the forefront of the wizards’ attention. “Colonel Hawkeye is a firearms expert and tactician, and Lieutenant Colonel Elric is a State Alchemist. Both have extensive combat experience and have volunteered to demonstrate that which would benefit from practical example. As specialists in their fields they also have questions that we hope you can answer, as well as potentially demonstrate in turn.”

Hawkeye inclines her head at the wizards and Ed gives a sarcastic wave. “Of course,” Beardy says. “On our part Amelia and Alastor are our Aurors, and sever us is an accomplished duelist and has made a study of spells and maneuvers favored by death eaters.”

Because he used to be one of them, ha ha, Ed doesn’t say aloud as Beardy gestures to Bones, Pirate and Lemons. “How would you like to begin?”

Hawkeye doesn’t step forward, but she does the spine-setting thing that makes everyone in eyeshot start paying attention. “Our objective for this exchange is to gain an understanding of each others’ tactics and capabilities as well as gather information on the methods favored by the enemy,” she says in her presenting-to-the-Council voice, formal and controlled with a barely detectable undertone of keep up, idiots. “As we use very different tools and systems in combat, starting with the basics would be best. Weapons and defenses and their ranges and effects are primary areas of interest, as well as anything else we can expect from enemy engagement.”

Some of the wizards don’t look like this info is sticking the landing, but Bones at least looks sharp. “We need to know what your wand sticks can do, and what else you use besides,” Ed translates for
the slow class.

“You don’t use wands at all?” one of the unfamiliar wizards says.

“We do not,” Hawkeye answers. “Are we correct in our current understanding that they are multi-purpose tools, and that in most cases every wizard is in possession of at least one?”

“That’s correct,” Bones says while the wizard who’d asked looks kind of like she thinks they’re the slow class. “A witch or wizard with a wand is armed. Other enchanted objects are occasionally used in combat, to distract and confuse and such, but not very often. Wands are fastest and most versatile.”

“What are some techniques we can expect from a typical wand user?” Hawkeye says.

Bones exchanges glances with Pirate, then looks back at Hawkeye. “Well, the spells depend on the situation,” she says.

“Okay, say I’m real mad and comin’ at you with a big stick,” Ed says and mimes swinging a bat. “What do you do? What’s the go-to?”

“Allow me,” Lemons says from the side, and before Ed can fully turn he says “Petrificus Totalus!”

Ed’s entire body snaps rigid and drops him to the ground. He’s stiff as a board, arms at his sides, can’t even fall properly, but ow he can sure as shit feel it when he hits the dirt ow ow, fuck he can’t move.

“Relax, he’s fine,” Pirate says harshly in the moment of ringing silence that Ed distantly recognizes as the immediate aftermath of Hawkeye going scary. “It’s just a full body bind.”

“And what is that,” Hawkeye says somewhere above Ed, very controlled. He can’t even blink. He tries to wiggle his fingers, his toes - his automail foot responds. His leg works. Not fucking much he can do in this position besides maybe aggressively scoot himself around but thank fuck, he is buying Winry so much jewelry.

“First year hex,” Pirate grunts. “Only not fatal because it doesn’t affect the diaphragm and heart muscles.”

Hawkeye appears overhead, leaning over Ed with her eyebrows tensed in concern. Boots crunch over on Ed’s other side and Mustang appears too. “Well that’s certainly useful,” he says, sounding thoughtful. Ed tries to melt the bastard’s brain out through his nose via his glare. “Does it wear off, or does it have to be reversed?”


Everything unlocks all at once, and Ed heaves in a huge gasp on reflex before gritting his teeth and flipping himself to his feet in a kip-up. Mustang gives him a report look completely at odds with his lazy tone. “Doesn’t affect automail,” Ed growls. “And no, we are not testing that directly, because my mechanic is all the way the fuck across Xing.”

“The… Finite Incantatem,” Hawkeye pronounces carefully at the wizards. “That ends it?”

“Cancels most spells,” Pirate grunts. “Got to put some force into it if the countercaster is strong, or the spell is ground in, but it’ll do for anything that’s not anchored or backed with a ritual.”
Ed can’t even begin to figure how that could make sense - does the cancellation energy act as a disruptive pulse on the existing active magical energy? - but Mustang’s looking at him. “You may want to test on an analogous system, if you can put together something with similar wiring,” he says to Ed, not under his breath but not addressing it to everybody, eyes narrowed a bit. “Knowing what kind of defense you may need would pay off, especially with your mechanic unavailable in case of emergency.”

Ed grimaces, lip curling back over teeth. His leg is wired to partially lock in cases of total system failure, so that he’s at least able to limp along and not just have it dangling loose if it gets royally fucked, but it slows him down a lot and Win yells at him real loud whenever he walks on busted automail for even half a second longer than is absolutely physically necessary. Can he even rig up something close enough in scale? In the past couple of years automail wiring’s gone practically nano and what he’s got right now is a lot of tiny fuckin’ mesh nets in the port and then a cascade series linked through the rest of the limb, and while he can probably set something up that follows the same principles he’s definitely not going to be able to mimic the bio interfacing -

“Um,” Arget says behind them. “You can. Try it on me?” She blushing spectacularly when everyone looks at her, but holds up her gloved right hand and flexes it once in the familiar robotic glide of good automail. “Car accident when I was sixteen,” she mumbles, staring at the ground.

“What, no, you can’t tell people that,” Ed tells her, momentarily forgetting about his leg and whatever the hell Lemons’ deal is. “You gotta say you fought off a cougar or punched a bear in the mouth or some shit. Car accident? Nobody’s gonna believe that.”

“You tell people you lost yours fistfighting god,” Havoc points out as Arget goes brilliantly red, though she does smile a bit.

“That’s because I did,” Ed says, turning back to the wizards. “Yo, Lemons, what the fuck was that?”

Lemons presents him with an eloquently disgusted sneer. “Lemons?”

“You want a better name, make better faces,” Ed tells him, cracking his knuckles. “You wanna go one on one, is that it?”

“What is automail?” Lemons shoots back.

“That,” Ed says, unimpressed, jerking a thumb back at Arget’s hand. “She just told you.”

“And what is that?” Lemons says in superior tones of the deeply grating variety.

Apparently this guy needs the paint-by-numbers explanation. “Automail is a type of prosthesis,” Hawkeye says before Ed can ask if this fuck knows what a fuckin’ prosthetic is. “It’s the most integrated option available and generally chosen for its mobility and durability.”

Most of the wizards are still looking pretty confused. Ed’s not sure why this is such a fuckin’ discovery for them, because while automail is mostly an Amestrisan thing that’s only just starting to catch on in Xing, he’s pretty sure Hairy or whoever said something about lord vasculitis making a new hand for one of his death idiots. “It’s what people use if they want to upgrade from that,” he says, pointing at Pirate’s peg. “Yo, why didn’t you buy a leg offa whoever made the eye, anyway? If they can do optical neuro work they’ve gotta be able to do limbs.”

“The eye is one of a kind, boy,” Pirate grumps. “And not all of us want a leg out of metal.”

“Uh, the leg’s one of a kind too, buddy,” Ed says, incredulous. “Every prosthesis is, unless you’re
using a temporary. Who the hell mass produces prosthetics? You got lotsa people losing limbs in the exact same way at the exact same joint?"

Every single wizard, however, is now zoned in to Ed’s general knee area and staring in a way that indicates they’re not paying attention. “Your leg’s metal?” Ponytail says interestingly.

Ed narrows his eyes. “Sure is. Y’all can cool it with the staring, I’m not taking my pants off no matter how sweet you ask.”

Bones snorts. She stared only for the first second, but Ponytail and the others keep it up and Baldy especially does not take the hint. “Which leg?”

Ed cocks his head and smiles as sweet as he knows how. “Guess.”

“Sorry, sorry,” Baldy says, finally seeming to realize he’s fuckin’ pushing it. “It’s just fascinating - oh my.”

They’re all looking past him again; Ed turns back and sees Arget’s pulled off her glove and held up her hand. It’s an interesting mount - she’s still got her original thumb, and it looks like whatever happened sheared across her hand diagonally, so the port is integrated across her palm. Ed can see that the metal’s curved and segmented into three joints at the palm instead of the standard single knuckle so as to move more naturally with the flesh that’s left - it’s clearly a dexterity-focused model. “That’s good work,” Ed says, mildly impressed. After two years as Winry’s live-in Pass Me Those Pliers - No, Those Other Pliers Idiot he kind of can’t not be. “Who’s your mechanic?”

Arget looks like she kind of regrets taking her glove off, but she turns her hand to show the little maker’s mark on the edge of her palm. “Altay sisters?”

“Oh, yeah, I heard of them.” Mostly in the context of Win hissing diatribes along the lines of those bitches, how are they getting that kind of signal load without having the client up to their ears in dampeners, I can’t believe this, I have to go all the way to West now and find out how they did it, those assholes, are they single? “They make good stuff.”

“Is that entirely mechanical?” Baldy says curiously, wide-eyed. “How is it attached? Did you charm it to - ah, my mistake, you use alchemy for this sort of thing, don’t you?”

“It’s not alchemy, it’s biomechanical engineering,” Ed says, back to annoyed. Then it occurs to him that he’s no longer alone in this particular test pool and twists back to Arget. “Shit, hey, is yours shielded? Like all your relays and stuff, do you have attenuation?”

“Yes sir,” Arget says, looking a little surprised. “Because I work with. Um. Special equipment? At - work?”

“Ah, don’t sir me, that’s for the brassholes,” Ed says, waving it off. “You should be fine then, long as you’re not sticking bits of yourself in any power sockets. Look - come and get a direct hit if you want to, but if they fuck you, you’re fucked, you know? I can run some wires together tomorrow and they can zap at that instead, see how it behaves that way. No need to lose a hand. Again.”

“There are wires inside?” Baldy says excitedly. “And - you said the Petrificus doesn’t affect it?”

“If it affects the muscles, not the nerves, then the signals from the brain are uninterrupted,” Hawkeye says.

They do not look like they consider that an explanation. Ed refrains from rolling his eyes. “It’s not enough of an immunity to matter, so it’s irrelevant. It hit me, I went down. You wanna know about
automail, you can write to an Amestrisan hospital and ask them to mail you a brochure.”

“Forgive us,” Beardy says. “We are not familiar with most engineering products, seeing as magic tends to interfere with most circuits.”

Wow, engineering, big word from Beardy over here. Ed bites back a smart remark and reminds himself that this guy’s just like any other automail nut crawling around Rush Valley and that while being a wizard does count against him he’s not any more of a freak just because he’s foreign.

“Arthur is a great enthusiast of craft, and appreciates fine work when he sees it,” Beardy continues, like he’s boarded Ed’s train of thought. “He means no offense.”

Well that - and Pirate talking about his leg - reminds Ed of pretty much the first question he had about wizards. “Whatever. Can you read minds or not?”

Chapter End Notes

snepe: welcome to the asshole big leagues, asshole
None of the wizards answer immediately. Bones is looking at Beardy. “Oh, fuck me,” Ed swears. “You actually can?”

“There is a method, yes,” Beardy admits, sounding grave. “Not commonly used, however. It is a considerably difficult spell to master, and navigating the mind of another is no easy task. It is not mind reading as you would picture it, I think - most cannot delve any deeper than passing surface thoughts, and understanding often requires a great deal of interpretation.”

“Voldie’s a Legilimens,” Pirate says, almost idly. “Best in the world. Not that he bothers, most of the time. But when he does - don’t think anything’s safe. Not even the best shielding’s a guarantee.”

“Shielding,” Hawkeye repeats evenly.

“Legilimensy’s counter is Ocklumensy,” Bones says. “You can train your mind to shield itself, though as Alastor said, against a very strong Legilimens it might not be enough.”

“And how the fuck does that work,” Ed says. “The shielding, the spell - how’s it affect you? What’s the range? Do you need line of sight or can some fucker get you from the next room over?”

“Eye contact is necessary in most cases,” Bones says. “I’ve never seen Legilimensy performed any further than from a few steps away. It’s not a spell used in combat. You’d be in the target’s mind together - nobody tries to incapacitate themselves like that unless they’ve got backup they’re damned sure of.”

“Voldie doesn’t need to cast to get you, or even meet your eyes,” Pirate says. “He can use it in combat. Your best chance there is keep him too busy to try and read anything from you. Though at that point yer just trying not to die.”

“And the shielding?” Hawkeye says, neutral in the face of this relentless little ray of one-legged sunshine.

“An Ocklumens protects themselves by emptying their mind, or putting up barriers,” Bones says. “It gives the Legilimens no way to push deeper.”

“And this can be learned?” Mustang says, arms folded a few paces behind Hawkeye.

“Yes,” Bones says. “Every Auror gets training, though most never master it. Some are naturally more resistant to Legilimensy, though. I’ve seen a few cases where recruits got the certification because the Legilimens couldn’t get anything coherent from them. They weren’t putting up an Ocklumensy shield, but they weren’t revealing information either, which is what counts when you’re out in the field.”

“‘Emptying your mind?’” Ed quotes skeptically. He last heard that from Mei and Al trying to teach him to sense qi, and that was specifically to open him up to external stimuli, not close him off. “You’re telling me the shielding specifically for this is just, like, meditation? No magic counter involved at all?”
“I don’t believe it’s quite like meditation,” Bones says, dry. “Though I hear it helps.”

“Disciplining the mind is the only way to ensure its unassailability,” Lemons says, back to his soft ooo-I’m-so-scary drawl. “Wand-waving or… clapping… cannot help you here.”

O-kay. Ed glances back at Al. He can tell they’re both thinking of the, okay, probably too frequent occurrences of Ed going so far up his own mental ass that he forgets to hydrate, doesn’t sleep for three days and walks into traffic, and that generally while reading getting his attention involves hitting him with a stick. That’s not an empty mind, but it’s a pretty thoroughly bricked up one. It follows that any mind-reading fuckdamn wizard is gonna have to have a brakes-shrieking honking thousand-kilo impending car crash or mental equivalent bearing down on Ed to make a dent when he’s like that, and it’s pretty empirically proven that the state is inducible.

Al shrugs a little bit with his hands. Ed chews consideringly at one side of his mouth and turns back to the wizards. “Let’s test it.”

Hawkeye and Mustang both give him some pretty similar are you FUCKING serious Fullmetal looks. Ed shrugs tightly. “They might not be able to get anything. And if it does go through, all they’ll get is math.”

Mustang and Hawkeye keep looking at him. Then they look at each other. Then they look at Al, which is just insulting, though at least Al just looks back at them like well, might as well find out how bad it gets.

“You want to try to repel it?” Bones says, not like she’s skeptical but like she’s making sure he really wants to stick his hand in this particular fire.

“Yeah, sure,” Ed says, rolling his shoulders. “Might as well find out what it’s like. Who wants a go, c’mon.”

Most of the wizards look at Bones, but she just looks back at Beardy, unimpressed. “I’m not a Legilimens,” she says archly.

Pirate’s looking at Beardy too, but Beardy nods at Lemons. “Would you care to indulge us, sever us?”

Lemons doesn’t reply but he does step forward, face fully lemoned out, and points his stick at Ed. Ed dives for his mental folder labeled Atomic Fuckery and spins out the fission problem again fast as he can, deliberately digging up the core array that started it all and running through the design base-up from first principles - the issue there is that if it’s possible alchemically, the math allows that it should be possible physically, and him and the Central U girl have been going at the problem from both ends with the dual tire irons of alchemy and nuclear physics because if they can translate it to a non-alchemical industrial process Amestris will be able to chuck coal burning and all its associated problems right out the window. Part of the problem is that Ed can’t fucking explain half the shit he just knows, so they’re both elbow deep in the math and the valence shells and the fucking byproduct containment question -

“Legilimens.”

Pain stabs behind Ed’s eyes. Abruptly he’s in howling white nothingness, staring up at the looming megalith of the Gate -

- and simultaneously in the weedy backyard, watching Lemons jerk hard and stagger backwards.

It only lasts a second. The split sensation snaps away, and Ed’s left with his heart hammering and
his whole body tensed. He’s had enough experience with this specific joyride to know they didn’t actually hit the Gate, but he has no damn clue what the sweet fuck it was instead - an afterimage, an echo? Can you somehow end up in Truth’s foyer without getting dragged all the way inside?

Lemons is standing upright and not clutching any bit of himself or coughing up any blood, which is further reassurance, and he’s wide-eyed and pointing his stick at Ed like he wishes it was a grenade launcher. “What in Salazar’s snakes was that, boy?”

Ed starts laughing, about seven parts sick delight to three parts relief. “My warmest fuckin’ welcome,” he informs an increasingly pissed-looking Lemons, once he’s got his breath back. Looks like hitting the Gate makes you immune to mind reading, because of course it does: that would transfer the Gate’s knowledge, after all, and it doesn’t share. “Wouldn’t try that again. Shit, you got off easy.”

“Brother?” Al says, in that cautious tone that most people don’t realize means he’s issuing a final warning.

“Ya, nah, we’re good,” Ed reassures him, then jerks a hand at Mustang and has the presence of mind not to look at Hawkeye at all. “Gate.”

“Ah,” Mustang says, also looking back to the wizards without glancing at Hawkeye or Hughes or any of the others. “That... would do it.”

“That was no Ocklumens shield,” Lemons says coldly, but there’s a spark of interest in his eye that Ed doesn’t like. “That wasn’t... natural. What did you do to yourself, boy?”

Ed can’t help the crazy laughter again. It really is kind of funny, now that it’s clear nobody’s been maimed this time. He grins at Lemons and knows it’s ugly. “Truth doesn’t come without a price.”

“The Amestrisan armed forces prefer their soldiers to keep some things to themselves, and take certain precautions to ensure this remains so,” Mustang interjects smoothly, which is not at all a lie and neatly implies everybody else has similar defenses so nobody fucking tries the same shit on them. At least not before they figure out a way to block it. “Is... Ocklumensy... the only way you deal with such an incursion?”

“Avoiding eye contact can help,” Bones says, watching Ed the way Mustache and the others did when they were talking about him killing dementers, and which they’re also doing again now, incidentally. “But generally if you’re no Ocklumens then it’s like Alastor said - your best bet is to keep your opponent busy and not get close.”

“I must confess to some curiosity as to these precautions,” Beardy says. “To deflect a Legilimensy probe without becoming an Ocklumens - if you have any insight as to how one may achieve that, it may prove extremely useful for those without the months necessary to develop Ocklumensy barriers.”


Someone starts coughing behind him. Lemons’ lip curls angrily, eyes glittering. “That,” he says with distaste, “was not porn.”

“Maybe it’s just porn you’ve never seen before,” Ed tells him seriously. “You don’t know what I get off to.” The coughing intensifies. “Y’all okay back there?”

“Fine, just fine,” Hughes says, kind of strangled. “So you, ah... distracted yourself?”
Beardy twinkles a bit at Ed. “Focusing on some particularly absorbing subject matter does sound like a promising avenue for protecting your mind.”

It’s cute that Beardy’s got a sense of humor about this, because Ed sure as shit doesn’t have a sense of humor about him. “Sure, try that.”

What Ed’s got doesn’t transfer; that’s the whole point. Though would a more aggressive stab at mind reading him send a wizard to the Gate? That would make it - human transmutation. A trespass on the soul - alright, yeah. If that’s where your mind is - and sentience retained as a soul in an empty suit of armor proves it is - then trying to invade it could invoke the Gate. Would their mind control shit work the same way? What about the memory erasing magic? That’s manipulating the soul too, arguably - though the fact that wizards aren’t losing limbs every time one of them does it points to the theory that they don’t have to deal with the Gate at all. Lemons definitely isn’t acting like someone who recognized what he saw in Ed’s head. If he even saw the same thing.

Maybe it’s only because Ed’s blown open his connection to Truth wider than a six-lane highway that Lemons encountered the Gate-echo at all. Everyone has a Gate - or at least they start out with one - but unless you get real dumb with your life choices most people never even know it exists. So presumably the wizards are no different, only their magic doesn’t interact with the Gate the way alchemy does.

That follows that interacting magically with Ed makes them play by the rules Ed has to live by, which, hah, but also makes him wonder if there’s an analogous system on their end - if he interacts with magic alchemically, does that change the way the alchemy works? Nothing’s happened so far in all his fucking around with the house and stuff, so if there is an effect it’s unobservable, negligible or belated. Or nonexistent. There’s no rule that says it has to go both ways. If there’s no Gate equivalent there might not be anything to transfer.

Would mind-reading work on Hawkeye? She doesn’t even have a Gate anymore at all -

“Does language affect it?” Al says from his bench. “If, say, you are trying to get information from someone who doesn't speak the same language - does something like the translation stones work within the mind as well?”


“It seems we have plenty of things to explore further regarding this topic,” Mustang says, stepping forward. “We would certainly like to discuss this in more detail - tomorrow, perhaps, as we don’t want to keep anyone this evening longer than necessary. We would welcome any resources you can share on Occlumensy, as it seems the most effective tool in dealing with these kinds of situations.”

“Of course. Sever us is a master Occlumens, and has several definitive texts on the subject,” Beardy says. “I’m sure he’ll be happy to discuss it with you going forward.”

Lemons looks like he’ll be happy to push them all off a bridge and even then only if it’s into a nest of crocodiles, but he nods. Ed’s gonna have to have his own talk with Al and Mustang too, tell them his theories without wizards listening in.

And Hawkeye. That’s… gonna be a conversation. Ed would happily never bring that up with her ever again in his life and he gets the feeling it’s mutual, but she’s basically in a wholly unique position and it turns out it’s suddenly real fuckin’ relevant in the here and now.
“You mentioned other methods to compel people to divulge information,” Hawkeye says to Bones. “As well as force them to do other things.”

“The Imperius,” Bones says, face grim. “I would call it far more of a danger than encountering any Legilimens, yes.”

“But resistance is possible,” Hawkeye says.

“Yes,” Bones admits. “It takes a strong will, and if the caster is powerful then it’s that much harder to break through. Complex orders are easier to resist, but if one is taken unawares, and the charm reapplied… it can be very nasty indeed.”

“Are there techniques to strengthen resistance to this as there are to the mind reading?” Hawkeye says.

“Practice,” Pirate grunts. “Experience. Willpower. It can help, but it won’t save you against a powerful enough wizard.”

“I see,” Hawkeye says. “We would like to test this effect as well.”

That makes Top Hat and Baldy and the others look pretty uncomfortable, exchanging concerned looks, though Beardy and Bones and the dark new guy keep their poker faces on. Lemons just keeps on looking like he’s constantly smelling dogshit, because despite any protests he’s clearly invested time and effort into getting his face to stick that way and he’s not about to give up now.

“That’s an unforgivable,” Pirate says, not hostile for once, just considering.

All the wizards swivel to look at Bones like they’re waiting for a verdict. “I worked with you for thirty years, Alastor, I know what you’re capable of,” she says crossly. “We’re fighting the bloody dark war again, you think I’m going to care? All the Auror recruits worth their salt test it on each other on the sly anyway, don’t think I don’t know about that. If they want to try it I’m hardly going to say no.”

The last is accompanied with a wave at Ed and Hawkeye and Mustang. Pirate turns a more considering look on Hawkeye, this one just this side of unpleasantly measuring, so Ed steps forward and beckons: if the same pseudo-Gate thing happens then at least they’ll all find out quick it’s nonviable and nobody gets hurt. “Yeah, let’s do it. Hit me.”

Pirate levels the stick right between Ed’s eyes and says “Imperio.”

There’s no jet of light. It’s a sudden rush of… pinkness, and… floatiness, like bubble bath and cotton candy and those first seconds of bliss when his automail nerve surgery was finally over and Winry could jack him full of painkillers. It’s kind of a nice place to be, actually. Ed doesn’t mind the hard stuff, reacts well to morphine, and he doesn’t get it often enough to have to worry about dependency so it’s not even one of the things Al stresses over. He only gets sky-highed like this when there’s nothing for him to do but stay down in some sickbed and grow scar tissue.

He’s got stuff to do now, though. Punch him. Mustang’s standing right there, looking stupid and annoying and so fucking punchable. So why not punch him. Punch him. Why not do it. It’d feel amazing. Punch him. He’s got the heavy gloves on, though, it’d break like, every second bone in his face. Punch him. He doesn’t want to break Mustang’s face. Punch him. Hawkeye would break his face, and then probably his spine. Punch him! And why the fuck does he want to deck Mustang anyway, he really has been weirdly nice lately -

“Oh, you son of a bitch,” Ed marvels, half admiring, half crazy fucking pissed. He’s dimly aware
that he’s slurring but his hands form into fists just fine, leather creaking. “The one time I got an ironclad excuse for fuckin’ deckin’ the bastard, I can’ even take it. That’s fuckin’ nasty. That’s inspired. I’m gonna hit you instead.”

The second Ed takes a step forward the pink fog lifts, and sound and weight and brain all snap back into existence in a rush. It feels a little like he just fell off a trampoline, the ground suddenly harder under his feet and gravity in full effect on every part of him; in front of him Pirate’s lowering his stick, looking speculative.

“Huh,” Ed says aloud, then can’t help shaking himself all over like a dog to get the weird aftershocky feeling off. That was nothing like the Gate. “That’s it?”

“Were you… trying to make him hit me?” Mustang says, sounding like he can’t believe the words coming out of his mouth; Hawkeye’s giving Ed an appraising kind of look too.

“Imperius can make you turn on your allies, your friends,” Pirate grunts. “If he wants a taste of what it’s like I weren’t about to do the disservice of going easy on him.”

Mustang’s now staring at Ed like he’s trying to figure out where the zipper is on his human suit and how he can wrangle it open to confirm his newfound conviction that Ed’s been replaced by an alien or possibly just a shaved wolverine. Pirate, though, gives Ed a grudgingly approving nod. “Good show, lad. Not many can even think their way through Imperius, let alone talk.”

Ed grins unpleasantly back at Pirate. “Aw, thanks. Shoulda tried getting me to punch Hawkeye. Then I really woulda hit you.”

“That was the compulsion?” Mustang says, still staring at Ed. “To hit me specifically?”

“Uh, yeah?”

Mustang’s face isn’t blank enough to hide that he very clearly has no idea why Ed didn’t, and it’s so funny Ed cracks up, incredulous. “Are you serious? Mustang! I spend every day not punching you, and that’s despite you, the entire country, the universe and all the laws of nature begging me to do it. I am the world champion of not punching you. Shit, are you disappointed?” Ed grins at Mustang’s pissy face and beckons with his whole palm, folding it into a fist. “Aw, don’t pout. You ever want a taste, you just come and get some.”

Mustang casts his eyes skyward like he’s praying for patience. “Proof that your inability to follow orders extends to magical coercion aside,” he says in the tone that means he’s fantasizing about garrotting Ed with his own ponytail, “I would like to hear that this is an offensive with effective counters available to us that are not pornographic fantasy.”

Ed snickers. “Relax, this one’s not hard. Pretty sure I’ve had cravings for pickled radish that were a stronger ‘compulsion’ than this.”

“Pickled radish,” Bones repeats in the kind of tone that’s usually the prelude in a lot of incredulous civilian yelling.

Ed would ask what her deal is, but Hawkeye’s looking a question at him. “Ever been on a lot of painkiller?” Ed tells her. “Like, tweety birds and talking purple badgers, feelin’ no pain kinda high? It’s like that. And then it feels like you should be doing something, and it sounds like a great idea. But it doesn’t make any sense – I mean, you wanna do it, but like I said, you, y’know, want to go get pickles when you wannit. And once I figured out it wasn’t me wanting it, I got torqued off, and, well.”
Ed smacks his fist into his palm demonstratively and is rewarded with Hawkeye going all amused around the eyes. “It’s much harder to fight off if you’re caught off guard, or otherwise unprepared,” Bones says with an edge of audible control in her voice, and they look at her. “Many would not describe the Imperius as experiencing a craving.”

“Understandable. We must admit Lieutenant Colonel Elric has a personal advantage in resisting coercion,” Hawkeye allows, considering. “I would like to test this as well, please.”

Chapter End Notes

moody: time to make a point that imperius ain't nothin to fuck with. Puncho Superioro Officero, alakazam

ed: HA! HAHAHAHA! HAHAHAHA HAAAAAAAAAAAA AAHAHAHAAAAAA HAHAHA HEEHEEEEEEEEE HOHOHOHOHOO HOOOOO HA HAAAHAAAAA
“Porn?” Sirius chokes, sounding like he’s trying not to eat his own tongue strangling laughter. “Porn? He - just - the Imperius -”

“Shhh,” Fred and George say.

“Purple badgers?” Ginny whispers incredulously, ignoring them. “Tweety birds?”

“Merlin - he just - to Snivellus - and Dumbledore -”

“Pickled radishes?” Hermione demands.

“Metal leg?” Ron hisses.

“Figures,” Harry grumbles, rubbing his bruised shin where Elric had swiped him into Ginny.

“And then - he just - porn!”

“Shhhhh!”
“You want to try the Imperius?” Bones confirms. “Well… try again, I suppose, Alastor.”

“One moment, please,” Hawkeye says, then begins unclasping the holstered sidearms from her belt. Ed steps forward to take them when she holds them out; she doesn’t make a move to undo her jacket and remove her shoulder holsters, so when she hands over the one from the small of her back he steps back out of grabbing distance and makes sure he’s not gonna drop anything. She’s damn smart - if Pirate tries to go all attack your pals again to make his point she’s not going to kill anybody if shit does go sideways. Her shoulder pistols aren’t quick-draw with her uniform jacket formally closed, and those holsters are secured besides - Ed or even Havoc could tackle her before she gets one of those guns into her hand.

Hawkeye nods at the wizards. “Whenever you’re ready.”

Pirate eyeballs her all what the fuck was that, lady, but he does step forward again, points his stick and says “Imperio.”

Ed gets to see what it must’ve looked like from the outside on his go-around, which is not much. Hawkeye’s eyes go kind of glazed, and it’s really only that Ed’s got years of practice reading her that he can see when her expression goes uncharacteristically vacant. Pirate’s got his stick still pointed, his own face focused, both eyes pointed the same way, even, and Ed’s internal background count hits twenty-two seconds when Hawkeye just says “No,” in a very level tone.

Then she blinks rapidly, eyes clearing, and looks around. Ed bounces his eyebrows at her, because Pirate’s looking pretty disgruntled. “Pickled radish?”

“Rum raisin ice cream,” she tells him.

“Rough,” Ed sympathizes, holding out a gun back to her from the top of the stack. “What’d he try and get you to do?”

“Take out my hair clip,” Hawkeye says dryly.

“What!” Ed says, then in a fit of pique, turns his very best shock and offense on the wizards. “Oh, that is not okay. Let her hair down? You some kinda fuckin’ pervert? In public - you’d get arrested in Amestris, you fucking sex maniac. That’s indecent.”

Every wizard looks deeply, satisfyingly taken aback. Ed’s seeing a lot of baffled looks go to Hawkeye’s hair, then his; he hopes to fuck nobody behind him cracks too early, because even Bones is blinking at him. “But… you had your hair down?” she says confusedly.

“Yeah, well, I’m a slut,” Ed deadpans.

Hughes once again loses any grip on composure behind him. Al sighs loudly over the hysterical choking. “Brother. Stop teasing. I want to go to bed at a reasonable hour.”

Ed cackles at the look of dawning fury on Lemons’ face. “I’m fucking with you,” he explains for the wizards not there yet. “Seriously, though, what’s the fuckin point of getting her hair down?”
“Imperius can get you through an easy order sometimes faster than a hard one,” Pirate grumps; whatever respect he’d decided to throw Ed’s way over the not following magic orders thing is gone and it’s back to the glaring. “You obey something small because what’s the harm, and then they’ve got you deep and unresisting.”

“Ah-huh,” Ed says, skeptical. It’s cute that they’re trying, and, okay, he’s gotta allow for the possibility of personality and background affecting their susceptibility, because if every wizard could shake it off like they did they wouldn’t be treating it like such a problem. In that case Pirate here just seriously struck out in his test pool, because dogs of the state or not Ed’s a huge fucking bitch and Hawkeye only follows the orders that she psychically feeds into Mustang’s mouth herself.

“Thank you for demonstrating the spell,” Hawkeye says, casually signing all clear at Mustang as she buckles her holsters back on. “That was very helpful.”

“Anyone else want a go?” Ed asks back at the rest of the team. “S’kinda fun.”

“At a later time, I think,” Mustang says, the party pooper. Probably scared Hughes actually would take the chance to deck him. “We’d like to explore this further along with the Legilimensy, but I think this has served as example, for the moment.”

“Yes, we’d all definitely like to try it,” Hughes says cheerily. “Especially if practice and exposure turn out to be necessary. Not all of us have Edward’s natural charm!”

Ed snorts. He doesn’t know about Arget or Jones, but the rest of this fuckin’ dance troupe consists of Al, who’s polite but not obedient; Hughes, who’s undergone so much counterinterrogation training that he now teaches the nasty specialty course; and of course General “The Last Time I Followed Orders I Committed Genocide, So How About I Just Overthrow The Government Real Quick” Mustang.

Havoc… Havoc might just have to duck.

“When you clap,” Beardy speaks up, apparently deciding the whole mind control thing is tapped out for now. “I assume you invoke your alchemy?”

“Yeah, sure,” Ed says disinterestedly. This is familiar territory: deflecting the but where’s your circle? questions without getting into the whole ‘consolation prize from human transmutation’ thing, because some fresh young idiot might just try it.

“How does that work, exactly?” Bones says.


“The wand acts as a focus and control for one’s magic, channeling the energy and concentrating it to cast spells,” Bones says dryly, like Ed’s trying to climb out a window and she’s pointing out that right next to him there’s a perfectly good door. “I assume it’s a different system for you.”

“If the concept of the philosopher’s stone is the same across our cultures, I wonder what other similarities our two alchemies may have,” Beardy muses. “You mentioned transmutation arrays, I believe… they are the practical execution of wizard ing alchemy, and I assume a facet of yours as well?”

“Sure,” Ed says sourly, reminded that their most important problem in this fuck festival is that lord ventriloquy most likely has at least one fuckin’ alchemist as well as at least one philosopher’s stone, and that isn’t gonna be affected by a magic negating array. “Arrays, yep, all over the place.”
“Your alchemy does use circles, then?” Beardy says, all oh-that’s-so- fascinating -Mister-State-Alchemist-sir. “I must confess, the application of transmutation without them seems an undreamt-of technological leap.”

Ed shrugs, bored down to his toenails. “You get good enough, you don’t need circles anymore.”

“Really?” Beardy says, projecting harmless grandpa as hard as Ed’s broadcasting boredom and blatantly not taking the hint. “How so?”

“I am the circle,” Ed says half-sarcastically, because it’s both true and the non-answer Teacher always uses whenever anyone asks how the fuck she’s transmuting circle-free. This is one of the core things that drive Ed nuts about Gate shit; it’s literally impossible for him to explain how he just understands how to align an array inside himself and channel the energy through it. It’s like trying to describe color to the blind. ‘The array is me’ is the closest he and Al can get to accurately describing what’s happening. “You can channel the energy through yourself. Like you’re your own… wand, whatever.”

“And the clapping?” Beardy says.

“Completes a circuit.” Time to turn this convo around. “Gimme some of your alchemy books or whatever later, I wanna see what you people use. They got arrays in them and shit, yeah? Great, don’t need to read your Inglish to read that.” Though a dictionary wouldn’t go amiss, and a periodic table either, because who knows if their symbols for elements are different. Shit, are their names for elements different? Half the Amestrisan table is named after Old Xerxesian shit, people and places and, like, fuckin’ hydrogen is bastardized Old Xerxesian for water. What the fuck did Smartypants and the others hear when he said helium?

“In terms of the enemy’s capabilities,” Hawkeye says, returning Ed from the land of nonuniversal nomenclature. “What would you say is the most urgent priority?”

“Information,” Bones says bitterly. “We don’t know where they are. They meet at different locations each time. We don’t know their plans; Voldemort’s keeping his own counsel. We can tail those we suspect, but we cannot enter their homes or follow them when they travel by apparition or port key. We assume he’s gathering his resources, but for what -” She shakes her head angrily. “We can only guess. Release his imprisoned death eaters, maybe. Contact werewolf clans and vampires and giant tribes to build his numbers, maybe. Attack potter, maybe - likelier now, given the dementers.”

“Has he released any declarations or manifestos? Any recruitment efforts, any attempts to consolidate power in foreign states?” Hawkeye says. She’s fuckin’ unfazable; Ed’s still trying to process vampires.

“No,” Bones says. “We know what he wants - that’s the easy part. What he wants is to kill us and muggle born and take over the ministry. But as to how or when… we only just now have anything substantial to work with, with the dementer attack. We have been trying to contact the werewolves and vampires first, but the clans are transient, and vampires are solitary and not big on, hah, socialization.” Her mouth twists wryly. “We can only hope they’re having as hard a time getting ahold of them as we are. There haven’t been any increased reports of those kinds of attacks near any wizard ing settlements, at least.”

Unknown numbers, unknown allies, unknown… everything. What a big ol’ dossier labeled Jack Shit. This is no surprise given civilians aren’t trained to gather information and vigilante groups don’t tend to have dedicated intelligence departments, but Ed’s still annoyed. Though that may be mostly because of the vampires. If they tell him lord valedictorian is assembling a magic mermaid
army Ed’s gonna go full yodelay hee hoo.

“Out of the known tools in the enemy’s arsenal, is there any that is especially urgent as a threat?” Hawkeye says. “Any specific advantage they have in weapons or -” the pause is barely perceptible, Hawkeye’s a professional - “magic?”

“Yeah, like, you said lord vacuole can get you with the mind reading without using a stick or saying the command, and that other people can’t do that,” Ed says. “He got anything else like that? A bigger stick, maybe?”

“Voldie casts quick,” Pirate says. “He knows dark spells no one’s ever heard of - he invents the things. He’s strong, he’s fast, he’s smart. He sets traps and takes hostages and gets allies, friends, families to turn on each other. He doesn’t skirmish himself unless forced into it but when he does only dumbell door can hold him off alone - and that’s just holding him off.”

“Does he have a range advantage, when using spells?” Hawkeye asks. “Can he get you from further away than you can get him?”

“No,” Pirate says consideringly. “No, it’s his curses. If he gets you, you’re dead. The killing curse speaks for itself; he throws that one out like confetti. But the rest... for what he uses, there’s no countercurse. No shields, sometimes. I’ve seen spells of his go right through Protego like it weren’t there. Healers can’t help you: the spells he uses aren’t anything they’ve got an antidote for. If you’re hit, you die.”

So... like a gun, basically. Large-caliber, okay, fine. There are lots of ways to deal with people with guns. Honestly, Ed’s more concerned about whatever the hell the gravity-null shit Smartypants used on him was.

“You mentioned he can fly,” Hawkeye says. “Please explain.”

“Nobody knows how he does it,” Pirate says sourly.

“Why the fuck would you want to fly when you can teleport,” Ed demands. “Can he not teleport? Apparate,” he tacks on, at the confused looks on some wizard faces.

“Oh, Voldie can apparate alright,” Pirate says darkly. “But you can only apparate somewhere you’ve been, lest ye Splinch, and in a fight he’ll be on top of ye before ye can blink. You’re stuck fighting on the ground; he isn’t.”

“What other specific advantages does he have over your own forces?” Hawkeye says. “Is it a question of numbers?”

“Aye, he has that,” Pirate says. “Death eaters wear cloaks and masks - makes counting their numbers difficult, can’t be sure if the three you see today are the same three you’ll see tomorrow. Fourteen of his most fanatical are still in Azkaban, Merlin mote.”

“Wizard ing prison,” Bones translates. “We do not have a firm estimate of his current numbers - perhaps thirty. At the height of his power he had over sixty at his command.”

Ed and Hawkeye exchange a look. O-kay then. And presumably this group here plus or minus a couple others are the entirety of the vigilante squad; about half that of the death munchers, then, if the numbers are accurate. Ed’s kind of glad that so far all the scary wizard shit is turning out to be pretty underwhelming, but also, yikes, guys. It’s getting kinda sad.

“You and Elric are alchemists,” Bones says, looking between Ed and Hawkeye to Mustang. He
inclinates his head in acknowledgement. “And the rest of your team are muggles?”

“I suppose that’s broadly correct,” Mustang allows, leaving off the *according to your creepy cult terminology, anyway.*

“Will that be enough?” Bones says bluntly. “The death eaters are all wizards. All of them are fighters, some very accomplished duelists indeed. They are unafraid to use dark spells and they won’t just try to kill you. They’ll make it hurt.”

Ed tries not to look too exasperated, because it is not the time to say things like *if we catch them unawares it’s a fuckin’ thirty-second workday for Mustang or lady, we had ONE alchemist decimate a town in two days, the body count was triple digits, fuck Void, damn him, six hundred and forty-two dead two hundred twenty injured sixteen missing.* Hawkeye, though, is apparently tuned to the same radio, because she tilts her head up and examines the darkened sky as if considering the night’s weather. “The usual distribution is one alchemist per platoon,” she remarks, apparently to no one. “Two if you are on campaign. One construction, one assault. Three is generally considered overkill unless your orders are to raze the field.”

“Oh host a catfight,” Hughes says, pushing his glasses up slightly. “You know what they say. One alchemist’s a crowd, two’s an opera, three’s a coup in progress.”

“Ha, I fuckin’ wish,” Ed mutters under his breath. Mustang doesn’t wanna roll their stupid government, well too fuckin’ bad, they’re gonna do *something* about the slavery before they go or Ed’s gonna make his life a living hell until he capitulates.

“We will manage,” Mustang answers Bones, smiling his Officer Asshole smile; it somehow manages to be more assholey than his Colonel Bastard and General Sadism smiles put together. “And this is a joint operation, of course. We will be relying on you for more than just information.”

“The death eaters won’t stand across a garden from you and wait for you to take turns eating spells,” Pirate says warningly. “They’ve taken on Auror teams and killed many a witch or wizard who’ve survived plenty else before. If they can order dementers to come after Potter they can order them to come after you, and if they swarm you need a patronus just to stay conscious. Don’t get me wrong. If you can do to them what you did to those that came before, I’ll buy your drink meself. But don’t make the mistake of underestimating what Voldie can throw at you. Especially if you’ll be tripping into his lair.”

This guy needs to sit down with Mustang and his contingency plan fetish. “You know what, let me cool you off on this one,” Ed says, because he’s had just about enough of standing around talking. “You wanna know we can handle shit, no problem. Totally fair. Let’s spar. Me on whoever. You guys can fight, right? Who’s good?”

That raises some eyebrows. “Spar,” Lemons says, like he’s pronouncing *sheep rapist.*

Pirate is focusing both eyes at him again. Ed cocks his head right back. “You fight still, old man?”

Pirate’s expression doesn’t change much, but a gleam lights in his flesh eye. Bones is grinning. “Alastor can be called... good, in a fight, yes. Of course, sever us Snape is also quite experienced,” she says. “I’m sure either would agree to duel, if you so chose.”

“Nah. Let’s do both of them. Two on one.” Ed grins right back and shakes his hands out, enjoying the heaviness of the leaded gloves. “Y’know. Gotta make it fair.”
ed, whose sense of humor shows up at the worst of moments and manifests as things only an intel officer would find funny: [tosses hair] oh haven’t you heard? I’m the slut alchemist

al, ouija board in hand: i’m fucking telling mom on you
Chapter 50

Bones looks at Beardy, though Lemons and Pirate both stay watching Ed like they can’t wait to trash his ass like it’s dumpster day. Ed grins back his take your ticket and get in line, you ain’t the first fucks to this party. “Why not,” Lemons bites out, murdering and dismembering Ed with his eyes. “It would be quite ... educational.”

Pirate’s look is a little more evaluating, his roving eye making minute flicks up and down Ed’s body. “Aye. I’m willing.”

Bones looks at Hawkeye, who doesn’t bother to emote, then at Mustang, who smiles back in politely fake inquiry. “If you’re sure,” Bones says, looking back to Ed with her eyebrows slightly raised like your funeral, kid.

“Yeah, let’s fuck this shit,” Ed says, lacing his fingers together as much as he can in the heavy gloves and stretching both arms out inverse over his head. “Are we doing first blood or tap out?”

Bones’ eyebrows stay up. “Blood?”

“Yeah, like, how do y’all spar,” Ed says, because he learned the hard way that Xingese matches don’t recognize drawing blood as a valid way to end things. “What’s the rules? How do you decide it’s over?”

“Disarmament,” Bones says, back to dry. “Typically a practice duel ends when one wizard has lost their wand.”

“Okay, well, I don’t have one,” Ed says patiently. “So we can either go until somebody bleeds, like I said, or until one of us taps out. That’s you hit the ground, one-two-three,” he adds, because he’s getting a lot of blank looks here. “You can also call yield.”

“Hit the ground,” Bones repeats.

No rising dawn of comprehension blesses the other wizards’ features. Ed’s tempted to add very sincerely that actually, Amestrian sparring is conducted strictly naked and knee-deep in canola oil, but he’s got the feeling that’ll choke Hughes out entirely and make Al do something memorable. He looks over at Hawkeye instead. “Demo?” She nods. “Throw me?”

Hawkeye steps forward. Ed doesn’t brace for the incoming - well, not more than is automatic - and lets Hawkeye get inside his guard, take his arm and lever it up over her shoulder. When his boots leave the ground he’s got to fight the instinct to turn it into a full flip and land on his feet; he doesn’t manage not to grab Hawkeye’s jacket with both hands in the starting position of a counterthrow, but she’s merciful and takes him down at quarter speed and absolutely no force behind it. Ed’s shoulder successfully hits the grass a second later and he unsticks one hand to slap the ground three times.

“Like that,” he tells the wizards, taking the hand Hawkeye offers and pulling himself up. “Means match over, stop whatever you’re doing. You got something like that? Besides losing the stick?”

“One may call forfeit and end the match,” Bones says. “Are there other rules you duel by?”
“Well, we’re not trying to kill each other or nothing,” Ed allows. “Let’s say it’s done when both of them lose their sticks.”

“Or you... tap out,” Bones says.

“Or I tap, sure,” Ed says indulgently, beckoning with a hand each to Pirate and Lemons. “C’mon, everybody else back, let’s do this.”

“Mark the live fire zone, Fullmetal,” Mustang warns.

“Yeah, yeah,” Ed says, waving for the others to get out of the way. “Back it up, I said. Less you want your shoes transmuted,” he adds, clapping and leaning down to pat the ground briefly. That gets wizards retreating in a hurry; the top layer of soil and grass shunts off in rumpled piles to the sides of the yard, because Al always complains when Ed crushes plants ‘wilfully’, so he avoids it when he can. It leaves a bare circle of even earth that stretches right to the hedges and benches. Ed considers it, decides the space is enough, and, remembering Smartypants’ ricochet into the cabinets, claps again and raises some thick dirt walls on the Amestrian side like the blast shields they have at the large-bore firing range back in East Command.

Al stands from his bench and hops up onto one of the dirt blocks as it rises, riding it to the top. “Yo, how do you handle ricochet?” Ed wonders aloud as the last of the dirt grinds into place. Do they even have ricochet? Psycho had that force-field-lookin’ thing when Mustang blowtorched the fuckin’ bog art, but an energy field like that would most likely absorb, not reflect. “Like when your shooty shit gets thrown back at you. Or does it not bounce?”

Bones is starting to get that look local officials always get after extended exposure to Ed; it’s an expression that starts with what the fuck, evolves to why me, takes a turn in why god and then escalates into god’s dead and all that’s left of my psyche is whatever it’ll take to get rid of this fucker. To her credit, Bones is climbing that curve slower than most. “Practice duels are usually conducted with nonlethal spells,” she says. “If any go astray it’s a matter of applying the counter hex.”

“So like... d’you need me to set up shielding, or,” Ed says skeptically. He does want to see what the wizards might do to solve that problem, but also, if they don’t have anything, he’s got a moral responsibility to build them some baby gates. Doesn’t mean he can’t be an asshole about it, though.

“We will manage without, I think,” Beardy says serenely, justifying all of Ed’s asshole tendencies anew with every sentence out of his mouth.

“We have shields of our own,” says the dark new guy with the big earring, deep voice all reassuring. Aw, does he think Ed’s worried? “We will cast them if necessary.”

“Okay, sure,” Ed allows, not adding any your liability, then comments because they’ll both find out soon enough if the wizards’ precautions are good enough. “Everybody get out of the ring, then,” he adds, turning to flap a hand at Mustang and the others to shoo them up to join Al.

Mustang gives him a deeply unimpressed look that says he is not happy about having to climb up two meters of sheer dirt to get any kind of view. Ed smiles at his pain. No one besides Al was smart enough to take the easy way up, though Jones looks at a block consideringly, takes a couple steps back and runs up the wall enough to grab the top. From there he extends a hand down to Arget, and then both of them pull up Hughes. Havoc sighs, pulls himself up with his arms and leans back down for Mustang.
Ed cups his hands to give Hawkeye a step up and makes sure to watch pointedly and snicker at the I-went-to-boot-camp-but-utterly-refuse-to-show-it look of entirely self-inflicted martyrdom on Mustang’s face. Havoc hauls him up in much more justified martyrdom, though Ed doesn’t believe the grunts for a second: Mustang weighs, like, maybe one of Havoc’s legs.

Then it’s just him and the wizards. Ed takes his time walking back in their direction, rolling his neck and shoulders, shaking out his arms. Pirate and Lemons move forward, taking up positions about equilateral to each other - they’re not shoulder to shoulder but they’re not spreading out, either, which is a poor starting choice if they’re planning to flank him. Ed had been half of a mind to beat the shit out of whoever he’d be against without alchemy, just to show off and make a point, but that’s seriously unlikely to be feasible given that fuckin’ Smartypants and Miss Redhead had dropped him like a sack of shallots just by catching him off guard. The magic sticks are ranged weapons, like guns only the bullets can make you do weird shit as well as, presumably, just kill you.

So like if Hawkeye was an alchemist, fucking hell what a scary thought. Plus sometimes the bullets are invisible. And Pirate has that eye that saw through Ed’s pants the moment they met, and might have some other magic bullshit going on besides. Plus teleportation. Great. Ed suspects he’s about to have fun like he hasn’t had since Scar and his headsplosions put him in his sights.

“We start on my command, then,” Bones says; she’s retreated with the rest of the wizards but stayed at the forefront, all of them with sticks in hand. “We end on my command as well, if I see it’s necessary. Understood?”

Ed nods along with Lemons and Pirate, shifting his weight to his back foot and opening his stance. He’s going to have to be quick. Make cover, keep moving; treat this like a live simulation because if they land with that paralysis shit it’s all fucking over. And they’re motivated, too, both watching him with something that can only be eagerness even if it is turning up on faces like bad citrus and old boot.

So. Use the terrain. Immobilize. Throw the book at them; give ‘em environmental, melee, all kinds of problems. Do not, under any circumstances, let them so much as clip you. Get their little sticks out of their hands and see what else they’ve got -

- but not too quick. The whole point of this is not to win, it's to see what wizards can do.

Of course, Ed intends to win anyway.


Chapter End Notes

ed, who took out a train full of armed ex-military hijackers when he was fucking 12 years old: 2 opponents? well ok i’m due for a spa day i guess
Both wizards fire on him immediately, but they weren’t expecting him to dive high and forward and their magic lights hit dirt under him as he tucks and rolls. He claps midair and slaps the ground as he lands, punching an array outward that destabilizes the entire yard, and it knocks Pirate and Lemons off their feet and simultaneously sends dirt spraying up into the air around them, cutting their visibility. Time to find out what Pirate’s magic eye can see-

Plenty, it turns out, as Ed has to roll fast to narrowly avoid an unerring jet of light. More lights come his way as he jumps up and runs for the perimeter, forming the next array and rolling to clap and slap the ground again, the sting traveling up his arms. He pretty much resigned himself to big guns right off the bat, but it’s still annoying as shit that these tapioca-brained cultists have managed to flunk their way into forcing him to actually put in some effort.

When you’re up against some dickfuck with guns, they have the range advantage, point blank. Well, fine. Ed likes to even the score by giving himself every other advantage instead. His array mows through the entire yard and makes the ground uneven, treacherous, dips and hummocks everywhere, pits opening and walls shooting up, spikes and pillars sprouting out of everything; Ed grins at the chaos, plants his automail foot on one rising square of dirt and rides it into the air.

His leap shows him Pirate and Lemons dodging heartily away from the pits collapsing open around them - and both of them still fucking firing, motherfucker - so Ed mentally marks their trajectories as he drops and falls behind the cover of a rising wall, twisting midair to avoid more wide-flung lights. At least the dodging’s thrown off their aim.

He lands in a crouch and stays low, the maze grinding into place around him. The jets of light don’t make any sound when they leave their sticks, which is a lack of cue Ed hadn’t anticipated; he didn’t realize how much he’d been expecting gunshots and the implicit announcement of the shooter’s location they provided. Also, no magazine and enough raw energy to teleport means the wizards’ve probably got unlimited ammunition. No making them waste their bullets and hitting them when they pause to reload. Do they reload? They need to concentrate for at least some of their magic shit to be effective.

The yard is dark enough that Ed’ll see any light beams clearly, at least, and - he squints - the haze of magic is visible on the strings of fairy lights up ahead. But if he can see fine, the wizards can too, and Ed is not interested in sharing any advantages. He claps again, presses his hands to the nearest wall and introduces some roofing.

There’s a thick phwoof sound and a burst of light from over where Pirate was. The array keeps working, the corridors sealing over into tunnels, but fuck knows what that magic hooah did, so Ed leaves his crouch, runs along his own still-open passage and vaults up onto the nearest wall.

When he and Al went to Dàdù the first time with Jerso and Zampano to make some introductions and see what alkahestry could do for their chimerism, Lan Fan had taken a personal interest in Ed’s presence. The resulting aggressively physical hazing lasted the entire three months of their stay and most often took the form of beatings (“sparring”), ambushes (“helping him develop qi sense”), and chasing him at breakneck speed across the entire city’s rooftops (“showing him around”). Ed sure as shit didn’t pick up qi, but the whole run-a-four-centimeter-rail-six-stories-up-at-top-speed had somewhat of a steeper learning curve. Especially with Lan Fan right behind him. Always gaining.
With knives.

Using the tops of his packed dirt walls, in comparison, is a cakewalk. The roofs themselves are domed and fragile, pulled from the walls as they are, but the rest of his little playground is load-bearing. Nobody immediately opens fire on him, so he trots along towards the center and spares a cheeky wave for the wizards; their heads are just visible at the far end of the maze and it looks like they’re moving around, trying to get a better view. As much as he’d like to hop over there and maybe cartwheel in mockery he’s got to keep an eye on Pirate’s general area, because if his fucking eyeball can see through walls, Ed’s an open fuckin’ target up here.

When he glances back Amestriswards Al’s got nothing for him but Hawkeye is, in fact, giving Ed a deeply judgmental look, so he grins kinda sheepish and speeds up, clapping and skimming his hand over the ground to pull out a polearm. It’s essentially stone, compacted down like that; he leaves the blade off the tip and feels it solidify in his hand just as something blows up over by Lemons’ last known whereabouts.

It’s not a very big explosion: a chunk of roof over there is now a bunch of much smaller chunks of roof over here. “Confringo,” comes Lemons’ voice, cold and annoyed, and part of a wall blows out too.

Ed changes direction. It’d probably make more sense to take out Pirate first because of his eye, but Ed’s got a bone to pick. He goes for Lemons.

The guy’s blasted apart a decent chunk of the corridor, advancing through the hole he’s made in the direction Ed had been when they’d started. His explosions are knocking the dirt apart pretty good, but nothing’s on fire and it seems to be a directed thing, issuing from his stick; might be some kind of kinetic force situation, no fuel necessary. And Lemons hasn’t spotted him yet.

Ed taps his knuckles together, a little awkward around his grip on the pole, and brushes the ground to set the yard shaking again, collapsing the roofs around them to give Lemons something to deal with and open up some space to really fight. Lemons stumbles and jerks, losing his footing on the moving dirt, and Ed drops down behind him and charges.

Lemons whirls, but not in time. He shoots off a light, but Ed’s already bouncing up off the wall on his left, polearm swinging. “Protego,” Lemons snaps, and the pole smacks down against hard air.

There’s the motherfuckin’ forcefield. The blow judders up Ed’s arm, abrupt like he hit a wall, and he grins into the vicious satisfaction on Lemons’ face. Ed attacked from above, so Lemons blocked over his head, and the angle’s awkward but the leverage is solid so Ed uses the unexpected redirect of momentum to swing his entire bodyweight onto the forcefield, boots first.

It takes his weight, which is a shame given it means Ed doesn’t immediately crash feet first into Lemons’ face, but the second of enraged bafflement down there is pretty satisfying. Lemons snarls something and jerks his stick - looks like wizards can fire through their shields, wooo fuck - but Ed’s crouched close enough to immediately take the jet of light on his bracer. That rebounds it right back into the forcefield with enough punch to make everything shudder, and oh, yeah, Ed loves that look on people. Did I just eat your bullshit and hork it right back down your throat? You fucking bet .

Lemons doesn’t waste time, to his credit. He swings his stick wide over his head, and it turns out the shield is a plane centered on his wand because it sends the forcefield tilting sharply, turning perpendicular to the ground. Ed kicks off the surface, drops the polearm - smart move, Lemons, if he just cancelled it Ed would’ve dropped directly onto his head - and claps to hit the wall as he flips, because he can’t give Lemons any time to realize what Smartypants did and start using area-
effect magic like her fucking gravity nuller.

Lemons fires off two more lights as Ed lands, but one goes wide and he manages to take the next on a bracer as his array snaps out through the dirt. It tilts the ground hard under Lemons and collapses the two nearest walls inwards, which makes Lemons flail and let loose some really heartfelt gibberish swears. Chunks of dirt bounce off the forcefield and Lemon’s staggering but still on his feet so Ed claps again, jerking everything hard this time, and he has to catch his own footing as the ground seesaws but he’s expecting it. Lemons isn’t. Ed scoops up the polearm and runs at him again as he reels, the walls lurching around them, because the closer Ed is the easier it is to block the magic lights and all he needs is one second of broken concentration -

- and there it is. A spray of dirt spatters down Lemons’ head, hitting his hair, his skin. The shield’s gone. Ed hurls the pole like a spear and closes in.

Lemons jerks hard to avoid the pole, eyes wide and one arm milling, off balance, and in the next second Ed’s inside his guard and it’s over. Ed strikes his wrist, his chin, then backhands him for good measure - all open-palmed because he doesn’t actually want to break bone - and Lemons’ head snaps back, his stick goes flying, and his balance is fucked enough for Ed to spin him, grab both arms and wrench them behind his back. Connecting his own hands for a second completes the circle, a transmutation crackling between them, and when Ed shoves Lemons forward his arms are bound together behind him, his sleeves melded into each other and into the back of his dress.

Lemons staggers, snarling, but twists and tries to kick him, which is just plain adorable. “I owe you forty-five seconds of full body paralysis,” Ed grins at him, sidestepping, “but I guess this’ll do.”

“Little wretch,” Lemons hisses.

“Pet names already?” Ed scoops up the dropped wand, twirling it over the back of his hand and tossing it up once to catch it, watching Lemons’ burning eyes follow it like a dog with a piece of steak. “C’mon, what else you got?”

Lemons looks like he very much wants to charge over and kick Ed to death, but he doesn’t actually try it. “Is that it?” Ed says mockingly. “Well okay then. Nice try. Oh, and hey, free advice?” He sticks the wand in his ponytail like it’s a really ugly hair stick, enjoying the way Lemons’ eyes widen in outrage. Ed grins. “Don’t fuckin’ call me little .”

He snags up his polearm and clips Lemons’ elbow with it as he goes past, knocking him on his ass. “Bye bye now!” he calls as Lemons struggles to rise, snarling about snakes and motherless dogfucking; Ed cackles, vaults back onto the nearest wall and takes off.

Chapter End Notes

snape: N-NANI?
“Bloody hellfire,” Ron whispers.

“He put his wand -”

“- in his hair,” Fred and George say from either side of one Extendable Ear, wide-eyed and giddy.

Sirius cannot bloody believe what’s happening. He feels like he’s accessed a higher state of being. He feels transcendent. He feels nuts. That beautiful Elric bastard just rolled Snivellus like a cheese wheel at the dairy fair, wham bam thank you man, and Sirius is pretty sure this is love. Moony better like blonds, because Sirius isn’t sure he can keep from proposing.

“That was very quick,” Hermione says, equally wide in the eyes but sounding more alarmed than appreciative. Beside her Ginny is looking slightly glazed and very thoughtful. “He just - jumped right on…”

On her other side Harry looks like he was just told he’d be playing Seeker for the Falmouth Falcons and that oh, by the way, the Holyhead Harpies are all trying to figure out who has dibs on asking him to dinner first: awed and disbelieving but cautiously ready to fall headfirst into delirious happiness. “Harry,” Sirius whispers very sincerely, nay, reverently, “I think this might be the best day of my life.”

“Mine - mine too?” Harry whispers back, sounding shellshocked and staring blankly out the window.

“I’m buying that little Elric bugger a drink,” Sirius continues. “Five drinks. Ten. As many as he wants, Merlin, that was beautiful. Think we can throw him a party on short notice?”

“If Mad-Eye doesn’t send him to St. Mungos,” Fred or George whispers hungrily. “Bet you twenty Galleons -”

“- Moody stuns him cold. Snape’s good -”

“- but he’s no Auror.”

Now that’s a wager. As good as Snivellus’s takedown was, Sirius definitely wants to see how Elric’s blondie acrobat act fares against Mad-Eye - not just an Auror, but the Auror. Moody took down four Death Eaters by himself once. Snape’s a duelist, but he doesn’t fight. And Elric doesn’t seem to be able to fire spells at all.

Sirius grins, all teeth, and reaches over to shake Fred or George’s hand. “You’re on.”
Chapter 53

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Ed hasn’t heard anything from Pirate’s side since the fwoosh, which means he’s either tripped and knocked himself out in the dark or Ed’s gonna be facing something elaborately nasty. He detours to the Amestrian side of things for a second, dropping down off the walls and then popping up in front of Hawkeye to pull Lemons’ wand out of his hair and toss it at her feet. Al’s not looking at him, staring out at the arena, eyes slightly unfocused in that way he gets now when he’s focusing real hard on shit no one else can see, so Ed rips off Hawkeye a grinning salute and falls back down into the maze corridors.

Now it’s just him and Pirate.

Barring whatever wizard escapist shit Lemons might try, of course. If he has any. Presumably a magic ex-terrorist would have at least one contingency for getting corked by the cops, though maybe this one dropped out to join the vigilantes because he couldn’t make the cut.

Ed looks around as he trots back towards the wizards and sees they’ve set up some kind of platform of their own, wedged in between the outermost maze wall and the yard’s surrounding fence. He hopes they have a great fuckin’ view of this dance-off, though he doubts it given more than half the maze is still covered over. Lemons has disappeared into one of the tunnel bits, or maybe just teleported away; in his place Ed would try and cut the straightjacket to try for another go, but not everybody’s as frisky and fun-loving as him.

Either way, Lemons’ll have to teleport if he wants out. Ed didn’t make this fuckin’ maze to be exitable.

He doesn’t see Pirate anywhere, and doesn’t hear him either. Given the guy looks like he’s been chewed on by a dog or twenty in life, Ed’s gonna go ahead and assume he isn’t huddled up waiting for someone to turn on the lights again down there. There’s been no indication so far that his perv eyeball can see through the dirt walls, but that doesn’t mean shit if he’s smart enough to hide it. Who the fuck knows what else he might have, anyway; that peg leg looks like wood and well might be, but for all Ed knows the guy’s got a laser-shooting prosthetic left nipple.

And now he’s been given time to plan. Alrighty then. Time to interrupt Pirate’s picnic. Ed speeds up and heads for the center.

He almost, almost misses it. He sees the air shimmer at the exact last second and only just barely changes trajectory, throwing himself sideways in a frantic twist, slamming the polearm butt first into the dirt to swing around and keep from going head over ass entirely. He skids a good yard or so regardless, just barely managing to keep both feet planted in line so as not to slide off the top of the dirt wall, and while it’s not exactly a textbook landing it at least it takes him further from the fuckin’ airhaze.

A magic field, hanging in the air, immobile. Ed can make out the edges of it: it’s a cloud enveloping the entirety of the top of that chunk of dirt, right in Ed’s path. So Pirate knows he’s up here and using the walls - point to X-ray eye - and he’s setting traps.

Face doing something that feels mildly evil, Ed taps his knuckles together around the pole again and hits the top of his wall with one fist, setting everything shifting again, terrain reforming into
something entirely new. He makes sure there’s no even ground anywhere, everything all sharp inclines, tilted floors boxed in by high walls; let Pirate and his peg leg navigate that.

Then he turns to the trap. He left that bit of wall as is, more to mark its place than anything, though figuring out how the fuck it’s anchored to hang in place like that would be nice. He rifles one hand across the dirt at his feet, grabs a handful and chucks it into the haze. It hits and hangs suspended, stuck midair; okay, some kinda magic glue trap, maybe.

Ed stays crouched, looking around the yard for more patches of haze and assuming that wherever Pirate is he’s watching him right back. Can that eye of his see through whatever? Ed’d try a flashbomb, only that’d blind everybody watching, too, and explosives can be unpredictable even without magic hooah in the mix.

There’s a faint, muffled noise, and half the corridor in front of Ed just - disappears, rubble and walls scooped out in one invisible chunk, what the fuck. Ed springs backward, landing on top of a different wall, polearm up as Pirate appears in the suddenly cleared space. While it’s good to know he hasn’t slipped on a banana peel and fainted somewhere down there Ed can’t say he’s glad to see him, because he brandishes his stick and snaps out some nonsense and a bunch of walls disappear again.

The gulp-and-gone style reminds Ed way too much of how Gluttony had unhinged his whole body into one gaping maw, sucking down swathes of forest, and he smacks his knuckles together and hits the dirt again. It opens a pit right under Pirate - not deep, Ed doesn’t want to break his neck - but the guy’s quick on that peg leg and only drops to one knee instead of sprawling. “Protego Maximus,” he raps out as he falls, jabbing his stick upwards, and a shimmering haze blooms all around him.

Another forcefield. Pirate shoves to his feet and proceeds to do absolutely fuckin’ squat. Ed checks again real quick to make sure nothing’s about to fall on him or jump out or nothing - when your enemy just stands there looking expectant that usually means they’ve set some sneaky bullshit in motion and it’s about to crash on your head - but there’s nothing and Pirate continues to just stand there, focused on Ed with his stick in lowered about halfway to waist height.

“You know how to break shields, boy?” he calls, his X-ray eye doing a wild circle before focusing on Ed again. “It’s possible, if ye didn’t know.”

“What is this, share and care time?” Ed backs up a bit just in case, making sure the corridors around him are clear enough to drop into if he has to jump. “C’mon, hit me. Open fire.”

“You waited for Snape to drop his shield,” Pirate says, not moving. “That won’t work for someone who’s got the brains to cast a Maximus. What can ye do from over there?”

Ed narrows his eyes. That forcefield goes all the way around Pirate in a dome, judging by the haze, and it might sink down into the ground, even. That shit is so far the biggest tactical advantage the wizards have so far besides teleporting; he should find a way to get rid of it. He does want to get up close and see if he can get a compositional read on a stable energy field with that kind of apparent density, but he’s not getting anywhere near Pirate until he can reliably counter whatever that wall-eating shit was. There was no bolt of light for Ed’s bracers to reflect on that.

Ed shifts his weight, watching Pirate just like Pirate’s watching him. How to deal with forcefields. This one doesn’t look like it’s taking concentration to maintain, but then again, if it didn’t take brainpower to keep up then Pirate would be doing something besides standing there watching Ed like a planted scarecrow. So, assume it’s like Lemons’ planar field had been - dependent on him having some level of focus on its functionality. Ed could shake the maze again and keep going
until Pirate falls over and loses concentration, but so far being knocked around hasn’t made the asshole drop his stick and in any case Ed’s ready to see something new.

What are his options. Theoretically, any forcefield dense enough to repel physical objects would be gas impermeable, but *theoretically* teleportation is impossible, so stamp a big ol’ magic fuck you on that one and assume Pirate’s not gonna run out of oxygen in there. That does presume, however, that *other* gases can pass through the field.

Atmospheric transmutation is hard as shit, doubly so over any kind of distance, and pulling that helium trick on Smartypants alone had nearly knocked him crosseyed; Ed’s best with dirt and metals for a reason. He hasn’t got the time to streamline the gas arrays he knows to cut the energy and focus requirements into something manageable and he *definitely* can’t do it while dodging. (Mustang spends all *his* fights standing in one place for a reason, too.) Maybe there’s a way to short it out? Ed also knows better than to set off energy arrays with a clap, because that’s the same problem as gases only tripled and with extra electrocution sauce on top. With twenty seconds he could scrawl out an EMP array, but he’d really rather not test his leg’s attenuation quite so aggressively in a fight where, *ugh*, winning doesn’t *actually* matter.

“What you did to the dementers,” Pirate says conversationally. “Try that.”

“Uh, *fuck no*?” Ed says incredulously, startled. “It’s a spar, we’re not trying to *hurt* each other.” Hellfuck, is this one-legged wonder shooting magic that’ll *actually* kill him if it lands?

“You’d better have enough hurt to share with the death eaters, lad, because they’ll bloody well be trying to hurt you,” Pirate says, not hostile so much as advisory. “Ye can kill when you need to, you’ve shown that, but a smart wizard’s got more tricks than a dementer. Let’s see if it can be countered.”

Ed has to clench his core to control the roil of disgust. Yeah, he’d killed those things. Two beings that could take directions, understand simple orders. Even if they were no more sentient than trained dogs, he’d still taken life. Even if it was self defense, they were still dead. You’ve shown you can kill when you need to, *lad*. Like that’s a good thing.

Good job, mister *alchemist*.

A part of him says, in a voice that always sounds infuriatingly like Mustang, that if Pirate’s trying to get him riled up, it’s working.

Ed flexes his grip on the polearm and gets it the fuck together. He can see why Pirate might want a firsthand look at what killed their super scary war weapons, but the guy clearly doesn’t understand he’s asking to be buried alive and then baked like bad lasagna. That’s not even something Ed would use on terrorist wizards, ever - it doesn’t matter if they can counter it, that’s just not what he’d do in a serious fight.

On the other hand - *would* a sufficiently destructive encounter overwhelm the forcefield, like Mustang did to Envy to leach power from their philosopher's stone?

Well, in that case. “Wrong alchemist,” Ed says aloud, not caring if it makes sense to Pirate or not. Wouldn’t he just teleport out if Ed tried to bury him, anyway? Come to think of it, Ed hasn’t seen *any* teleporting from these two wizard fuckin’ warriors so far, and that’s a *big* whatsie-fuckie considering those twins proved how easy it was for them to pop up all around Ed, fast enough to get inside his guard. If *Ed* could teleport he’d never fuckin’ lose a fight again.

Might as well stick his hand in the chimera’s mouth. “Why aren’t you teleporting?” he says
bluntly, bracing to move if that gives Pirate any ideas. Surely some fuck of a wizard has thought of the applied uses of teleporting in combat. “You could be zapping around this whole yard and I couldn’t catch you. If I buried you you could just get out. What the fuck’s up?”

Pirate snorts. “No sane wizard will apparate in a fight, boy, no matter how useful it’d be. Why do you think Voldie made himself fly?”

“Drama?” Ed says automatically, but - what, seriously? “You don’t teleport in combat at all?”

“That’s a quick way to get yourself Splinched,” Pirate says in what’s probably meant to be a mild tone.

“And what the fuck is that?” Ed demands.

“Leaves bits of you in one place and the rest in another. Any bloody fool that determined to get himself hurt might as well eat a curse to begin with.” Pirate flicks his stick and a bolt of light goes right for Ed, making him skid sideways along the wall to dodge. “Try your thermite,” he repeats, firing again in a let-me-motivate-you kind of way.

Ed hisses through his teeth and drops from the wall, taking off down the corridor as something blasts loudly where he’d been crouched a second ago. He’s not going to bury Pirate no matter how fuckin’ annoying he gets, but testing whether Ed can transmute inside the forcefield - yeah, okay, that he’s gonna find out.

Ed can’t actually do ranged stuff. He can throw all this dirt around, yeah, but it’s not true transmutation at a distance the way alkahestry is, it’s just pushing his transmutation bigger with a matching energy drain to compensate. His max radius, though, is plenty big enough to encompass this whole yard. He claps and hits the ground.

There’s a weird blip when the transmutation hits the forcefield - like the house had felt, that very first time - but then the energy washes through, and Ed has a second’s worth of smug before he feels his array - splinter.

That’s not the right word, but there is no right word - the variables warp nonsensically, the transmutation unravels, and he cuts the energy immediately but it’s too late. The ground shakes, discharge snapping wildly over the dirt beyond the forcefield, and Ed can tell it’s executing the intended effect but there’s no control and that makes it a fucking localized earthquake.

That did not happen with any of the house transmutations. Ed jumps up onto the nearest wall quick because unexpected transmutation rebound always means damage control; the array was meant to sink and seal Pirate thigh-deep into the dirt but it definitely didn’t do that - but Pirate’s fine, his forcefield’s active, and his eyes snap to Ed even as he catches his footing amid the aftershocks.

Okay. Ed follows through on his vault and lands down in the next corridor over, smacking his knuckles together. He slaps dirt and watches a single centimeter-square cube rise up. No problems. The effect’s local.

The forcefield can disrupt alchemical energy. Bad. Whatever shielding is on the house didn’t, so - does the kind of magic matter? Whatever Pirate’s using for this forcefield must be different. Ed leaps back up onto another wall, knuckles meeting so he lands hand-first and sends a new transmutation out and down. Walls rise around Pirate, right outside the border of his forcefield, and Pirate immediately waves his stick and sends a bolt of light that blasts part of the wall out the way Lemons had. He keeps blasting as Ed jumps from wall to wall, automatically trying to get behind Pirate to give himself time to think; Pirate just turns in place and keeps up his casual demolition
until all the dirt around him is gone again, perv eye tracking Ed steadily, inexorably.

He’s taking Ed seriously. He’s not going to get mad like Lemons did. Ed can’t match him on range, can’t get close when that field’s up and he knows it.

Okay, fuck this, Ed’s Faradaying himself and then setting off an EMP. He’ll have to be real fast, because this’ll take a drawn circle and he’ll have to activate it from up close. Though not if he makes it bigger - size the array to the whole yard and activate it from the outer edge, damn. Can he do that? He’d have to inscribe the array in dirt with a transmutation -

“I forfeit,” Pirate says, waving his stick. The forcefield blips out.

Ed skids to a halt in shock. “Wait, what?” he demands. “Oh, come on!”

Chapter End Notes

snape, off in some corner, kicking a wall: fuckin’ nasty ass hobbitses
“Ye can fight. You’ve proven that much,” Pirate says. “And if ye won’t get serious, no point
drawing it out.”

*Drawing it out? “ We barely did anything, ” Ed says incredulously. “We ain’t been at this ten
minutes! What, is that all your terrorists might throw at us? Did your stick run out of spells?”*

“Anything a death eater sends your way is something you don’t want to land. Doesn’t matter much
what curse it is, your job is to not get hit. You didn’t get hit,” Pirate says, in a brusque tone that
conveys he’s not exactly impressed but knows beggars can’t be choosers when it comes to
accepting recruits to the magic vigilante squad. “We don’t have time to waste hopping around. Get
down from there and show us how your thermite works.”

“*Oh my god,” Ed says, starting to feel the crazy really coming on. “Thermite is not - okay. Listen.
Thermite is a chemical compound, and that means it is a physical substance. It looks like dirt. It
basically is dirt, kind of, and it is inert unless ignited and that itself is real fuckin’ hard to do. The
temperatures involved are ve-ry, ve-ry hiitiiigh, do you understand? Big temperatures. Heat. Hot.
Ouch. And I am not going to use it, especially on people, because it would melt them. ”*

Pirate considers this. “You can melt people with dirt?”

Ed twitches in what’s gotta be a pretty noticeable way as he physically strangles the urge to hurl
Absolutely. Dead fucking on.”

“My concur with mad eye’s suggestion,” Bones calls from across the yard, before Ed can get the full
lungful he needs for a really good scream. “We’ve gotten an idea of each others’ approaches and at
this point we’ll get more from a discussion. And we would all benefit from learning a new method
to deal with dementers.”

“Okay, well, unless you can make and ignite thermite, I can’t fuckin’ help you,” Ed says sourly,
not adding that he’s not teaching anyone in this dipshit terrarium so much as the exact chemical
formula given they’re struggling to grasp what it even does while still being way too excited about
it. He hikes his lip at Pirate and spins his pole once. “You that sure you wanna forfeit? You ain’t
even landed one hit on me yet.”

“A death eater attack can come at any time, boy. The dementers going for potter proved that,”
Pirate says, grumpy but not grumpy enough given the fuckin’ circumstances. “Save your energy
for the real fights. This is a war. You’ll need it.” He jerks his chin in a here-boy motion. “Come
down. Let’s see if ye can break a shield wandless.”

Well now Ed wants nothing more than to transmute his polearm into a giant cartoon mallet and
whack Pirate over the head until he’s sunk knee-deep in the ground like the world’s ugliest lawn
flamingo, but he rides out the urge. He’s annoyed, jittery with dead-end adrenaline, overwarm in
that started-the-workout-but-didn’t-get-to-sweat-way; what a fuckin’ shortstop of a demo match.
He looks back Amestriswards. Hawkeye opens her hand; his discretion.
Ed looks back to Pirate, who gestures all whenever you’re ready, asshole. Ed can’t exactly go and hit the guy after he’s forfeited, so he grinds his knuckles together, plants the polearm vertically and sends it back into the dirt, the energy crackling down and across the entire maze to grind it back into the ground. “How do you get rid of other people’s forcefields?” he demands as he rides the wall down, folding his arms at Pirate as Hawkeye and the rest come back over and the wizards fuck around with their own shit on the other side.

“You need a wand for that,” Pirate says. “And I doubt we’ve time to teach ye to use it. No, let’s find out if we can do it your way.”

If Pirate wants to test his forcefield against what he thinks is a super-duper demon-killing magic wish bomb, then a controlled collaborative experiment is way safer than just throwing it around within a spar. Though Pirate had asked for that first, so maybe Ed should just be grateful that safety measures occurred to him at all. “My way is not gonna be thermite,” Ed warns. “I mean it. All of you need a fuckin’ intro to chem lab materials safety lecture, you’re gonna get yourselves killed.”

“What would have been your approach?” Mustang asks as he traipses up with the rest of them. “With thermite out of the question.”

Ed rolls his eyes skyward and blows his bangs huffily up out of his face. “Faraday me, EMP him. Run the array around the forcefield’s circumference, the shield shorts out, boom.”

Mustang narrows his eyes slightly. “And your experience with electromagnetic arrays is extensive, is it?”

“Oh, me and Kendra worked that fucking hydrodam sabotage thing together for two whole months, bastard,” Ed says. “I know you know that because you assigned us. I picked up some stuff.”

It’s not super common alchemy - Kendra got her state title for it, and she’s pretty much the only one working with electromagnetics in practical alchemy because pure energy arrays are complicated as shit. Ed would be able to set off a pulse - cheating, really, mimicking a lightning strike via electricity-based array - but Kendra can do way more fine-tuned stuff as well as dial it up all the way to ionization.

Which is probably why Mustang’s giving Ed the bitcheye. Generating electromagnetic radiation strong enough to do area-effect damage is a war tool. Kendra wasn’t in Ishval, but she’s in Mustang’s bloc because she served four years on the Aerugan front. More than one General, she’d told Ed sardonically, used to loudly fantasize about their alchemist dream teams: Electric Storm knocks out communications and downs power lines, Strong Arm disrupts and blocks off the rails and water mains and roads, Flame comes in and burns what’s left to the ground.

“Some stuff,” Mustang repeats, because he’s probably heard plenty of that kind of fantasizing too.

“Yeah some stuff. Little kiddy sparky stuff, okay? Like blow out one radio levels, I know better than to set off a large-scale EMP.”

Mustang gives Ed a narrow look that usually accompanies words like ‘requisition form rewrites’ and ‘budget review’. “What’s EMP,” Pirate says, before Mustang can make some comment about how Ed’s due for an in-depth skill self-assessment report, single-space typed sixty page minimum.

Ed is not in the mood to run a preschool primer here. “It’s when some lightning and some magnets get together and make a baby and the baby gets really, really mad,” he says. “Then it claps its little baby hands and shakes its baby rattle and disrupts the ambient electrical field via transient
broadband pulse and subsequent damped sine wave response. Locally speaking.”

“Oh, is that all?” Pirate says, just as sarcastically.


“Your approach to combat is certainly unusual,” Beardy remarks as the rest of the wizards pull up. He’s looking over Ed’s shoulder; Ed glances over and sees where the maze coming down revealed Lemons, who has clearly decided that lurking and looking hateful is the best way to present himself with dignity. Beardy waves his stick at him, and with a faint noise of cloth splitting Lemons is able to shake his arms free, sleeves cut away from the rest of his dress. “I believe you took possession of sever us’s wand?”

Hawkeye hands Ed the stick he’d liberated with a mild warning in her eyes, so Ed only curls his lip a little when he goes over and bows sarcastically shopkeeper-style to Lemons, presenting the wand in both hands. Lemons takes it slowly, with a measured look that says he’s going to spend a while having sex fantasies about roasting Ed’s lungs on a spit.

Ed just winks, sweet as mean gets, and turns back to the others. “Okay. Reality check. Thermite’s not a bomb but for you guys it might as well be, so no, we are not messing around with ‘explosives’ in some random civilian backyard for no fuckin’ reason. I don’t know what exactly about it killed your fuckin’ dementers, but I would say the fact that it burns at two thousand two hundred degrees Kelvin is a good fuckin’ guess.”

“So it’s fire,” Bones says consideringly.

“It’s solid fuel combustion,” Ed says, trying not to be too exasperated at the one person so far demonstrating the most of what wizards have passing for common sense. “Fire - technically, yeah, sure, this is fire that’s really, really hot. When fire is that hot, asphalt melts. And it’s real fuckin’ hard to stop, cuz once you light thermite the reaction keeps going ’til the fuel’s gone. It’ll keep burning even underwater.”

“That… could mean that fiend fire could be used to destroy dementers,” Mustache pipes up, sounding carefully exploratory, glancing at Pirate and Beardy. “In theory. Though it would have to be from a distance, as controlling fiend fire is already supposedly quite difficult even without dementer interference. Perhaps if someone else cast the patronus while another wields the curse?”

Pirate grunts. “We’ll try it next time dementers show up and we feel like burning down the neighborhood. Now, what were you going to try with lightning and magnets, boy?”

Ed knows Pirate’s just finally wised up and started fucking with Ed right back, but the real lack of basic scientific literacy is getting genuinely annoying. Should he even be demonstrating stuff like EMP, when their opsec is so shit and they have an ex-terrorist right here and in general trusting these fuckin’ turtledoves is a bad idea? Then again, if a pulse can fritz their forcefields, then it doesn’t matter if they know what an EMP does, it’ll take them out anyway. It’ll just make Ed more of a target, and he’s already public enemy number one just on sheer personality. And the fact that Pirate’s forcefield can disrupt alchemical energy is something they need to address.

It occurs to Ed that unless Al got something from qi, nobody else knows that happened, because the actual effect probably just looked like more of his ground-shaking. He needs to find out why the fuck his array disintegrated. It had felt like a corruption of the information, not the energy itself - like a radio with signal interference, the sound coming through but the information that tells it how to form words warped into nonsense noise. The best working theory he’s got at the moment is that out of those two energy fields, the magic shield was a higher-density concentrate, so to speak,
and affected the alchemical energy more than the alchemy affected it.

And Smartypants had told him that magic disrupts electrical equipment, so that plus his magic-as-weird-fucky-light discovery is a pretty decent indicator that an EMP would interact with the forcefield on the same playing field.

An array that would guaranteeably overwhelm the forcefield would probably not produce a small EMP. The safest thing would be to determine the field’s specific energy output then calibrate the EMP array to just a little bit over that, but all that might mean is ramping it up in gradual increments to a real big whoopy if the first test doesn’t work. Plus this is also shit they’re gonna have to test with the magic-cancelling array. If the circle is draining magical energy, would a forcefield be able to interrupt it or would it just get eaten?

Ed’s been silent a couple beats too long, and Mustang’s looking at him expectantly with an edge of don’t blow us all up because you had an idea, Fullmetal. “That’s gonna take more prep to do safely,” Ed admits grudgingly. “I’d want to Faraday more stuff than just me and Arget and get numbers on their output of… whatever so I don’t blow out every power line on the block by accident. If we’re gonna test automail analogs tomorrow anyway we might as well do that then.”

“It’s that destructive?” Bones says, looking kinda judgmental about it.

Ed seesaws his hand. “Depends how much power you put into it. If your shit’s charged enough to behave solid, though, then yeah, you don’t wanna set that off without some attenuation. Plus there might be a damped sine rebound, like I said, and since it’s hitting a battery basically to begin with I have no idea what the decay rate would be.” He reflects on this. “Shit, might not come out damped at all. Might amplify it, actually. Hell, I’d like to see that.”

A bunch of the other wizards are now eyeballing Ed with that are-you-a-werewolf look again. Ed squints at their expressions. “Don’t gimme more of that oh no, we only use happy nice thoughts shit again. I told y’all, this ain’t special. Chemists make thermite. Electromagnetic energy is, like, everywhere. Applying it with alchemy just makes things faster.”

“Happy nice thoughts?” Al says delicately.

“Yeah, that’s how they deal with the dementers,” Ed says, rolling his eyes. “They shoot their happy fun spell and it chases the scaries away. Apparently only super evil dark stuff gets rid of them permanently.”

“Well, ye gave us reason to think, didn’t you, boy,” Pirate says. “To ward off a dark creature, that’s one thing. To destroy it to the point where it leaves barely a smear is another bag of Skrewts entirely.”

A couple of the new wizards intensify their wall-eyed Ed-staring. Bones sighs. “Curses are curses because they’re cast with intent. That’s why unforgivables have no legal defense. If you cast the killing curse, you had to want your target dead. If you cast the Cruciatius, you had to want them in agony. Fiend fire isn’t outlawed just because it’s damn near impossible to control. You have to want your target to burn, and burn in cursed fire until there’s nothing left, not even ash.” She purses her mouth slightly. “Your… thermite does not sound quite the same, if you claim muggles can make it. But we’ve learned to use caution when it comes to these sorts of things.”

Pirate snorts. “And maybe look a little less like a junior necromancer if ye don’t want people calling you a dark wizard.”

Hughes makes another can’t-hold-the-cackle noise. “My brother’s not a dark anything,” Al says,
politely bemused in a mildly warning way. “He’s one of the most caring and optimistic people I
know, actually. He’s just goth.”

“Okay, for the billionth time, black is practical,” Ed says, pointing a finger, because he’s not
about to tell these wizards about how technically he has committed necromancy, or at least tried,
and lost a leg for it; they already have their lord vagrancy resurrecting himself. “And so’s the
fuckin’ leather! You try making pants last more’n a week when one of your knees is metal.”

“Goth?” Bones pronounces awkwardly, raising her eyebrows as everybody else once again starts
staring at Ed’s legs.

Al waves slightly at Ed. “I know it’s hard to believe, but he’s dressed really professionally right
now. For him. There’s usually a lot more chokers and spikes than this.”

“And it looks great,” Ed says pointedly. Sometimes he can’t understand how Al can be so
determinedly sartorially boring and still be related to him.

Al gives him a faintly pitying look. “You wore a dog collar to a six-officer performance review
panel last year.”

“I was making a point!”

“That you share a wardrobe with a police dog?”

“I might as well if all they want is for me to bark like one - ”

“Fullmetal’s dress code misdemeanors aside,” Mustang cuts in. “Alchemy does not operate on
quite the same principles as magic. There is no emotional requirement to array activation, and
neither thermite nor electromagnetic radiation are inherently destructive. As Fullmetal mentioned,
thermite is used in welding and construction and electromagnetic radiation is only harmful in
specific concentrations. In practical terms both are replicable by equipment and occasionally
appear as natural phenomena.”

Blah, blah, science isn’t evil, if this pack of zebras hasn’t gotten that yet they’re not going to.
“Great, cool, nobody’s a fuckin’ dark wizard because that’d be stupid as all hell, hooray,” Ed says
impatiently. “Let’s talk tactics. Like how yours are shit, specifically. Y’all ever heard of
teamwork?”

Chapter End Notes

i know goth is a word that wouldnt exist in amestris bc the etymology is - yeah. The
joke was too strong not to make. Just. Do what we did with Kelvin and let’s all
pretteeeend it’s an amestrisan proper noun equivaleeeeeeent

“Yeah your tactics. You coulda just worked with Lemonface over there, and suddenly I’d be actually fighting two people instead of one twice,” Ed says, gesturing. “Like, next time? Yell hey! Let’s flank the bitch! And then you get to tag team instead of getting picked off, ’cuz sure I didn’t land shit on you but half your force was out in the first two minutes. You didn’t try to cover each others’ backs at all.”

A couple of wizards in the back exchange glances, but Bones just sighs. “Mad eye was holding back on you.”

Ed stares at her. “Yeah. Yeah, I would fuckin’ hope so,” he says. “Because, and I cannot fuckin’ stress this enough, we are not trying to kill each other.”

“I mean that he could have disillusioned himself and cast area-effect jinxes,” Bones says with a touch of exasperation. “And those you can’t deflect or dodge without a shield.”

“Well sure, but that doesn’t - wait fuck that's why it disrupted the array,” Ed blurts, forgetting all about his lecture on the power of teamwork. “It disrupts energy as a function, it’s - yeah, okay, if you’re dealing with fields as well as rays that makes sense…. you want it to corrupt the energy deliberately, otherwise what’s to stop someone from, like, levitating you with your shield. Fuck, that’s complicated, what’s the equation for that? Please tell me you know. Or, like, anyone. Who invented it?”

“There is no one individual credited with the invention of the Protego,” Beardy says after a short pause where Bones gets the they let this into the military? look again. “It is a Roman spell, I believe, though as it arrived to them already codified it may have been Etruscan… I don’t believe there to be a relevant equation, however.”

“No equation,” Ed repeats, back to wondering if he’s ever going to hit an upper limit on how annoyed and depressed this backwater can make him. “Of course. Why would there be? That would make way too much fuckin’ sense. Fucking… fuck it, whatever. Look, if I was one of your death eaties or your lord volgograd or something, how do you go at me? What are you expecting, what’s worked on them in the past?”

“A good Protego will work against most death eaters’ spells, if you’re not up against you know who,” Bones says. “But any fighting wizard can cast a shield breaking charm. They go down just like anyone else if they’re hit, but they attack in groups.”

“One breaks your shield, another gets you in the back,” Pirate grunts.

“They’re cowards, too,” Bones says, bitter again. “They attack when someone’s alone, or when they know they outnumber their target. They know most of them wouldn’t be able to take a decent witch or wizard in a fair fight.”

Ed does not point out that fight fair usually ends up a synonym for lose, but he’s pretty sure his face is saying it for him; no wonder Pirate and Lemons didn’t work together, if they’re interested in fighting fair. “It was mentioned that the enemy’s go-to in the past has been individual
assassination,” Hawkeye says, also kindly not bringing up that ‘try to outnum"er your opponent’ isn’t cowardice, it’s just good tactics.

“Assassination’s too pretty a word,” Bones says blackly. “It’s thug murder. They’ll break into a house, torture and kill everyone inside and light the dark mark over the scene once they’re done.”

Pirate leans over and spits on the ground. “They like their ambushes. When someone manages to call for help we send out who we can. Aurors do threes, but we haven’t the men. The death eaters are usually twos or fours.” He zeroes in on Ed. “You need a partner. You’re quick but you won’t get far without backup.”

“Uh, I have backup,” Ed says, offended. “Who do you think all these guys in uniforms are, my cheer team?”

“You told me this was your op alone,” Pirate says, raising the couple of butchered caterpillars he’s got passing for eyebrows.

“Yeah, before we found out your lord veranda is fucking armed with philosopher’s stones,” Ed says. “I’m not suicidal. Look - are the wand sticks seriously all they use? What about like, cars and shit?” Well, they teleport everywhere, so maybe not. They keep saying they’ve never seen alchemy in combat before, too, so they might be lucky and lord wastebasket’s alchemist is some twiggy research wonk with the strategic planning of a dead stoat and the combat aptitude of warm butter. “No guns or anything?”

Pirate sighs. “Anything a gun can do you can get from a wand, lad.”

“No guns or anything?” Bones tells him, a bit dry.

“Yeah, but they’re delivered via waveform, not metal going faster than you can see,” Ed says exasperatedly. Pirate seems to have some inkling of what guns are, but the rest of these tulips clearly don’t. And they really should know, if only because the way their luck is going, Havoc’s gonna put his sidearm down or something for one second and someone’s gonna go ‘hee hee, what’s this?’ and die horribly. “Look - we didn’t demo our projectile weapons because you can’t spar with guns. There’s no fuckin’ ‘paralysis only’ setting, it’s lethal force or nothing.”

“Good,” Pirate says, perv eye swinging over Hawkeye’s holsters and then back to Ed. “Ye any good with them?”

Ed scowls reflexively, half because he should not be looking at anyone with that fucking Clothes Optional eyeball and half because he is sick of the fucking gun question. “No. I don’t use guns.”

“Why not?”

“Because my job is bringing in alive people,” Ed snaps.

“Lieutenant Colonel Elric is not a war alchemist,” Hawkeye steps in. “He’s a field investigator and research specialist, and he’s here as a subject matter expert with experience in the enemy’s specific background as it was relayed to General Armstrong. Our original understanding was that we would be dismantling a terrorist cell via arrest and detainment. While Lieutenant Colonel Elric has extensive experience in apprehending targets, in this kind of engagement his skillset is best
deployed as defensive fortification."

When arrest and detainment are off the table, she means. “I find stuff out, I fix shit,” Ed says shortly. “I’m not actually the first option for ranged combat.” Or the second. Or third. He doesn’t use firearms, or alkahestry, and his transmutation in combat is either to terraform or give himself a melee weapon - which had bounced right off Lemons’ shield.

The forcefields act solid. Ed looks at Hawkeye, then at Pirate. “Is your forcefield always attached to your stick?”

Pirate clearly did not take the same mental turn on this conversational highway and frowns at him. “What?”

“Your shield. Can you set it up at a distance,” Ed says impatiently. “Like, can you shield that tree over there instead of centering it on yourself. Can you?”

“That would not be a Protego but rather a ward,” Beardy speaks up. “There are several charms that behave similarly, however. Are you looking to have something protected?”

“No, we need to test bullet ricochet,” Ed says, mostly to Hawkeye. “If I can stand on one of their shield things, that’s gonna give some kinda rebound.”

She also casts a speculative eye over the tree. “We’d have to set up a range. And address soundproofing.”

Yeah, gunshots in some civilian backyard are probably not gonna go over great with the whole secret safehouse thing. “Tomorrow for that too then,” Ed says, then, for the wizards, “If it’s just gonna fling it right back at us we gotta find out so we don’t shoot while they’ve got shields up and accidentally frag whoever’s standing nearby at the exact wrong angle. Also,” back to Hawkeye, “you’re gonna need a range probably to test out the, y’know -” Ed waves his hands around in a way that hopefully conveys alchemically constructed sniper rifle Mustang’s promised to make you. “Kerchatka or T-60 or whichever. With the chromoly.”

“Kerchatka,” Hawkeye confirms. “I understand the operation sites we’ll be touring tomorrow will be mostly rural,” she adds to the wizards. “We’ll arrange a firearm demonstration there if conditions allow.”

“Guns are your main arsenal, then,” Pirate says, running both eyes from Al on the left to Arget all the way on the right. “Five soldiers and two alchemists.”

“Don’t forget our charm, wit and indomitable sense of humor,” Hughes says brightly.

“Critical to any endeavor,” Beardy says solemnly, like he thinks Hughes is laughing with them and not at them.

Bones, though, is watching Mustang, and it looks like she might be starting to catch on that there is a war alchemist here and it’s not fuckin’ Ed. “Livvie says you’re the only one in Amestris who does the kind of alchemy you do.”

Mustang’s expression, though, has gone totally buttered over, vacantly attentive in that way that makes him look like a beautiful overbred show collie trying very hard to understand what sit means. It’s not a super obvious change given Mustang already goes around looking one good knock on the head away from total brain death, but these days Ed can tell when the switch flips. “I am.”
When it’s obvious that there’s gonna be nothing further, Bones prompts, “What would that be?”

“I work with fire,” Mustang says placidly.

“Flame Alchemist,” Bones says.

“Indeed.”

Pirate jerks his chin at Ed. “So like his thermite?”

Mustang shrugs genteelly, the motion slight with his arms folded over his chest. “In some ways, yes.”

Bones frowns slightly. “But you’re the only one who does your kind of alchemy?”

“He doesn’t do solid state stuff,” Ed dismisses, waving a hand. He can see why Mustang’s back to the airhead act given the wizards all just talked real concerned about how using fire makes you some kinda psycho arsonist; he’s not giving them the full performance, thank fuck, probably because they do need the wizards to take them seriously, but it’s definitely not a great idea to lay all their cards out in one go here. “Alchemists specialize. Thermite’s metals, most explosives are combination metals and earths and I dunno if you can tell but this guy wouldn’t touch dirt at gunpoint.”

Hawkeye’s mouth twitches and Al looks like he wants to groan, so Ed’s chalking that up as a win. “Some of us do care about the uniform code, Fullmetal,” Mustang says all socialite-pissy, then slides his gaze over Ed in a way that feels like highlighter scribbled over the coal dust probably still ground into his cheeks and the way he never did manage to shave this morning. “Among other standards.”

Pirate snorts, shifting his weight off his peg leg a bit as his pervert eye does its own up-and-down over Mustang. “There’s more important things than keeping yer hands clean,” he says, and Ed has the deeply weird moment of realizing Pirate’s siding with him here instead of agreeing that Ed’s a mudspawn from the hick lagoon. “Fire’s all you do, then?”

“It tends to suffice,” Mustang says.

“And it’s that different from Elric’s, is it?”

“Well, I certainly can’t make things burn underwater,” Mustang says, which is true and so utterly misleading it makes Ed nearly inhale spit keeping down the laugh. “And what I work with rarely reaches half the temperatures Fullmetal described.”

Mustang follows this with an exasperated look at Ed, which reads as disapproval of a reckless subordinate, lack of ability to actually do anything about it, and an extra garnish of vague professional jealousy on top. The wizards probably can’t see the edge of keep laughing, brat that’s underpinning all of it. “Of course, he’s our youngest ever State Alchemist for a reason.”

Ed leers back, because he is going to keep laughing. “Yeah, bastard’s got a long way to go to get on my level.”

Mustang smiles at the wizards like there you have it , generic and a little tight with one corner of his mouth tipping up like haha, yeah, this kid alchemist is a bigger deal than me, but I’m all mature and cool and shit so I’m not gonna make a donkey’s cock out of it. Publicly.

And they’re buying it. Watching this shit go down is always a little like watching a baby stroller
roll into traffic, and Ed always gets the vague urge to yell watch out or something, only this pram is full of magic morons. Psycho’s the only one who saw what Mustang did to the bog art thing, but a bunch of these wizards were there both times Mustang took his ditz face off to explain how stupid they were for having one shit guard on Hairy and not teaching their shit wizard children not to kidnap people. It’s fucking insane how half the time people don’t even recognize Mustang’s teeth when he shows them, and not even just with the manipulation - Ed cannot fucking believe how many people still buy into Mustang’s oh-teehee-I-just-do-a-lot-of-paperwork after seeing him blow something up.

Meanwhile, you put on one pair of leather pants and everybody’s fucking acting like you’re a felon.

Okay, Ed is a felon, but it’s not because of the pants.

Most of the wizards are back to looking at Ed, though Beardy’s unreadable with his hands politely folded together in his sleeves; Lemons is stony-faced beside him. He’s also staring at Ed, still, though now with the look of someone who holds a grudge - which is getting him Al’s attention, though Al’s not nearly so obvious about it. That’s almost enough to make Ed feel sorry for him, though not actually enough not to meet Lemons’ glare head on and wink again.

Bones, though, is looking at Mustang like she’s caught a flicker of black and orange stripes where everybody else is seeing green tiger-free jungle. General Armstrong clearly didn’t tell her everything, given she’s all worried about them not all being alchemists, but if… Livvie… wrote to her about both of them in enough detail to complain about Ed being vain, she probably at least told Bones Mustang’s not useless in a fight. Not all the time, anyway.

She’s definitely running the numbers on something, watching Mustang like that. “Would you care to demonstrate?”

“Certainly,” Mustang says, and Ed automatically takes a couple of steps back with all the other Amestrisans before he realizes that might not be such a smart thing to do given they’re still pretending that the most intellectually grueling thing Mustang’s ever done is reschedule a hair appointment. Mustang just sighs, though, and uncrosses his arms to bring his fingertips together, the barest crackle of energy playing over his hands. “Fuel, oxidizer, energy, redox,” he recites negligently, separating his hands and using one finger to write out the basic equation for generic air combustion to hang airborne in glowing fiery symbols. “Fire, in chemical terms. With the application of alchemy, it can be directed and controlled.”

Ed squints. That’s not fire. It kinda looks it, sure, but it’s not moving like flames at all, and Mustang pointedly didn’t use his gloves - as far as the wizards know, Ed realizes, every alchemist in Amestris can transmute with just a clap, and none of them know the significance of the Flame Alchemist’s infamous gloves. Mustang activated a different gas array - neon, argon? That’s a pressure control and faking a diode to ionize the gas on top of concentrating it in place, and argon’s third most common in the atmosphere but it wouldn’t glow red like that, neon’s what glows red. Where did he get neon. Right up until this moment Ed would not have assumed Mustang capable of elemental switch via subatomic manipulation -

- but that’s bullshit, of fuckin’ course he can. Ugh.

Individual alchemists aren’t exactly paragons of sharing when it comes to their techniques, especially not combat alchemists, and Ed knows better than to dig about Mustang’s gloves, though realistically the only thing there that would be news to Ed would be the variables and control methods in Mustang’s specific directivity formulas. The real secret to flame alchemy is that it takes insane control to direct molecular bounce in gases, and most alchemists who try to recreate the
results blow themselves out their own chimneys because they can’t handle the backscatter.

Mustang does it in combat. The man’s a freak. Of fucking course anyone who can handle that level of gas shaping has the necessary control for subatomic shit. Mustang does more intensive work than this just by making sure he doesn’t blow his own fingers off every time he snaps and Ed’s an idiot who fell for the lazyass fuckaround goddamn smokescreen again. He of all people shouldn’t be tripping headfirst into any fucking assumptions, because Mustang digs those ditches on purpose and he’s down there setting bear traps. Ed especially shouldn’t be any kind of surprised after the fuckin’ carbon, because clearly Mustang has been practicing.

And now he’s got a two-stage array going, transmuting and shaping the gas and then ionizing it to make it look like he’s writing in fire. And he’s talking while doing it. What a bastard.

Pirate’s examining the slowly fading letters critically. “That’s it?”

Because to anybody who doesn’t know exactly what he’s doing, this little party trick looks like a couple sneezes’ worth of pretty lightshow. Showing off what a nightmare he is while looking stupid harmless, that’s fucking classic bastard. Sometimes Ed just wants to kick him.

Mustang just shrugs again, refolding his arms. “Scaling up in this environment would present a safety hazard.”

“Got a city block you don’t need?” Hughes murmurs very, very quietly from right behind Ed, which is morbid as fuck and makes him nearly snort out a sinus.

It also makes Bones’ gaze snap off Mustang and onto him. Ed’s pretty sure she didn’t hear Hughes, but she definitely saw how all of them gave Mustang the room, and it was obvious enough that none of the other wizards could miss it either. “What else do we need to test?” Hawkeye asks Ed, before Bones can ask Mustang to set someone’s hair on fire or something.

“Bullet ricochet off their forcefields, transmutation rebound off same,” Ed counts off on one hand. “Space manipulation and matter compression, limits of mind control and how they do their memory erasing shit.”

“Implantation of false memories, or however else they explain away sudden cases of amnesia,” Al says. “Magic-automail interaction.”

“Freight transport,” Havoc says, then, when everyone glances at him, “unless you just teleport cargo too? I mean. How do you move lots of people, or - supplies, or - anything in quantities, really. Are there magic rail cars? Trucks?”

“There are… some charmed cars, yes,” Bones says with a slight hesitation and a look at Havoc like why the fuck are you asking this, as Baldy suddenly looks inexplicably guilty. “Authorized ones are generally reserved for official ministry business. Chauffeuring large groups and the like. Any accompanying luggage is made to fit, I suppose.”

“Generally anything too big gets taken care of with a shrinking charm,” Mustache contributes.

Ed groans and drags his palms down his face, gloves scraping grittily over his cheeks. More spacetime fucking? “Okay, somebody explain that right now,” he demands. “Like, what is this mass compression shit? Have you weaponized that?”

“Weaponized what,” Pirate says, zoning back into the conversation from where he’s been eyeballing Mustang.
“This yippee-double-your-yard shit,” Ed says impatiently, waving an arm around at the scalped lawn. “If you’re genuinely folding space, throw that at your opponent and have them trip head over ass into the dimensional, whatever, accordion and boom, they’re trapped until you unfold them out. Unless that’d fuckin’ woodchipper them. In which case maybe don’t do that.”

“Dimensional accordion?” Beardy asks, eyes threatening to twinkle again.

Ed gives him a flat look and sticks a thumb at Bones. “Whatever y’all did to expand this yard by like forty meters. And all these benches and shit weren’t here until she waved her stick neither.”

“That’s an enchantment built into the grounds,” Bones says. “I merely activated it. Laying that kind of working can take months - it’s goblin-made, this one, that’s why it has all the frills. Self-lighting lampposts, even.” She blows out a breath, eyeing Ed. “Workings like this take months and usually have safeguards built in to make sure nothing living gets trapped when the space contracts. I must admit the thought of using it as a... weapon never occurred.”

Well, if nobody can fall into this freak shit by accident, this doily collective might not even realize it can be dangerous - though clearly someone did, if they thought to safeguard against it in the first place. “Well, that’s my job in a nutshell,” Ed says sardonically. “Pointing at shit and asking annoying questions like hey, can that kill you? Ugh.” He blows out a breath. “Okay, automail and guns tomorrow, let’s see how bad it’ll fuck our shit up. And everybody gets to go to the pickled craving party.”

“Can’t wait,” Hughes says, with what Ed can tell is genuine anticipation, because Intel doesn’t just take crazies, it makes them.

“If it’s an area safe enough to test your guns in,” Bones says evenly, directly to Mustang, “it’ll be safe to demonstrate some of your alchemy, won’t it?”

Mustang smiles all agreeable, like what Bones is asking is to light some candles on a nameday cake. “I don’t foresee any problems.”

Bones doesn’t look quite satisfied but she does nod, posture settling back on her heels slightly. Mustang’s walking the line between keeping his shit under wraps and seeming totally incompetent, Ed can tell that much, but the evasiveness is kinda obvious at this point and he’s honestly not sure why Bones at least isn’t poking it harder with a stick. Well - she is the only person here in actual law enforcement, and if Ed had to run an op with a bunch of excitable vigilante civilians he wouldn’t want to be doing strategy and capability rundowns with every bright-eyed idiot sitting witness at the table. Like - that’s gotta be it. Not every wizard can be terminally incurious, can they?

Whatever, not his problem. “I’d also like to have a conversation about your available medical care,” Al speaks up, leaning in slightly to glance across the entire crop of wizards. “Ah - hello everyone, not all of us have met, have we? I’m Alphonse Elric, I’m a medical specialist here on General Mustang’s behalf. I suppose I’m asking if I have a counterpart I could meet on your end.”

“A horrible noise interrupts her. Everyone looks at Ed, whose stomach obligingly growls again. “Ah,” Beardy says, smiling faintly under the beard. “We are a bit past dinnertime, aren’t we?”

Ed bares some teeth on principle, but usually when his body starts making that noise it means it’s moved past threats and is informing him it’s about to cut power to everything that isn’t food-
“We may as well end things here for tonight. I should be able to take a half day tomorrow if nothing goes belly up - fudge is making noises about summoning you to a hearing, by the way, and the Wizengamot’s not arguing,” she adds to Beardy, brusque. “If they vote Veritaserum you’d better have a hell of a truth lined up.”

“Malf - doesn’t believe Potter’s truly missing, then,” Pirate says grimly. “If he’s forcing a hearing he suspects you’re behind his disappearance. You’d better preempt that questioning, Albus.”

This Malf - guy a-fuckin’-gain. The rest of that nonsense is all Mustang’s problem, but once Ed and Al have a working null array Malf - is gonna be his problem. It doesn’t sound like it’s doing anyone any good to let him keep running around. “Thank you for the warning,” Beardy says, inclining his head at Bones. “We will prepare accordingly. I’m afraid we may have to miss dinner once more, Arthur - do apologize to Molly for us, will you?”

“Not a problem,” Baldy says, though kind of distracted since he’s looking curiously at Al.

“Roy,” Beardy continues, nodding to Mustang. “There are a few things sever us and I must set in motion tonight that cannot wait. We’ll be by first thing tomorrow morning and determine if we can be of any assistance to you.”

Mustang gives Beardy a nice, accepting I fucking hate you smile. “Of course. Best of luck.”

Beady smiles his own bullshit smile and nods bye-bye around the rest of the wizards as he steps away from everyone, Lemons joining him with one last stone-faced look at Ed. “Until tomorrow,” Beardy says, and the two of them disappear with a simultaneous crack.

Bones blows out a long breath. “Until tomorrow,” she echoes, sounding just a little bit sarcastic about it. “Well. Let’s have that healer chat over dinner then, shall we? Might as well eat.”

Chapter End Notes

mustang: don’t worry :) i’m so fucking stupid ;)

bones: liv. girl. what the FUCK did you send me
“That was a forfeit,” Fred argues.

“Yeah, but Mad Eye didn’t knock him out,” Sirius says goodnaturedly. “Those were the terms.”

“A forfeit negates the bet,” George continues as they head down the stairs; Mrs. Weasley yelled for Fred and George just as Dumbledore and Snape Disapparated, and given everyone outside was breaking up anyway for dinner they figured they might as well come back down. “Because the match was called off, essentially.”

“- so neither of us wins, since neither of them did.”

“We didn’t bet on how the match would end, we bet on whether Moody would knock Elric cold or not,” Sirius says happily. “‘Course, we can make a new bet, if you like.”

Hermione’s not listening. The meeting out in the yard didn’t last long but that was still… a lot of information. Especially the fight. It wasn’t anything like dueling club second year, or even that horrible chess match first year where Ron had directed pieces to brutally smash and break each other. Hermione already knew Elric was fast from how he stole their wands, but to see Moody cast wordlessly, hex after hex, keeping up with a moving target while the ground shook and walls rose and dropped and reformed around him - that, she’d realized, looking out the window, was what a serious duel looked like.

And they weren’t even really trying to hurt each other.

Hermione feels her stomach tightening in that way it’s been doing more and more lately, twisting up in a hot, acidic sort of fear. Voldemort is back. They aren’t dealing with petty insults and schoolyard jinxes anymore. This won’t be Malfoy and Crabbe and Goyle; this will be their parents, fully grown Death Eaters, wizards and witches who have tortured and killed people. And Harry’s survived a lot, but he’s only fifteen and barely knows any real fighting spells. Neither does Ron. Hermione can’t even Apparate yet, and if it comes to treating anything more serious than a cut...

The Order is already filing in through the back door when they reach the ground floor; “Madam Bones and Shacklebolt will be joining us for dinner, dear,” Mr. Weasley calls into the kitchen, then notices Hermione and the rest. “Ah - and here’s everyone else. Er. Do you want us in the dining room, Molly?”

Hermione keeps her eyes on the Amestrisans as Mrs. Weasley pops out of the kitchen, looking harried, and chivvies them into the dining room while snapping for Fred and George to help set the table. Wizarding Britain doesn’t have an army, hasn’t since Godric Gryffindor’s time. Aurors aren’t soldiers. These people are soldiers, though it hadn’t really hit home when it was just Elric with his attitude, constant garbled swearing and… outfit. Even when the other Amestrisans arrived they hadn’t seemed very imposing at first; most of them are shorter than Ron, and the uniforms look fussy and impractical with the bright color, hanging braids and long skirt-thing over their trousers.

Now Hermione can’t help but think of aposematic coloration. Elric and the long-haired blonde woman had both shaken off the Imperius like it was nothing, they were apparently all immune to Legilimency, and whatever Snape saw in Elric’s mind before being thrown out had genuinely
alarmed him. The woman removed four guns before she was Imperiused, handing them over to Elric with the casual deliberacy of someone who knows exactly how to use them. And Elric had pulled oxygen out of Hermione’s lungs, just by clapping his hands, and told her he was being nice because he could’ve ripped them up instead.

Hermione did not like that.

Sirius is clearly just thrilled that Elric made a fool of Snape, and while Harry’s warier he’s just as clearly caught up in Sirius’s enthusiasm. Fred and George are fascinated. Ron is solid beside Hermione, blissfully unchanged in his suspicion of Elric, and while Ginny is still - well - interested, Ginny hangs upside down off brooms by her knees for fun and at least Hermione knows she can, has and will hex the boys she fancies. Elric gave their wands back, and Fred and George did kidnap Alphonse in a - well - not very bright maneuver - but he did take away their wands when they stunned him and might do it again, if he feels like it. And the Amestrisans might be here to help the Order, but they’re not exactly friendly.

The more Hermione thinks about what they just heard and saw, the more she wants to make like a mandrake and scream hysterically into a pot of dirt for a good long while. The way Elric had said Voldemort was armed with Philosopher’s Stones - he made it sound like a weapon. Hermione’s never come across anything about Philosopher’s Stone being used as anything other than a restorative elixir and gold production in all her research, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t anything; she’d been a first year after all, with barely a clue how to navigate the Restricted Section of the library. And Elric said stones. Plural. And none of the Order had corrected him.

Hermione should have tried to get to Harry and Ron sooner, this summer. The situation is clearly worse than she knew, and between the fact that they’d been forbidden from properly writing to Harry and now Moody and Bones both admitting they have barely any information on the Death Eaters... She should have been learning new spells, teaching Harry and Ron, planning - preparing. She’d wanted to spend time with her parents, go with them on vacation and to see Auntie and Grandpa and everybody. She’s been so relieved at the normalcy, the steadiness of her family’s lives, their uncomplicated hugs. She’d fallen gladly into the desperate complacency of reassuring herself that Dumbledore had his reasons, that the greatest wizard in Britain was there for them, to face the foe.

She can’t depend on that anymore. What if they hadn’t gone looking for a library with Elric yesterday? What if Ginny hadn’t demanded they go see Harry, and he’d been alone at that park, and the dementors had overwhelmed his Patronus and Kissed him? What if next time, Voldemort sends something worse, something they have no idea how to defend against? How is Hermione going to feel, if something - happens tomorrow and instead of studying shield spells over the summer she’d been on the beach in Côte d’Ivoire trying not to think about anything but Mum complaining about tan lines?

And if Voldemort wins - what’s going to happen to her parents?

Term starts in two weeks. Mrs. Weasley hadn’t focused much on why Fred and George had gone to Harry’s house; she’d softened a bit and gotten distracted when Fred and George had protested that they only wanted to pick up Harry’s things since he’d been transplanted so abruptly and everyone else was so busy, so the Invisibility Cloak and Marauder’s Map are still stuffed somewhere in with Harry’s things. They’ll keep trying to get answers, however it takes. They’ve already managed to get more information today than all of the last three months combined.

Hermione just has to keep paying attention. And looking for opportunities.

Mr. Weasley joined Mrs. Weasley in the kitchen, Moody stumping after him muttering something
about flasks and never eating what you didn’t see prepared and constant vigilance - though not without his eye whirling around the room and clearly fixing his gaze through the back of his head as he leaves. Sirius sits down with Harry on one side and Lupin on the other, Tonks and Shacklebolt and Emmeline Vance joining Bill in settling as well; Madam Bones runs a gimlet eye over them and rests lingeringly on Sirius, who gives a tight, uncomfortable smile in return, before she turns to Alphonse. “What do you need to talk to a healer for? Do you need supplies?”

“Oh, no, we have everything we need so far;” Alphonse says politely; Elric is sniffing the air like a dog, distractedly enough that Alphonse has to pull him out of the way of the rest of the Amestrisans coming in through the doorway. “I mainly want to get an idea of what’s available here, and the methods you use to treat some things.”

“I have experience with a variety of healing charms,” Lupin says unobtrusively, meeting Alphonse’s gaze. “I’m not a healer, but I deal with minor injuries with some regularity.”

“What kinds?” Alphonse asks him, taking his brother by the arm to sit them both at the table. Elric sits, looks around blankly, then down at his empty plate, seeming confused and betrayed to find it empty. Hermione sits down across them as unobtrusively as possible - she’d sit across Alphonse, but the way Sirius and Harry have taken the corner puts her across Elric instead. Alphonse leans around him to keep talking to Lupin. “I’m assuming you deal mostly with first aid?”

“Lacerations, bruises, sometimes cracked bone,” Lupin says, taking his own seat as the Amestrisans start filling up the other side of the table. “Spell damage is more complex and I can usually only mitigate some of the symptoms - things like nausea, dizziness. You are a healer yourself?”

“Qi specialist and Alkahestric clinician,” Alphonse says in agreeing tones. “Though I’ve patched up my brother enough to qualify on first aid as well. What do you do when someone is injured beyond your capabilities? Do you have access to medical facilities?”

“There is a wizarding hospital,” Lupin confirms. “St. Mungo’s. They take on everything regular healing charms can’t handle.”

“And it’s safe to access?” the Amestrian in glasses - Hughes? - leans in to ask. “Given the extrajudicial nature of your operation here.”

“St. Mungo’s treats everybody,” Lupin says, pausing as Elric whaps his palms together, takes a fork in each hand and turns them into two sets of chopsticks in a crackle of blue light, putting one set in front of his brother. “The healers take their responsibilities very seriously -”

He’s interrupted by Fred and George throwing the kitchen door back open and sending bowls of food skidding onto the table, casserole and mashed potatoes and green beans shuddering as they slide to a halt. “Mum says get started -”

“- there’s so many of us, she’s still taking things off the stove. Bon appetit!”

Elric lunges for the food like a starving dingo, pausing only to dump some casserole on Alphonse’s plate before shoveling half the bowl onto his and attacking with his chopsticks. Everyone stares in alarm at the sudden carnage - even casserole doesn’t deserve *that* - but after a moment Shacklebolt huffs under his breath and starts passing plates down to Tonks and everyone collectively decides the scene is not worth commenting on. Fred and George whisk a few more bowls from the kitchen before sprawling into their own chairs, dropping down between Ron and Lupin - and when they do Mustang leans forward slightly, just enough to look directly at them.
He’s got his elbows on the table and fingers laced loosely below his chin, his half-lidded eyes lending a dreamy cast to his expression. When Hermione first saw him he reminded her of Dr. Liu, who’s one of her dad’s friends from dental school and came over for dinner a lot when her parents hosted parties all through primary school; he’s got the same kind of cheekbones and eyelashes that make Dad grumble while Mum sighs dramatically and uses words like *phenotypically unfair*.

Hermione tries not to remember how much of a crush her nine year old self had on Dr. Liu. Dr. Liu was nice and funny and taught her multiplication tricks one time and he *definitely* never smiled like Mustang had when he told them Elric could eat their wands for all he cared.

And Mustang is leaning in like that to look right at Fred and George, who pause in their chair-jostling to look back. “Mister and Mister Weasley,” Mustang says in an easy tone. “I understand you are over the age of majority here and thus legal adults. I wouldn’t presume to insult you by treating you as anything less. Are we going to have any other incidents between you and any of my staff?”

He sounds calm and genuinely curious, nothing more. Hermione’s seen and heard plenty of professors dress down Fred and George over the years, everyone has, but she’s fairly certain no one has ever addressed their rulebreaking like this. Like if there are any other incidents, Mustang won’t get angry, won’t get upset, he’ll merely… focus his attention. All of it. On you.

It’s not a threat. It’s not *at all* a threat, and Hermione can’t quite figure out how nevertheless it so obviously, plainly is one. Fred and George haven’t failed to notice, staring back at Mustang in open fascination, and Bill is slowly lowering his fork from his mouth like he’s not sure whether he should do something about this. Sirius and Lupin are exchanging glances and Shacklebolt is looking at Madam Bones, who is watching Mustang like he’s an egg about to hatch and she has no idea whether it’s going to be a chicken or a basilisk.

And the rest of the Amestrisans are all watching them right back, if unobtrusively - the only one *not* watching is Elric, who has now lifted his plate in one hand and is tipping food into his mouth directly.

“No,” Fred says. The silence hasn’t even lasted more than a second or two, but it feels much longer.

“No,” George agrees, both of them watching Mustang right back.

“No more -”

“- incidents.”

Mustang smiles, and the tension is suddenly gone as if it never existed. “Wonderful.” He reaches over without looking, plants a hand on Elric’s forearm and exerts pressure until he lowers his plate from his face. “Wha’,” Elric snaps, chopsticks jerking in an abortively stabby way.

“Manners,” Mustang says mildly, still not looking at him, and the room eases further as Sirius chuckles a little; it’s not humor, just relief.

“Ain’t got none,” Elric says belligerently, somehow back to eating as he talks, which causes a few more smiles around the table over the appallingly grating scrape of his chopsticks.

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley aren’t in the room, Hermione notes. Bill is, but he’s not saying anything - and not that Fred and George need it. They don’t seem intimidated, just thoughtful, but Hermione can’t make herself relax. Doesn’t want to relax. If what Elric said was true, this man - slightly
built, pleasant-faced and polite - had done exactly what Voldemort at the height of his power had failed to do, for years, and taken over a government.

It’s not that she didn’t believe it; she doesn’t know anything about their country, or their political system, or their military - but she hadn’t been able to picture it. She still can’t picture it. Coups are two-sentence mentions in her World History primers from year 5 and vaguely alluded scenes from American movies she hadn’t been allowed to watch. Now, though, she can definitely see that smile turned on - on someone like the Minister, on whole governments, and with it that unflinching attention, serene and dead as the smile of the Gizan sphinx.

And then Mustang turns to look at Hermione. She feels her knuckles tighten on her fork, involuntary. Ron tenses beside her. “I understand this is a stressful time for all of us,” Mustang says, still smiling, eyes calm and clear and holding hers. “But we really don’t want any more accidents, don’t you think?”

Hermione’s mouth is dry, but a part of her wants to say - or what? But she knows what. Alphonse knows about the Cloak and the Map, and he told it to all the Amestrians outright - items they don’t want their parents to know about. And Mustang knows he’s got that leverage.

“No,” she says aloud. Her voice comes out calmer than she expects it to. She’s not getting the same patient look Fred and George got, but there’s no warmth in Mustang’s eyes. He doesn’t seem anything like her parents’ friend anymore.

“We really are sorry,” Ginny adds, leaning in wide-eyed and looking fairly convincing from Fred and George’s other side. “We didn’t mean things to get out of hand.”

“Understandably.” Mustang gives her a tolerant glance. “Of course, it’s not me who’s owed an apology.”

They all look at Elric, but he’s going at his plate like a whale that’s just gotten a turbo-powered water pump installed in his baleen and he’s trying to pack a month’s worth of krill-straining into the next two minutes. Instead Alphonse looks up, from where he’s been examining his own untouched plateful of casserole. His eyes are a deeper gold than his brother’s, his nose straighter; his hair is a little darker too, his cheekbones and jaw sharpened by the way it’s cropped close at his temples.

He meets Ginny’s gaze, then Hermione’s. He smiles. “We all make mistakes sometimes.”

Hermione can’t make herself smile back. He seems nicer than his brother, and Harry said Alphonse examined him he’d been perfectly fine, but when Elric told Alphonse to grab Fred and George he hadn’t hesitated for a second. And he didn’t actually accept Ginny’s apology. Well. Not that she apologized to him.

“It won’t happen again,” Ginny says virtuously, and Alphonse circumvents an answer by smiling and nodding and lifting his first forkful to his mouth. Hermione sees his expression freeze into polite horror as he takes the bite, but Mustang and Madam Bones are looking at each other again and there is something being communicated there and Hermione has to see. Madam Bones hasn’t taken her eyes off Mustang, a deeply considering but now increasingly amused look on her severe face. “You have children, Mustang?”

Mustang’s smile flickers into a grimace of horror as Chaos snorts and Hughes chokes on his sip of water. “No children,” Mustang says, tone delicate with revulsion as Hughes gets carefully pounded on the back by the short-haired blonde with the metal hand. “Though I’m reliably informed that junior officers occupy much the same existential role.”
“Yes, that would do it,” Madam Bones says, amusement growing as Hughes keeps coughing. “You known Livvie long?”

“A while now. I served with her brother,” Mustang says, ignoring the others. “Have you met Alex?”

“That the big one who cries a lot? Only pictures,” Madam Bones says. “Livvie’s invited us to visit, but with my work and Susie in school there just hasn’t been the time.”

“Your child?” Hughes guesses hoarsely, thumping his chest a bit as Elric slings one last hapless piece of broccoli in his mouth and abandons his plate to grab for his water glass like he hasn’t imbibed fluids in days. Alphonse uses the moment to quietly switch his full plate with his brother’s empty one.

“My niece,” Madam Bones says, some amusement fading. “Her parents were murdered by Death Eaters in the first war.” She nods at Hermione and Ron, then. “She’s in your year.”

Susan Bones, right. Hufflepuff, quiet, decent marks, never asked to copy Hermione’s homework. “We had Herbology together last year,” she hazards, unsure of whether the look on Madam Bones’ face is reprimanding or not. Madam Bones had been looking at Mustang like she’d heard his threats loud and clear, but now it seems like she’s mostly just teasing him. It had seemed like everyone felt that moment of tension, Shacklebolt and Bill and even Tonks, but Mustang had sounded perfectly nice and Hermione still can’t even pinpoint why exactly it had felt like staring down a tiger. Is she just - imagining things?

No. That look he gave her, talking about accidents - she knew, clear as if he’d spoken, that he’d start with the Map and the Cloak and he certainly wouldn’t stop there.

“She says you gave quite the show at the Tournament,” Madam Bones says, this time to Harry. “You would’ve won, I hear, if things hadn’t ended like they did. Bloody good show for a boy your age.”

Harry’s face has shut down entirely. “Cedric would’ve won,” he says flatly. “If Crouch hadn’t cleared my way and Voldemort hadn’t killed him.”

Madam Bones grimaces, but before she can respond to that Elric surfaces from his water with a final whole-body gulp like a swallowing crocodile. He thunks his cup down, swipes his hand over his mouth and immediately fixes his yellow stare on Harry. “Where’s your report.”

“What?” Harry says.

“On how you got kidnapped,” Elric says impatiently. “Where is it. I gave you paper and everything.”

“Haven’t done it yet,” Harry says tartly. “Been a bit busy getting drawn on by your brother.”

“You’re welcome,” Elric says, turning to Alphonse. “So is his brain gonna explode or what?”

“There haven’t been any signs of atypical neuroelectric activity,” Alphonse says calmly. “His cardiac and pulmonary function seems unimpaired. At the moment I don’t foresee us having to deal with any physical complications.”

“That’s good,” Ginny says, as Hermione wonders what exactly they were looking for - Harry’s brain might be affected by Voldemort’s scar, but his lungs? His heart?
“Yeah, yay, whatever,” Elric says, turning back to narrow his eyes at Harry. “You owe us names. I told you, you want back at those assholes, give us something to work with.” He switches his gaze to Madam Bones without pause. “Did you debrief him? Somebody did, right? Can we have that file at least?”

“The Ministry’s official stance is that Voldemort has not returned,” Madam Bones says, wry and bitter. “As such, there is no report. The case was determined to be the work of lone madman and former Death Eater Bartemius Crouch, who was executed by the Minister’s mandate before he could be questioned by Aurors. Potter was put down as overstressed and hallucinating from Acromantula venom.”

Mustang and Hughes exchange unreadable glances. “Minister’s mandate,” Hughes repeats.

“It doesn’t look good for Fudge that a Death Eater got out of Azkaban, let alone taught at Hogwarts for an entire year,” Madam Bones says, lip curling. “Who knows what else Crouch might reveal in a trial? Fudge is getting hell for ordering the dementor’s Kiss now, of course, but whatever the hell else he had to tell, we’ll never know.”

“Mm,” Hughes says, sat back in his chair with his hand over his mouth now, eyes sharp behind his glasses. “Sounds like he was very invested in making sure this… Crouch… couldn’t talk. And he has the authority to give kill orders to dementors?”

Madam Bones sits back as well, meeting Hughes’ gaze. “Fudge doesn’t gain anything from Potter’s death,” she says bluntly, even as Hermione realizes what, exactly, Hughes is implying. “He’s the Boy Who Lived. Even if Potter here is making a fuss for him about Voldemort being back, most people just think he’s had a nervous breakdown from competing too young in the Tournament and tsk tsk at Dumbledore for not taking better care. Which makes Fudge look better in comparison.” Harry glares at her, but she doesn’t glance around to notice. “Frankly, gentlemen - Fudge is an idiot. There isn’t any obvious advantage to having the Boy Who Lived be murdered by dementors, and he’s not bright enough to think of any non-obvious ones.”

Hermione’s hand feels like it’s going to have permanent dents from the shape of her fork. It was upsetting enough to have Elric talk about Harry like he’s a chess piece and not a person, but it somehow hits harder to hear Bones speak the same way. “He doesn’t have to be a master of thinking, he just has to be compromised,” Hughes says reasonably, though his eyes are grim. “Why give the kill order yourself if you can blackmail someone into giving it for you? And fools are easy to blackmail.”

Shacklebolt and Vance look just as grim, Hermione sees, and Lupin and Bill too. Bones’ mouth twists, but before she can reply the kitchen door swings open again and releases Mrs. Weasley, frizzy around the hair and frazzled around the eyes as she guides in a whole new stream of dishes with her wand. “Sorry, sorry, everyone - had a bit of trouble with that oven again, but not to fear, there’ll be enough for everyone -”

Mr. Weasley comes in behind her, bearing even more food, and as Bill stands to help his mother and Shacklebolt starts moving dishes out of the way the room dissolves into subdued chatter. The Amestrisans exchange some discreet glances but keep eating, and Mrs. Weasley pointedly asks Fred and George about their NEWTs before she’s even sat down, and Hermione knows the real conversation is over. For now.

She exchanges a glance of her own, with Harry - troubled, angry - and Ron. Elric had been right, telling them about extortion and negotiating and blackmail. They need leverage. Hermione needs to make it so nobody can threaten to take away Harry’s Map and Cloak, to start with, and she needs to have - something that will make the Amestrisans have no choice but to tell her what she needs to
know. And Hermione is on a deadline. The Amestrisans won’t be going to Hogwarts. She needs to find out about - too much, there’s so much to do - but she can start with Elric’s new armguards. These ones look like they’re made of some kind of crystal, almost, and the stunners and hexes had just reflected right off them. Harry and Ron should be able to learn Protego Maximus, but even if they can’t, even if they get disarmed - having something in reserve that can deflect spells may save their lives.

And Snape had been put out of commission when he lost his wand. If alchemy can let Elric do wandless magic - and if anyone can learn alchemy - Hermione has some work to do.

Chapter End Notes

hermione, 10 years later: so yeah that’s how I dropped out of high school, joined the SAS, founded the House Elf Liberation Front and established the Global Democratic Republic of Earth via me holding the G20 summit hostage with my fleet of house elf fighter pilots and magically augmented F-52 Raptor jets.

reporter: … so what DID happen to Voldemort?

hermione: who? Oh, him! [laughs, gestures with lightsaber] sorry, it’s, you know, hard to remember details from childhood adventures sometimes when you’ve got so many other things to do
“So,” Havoc says resignedly as they close the door on their alchemically conjoined bedroom collective; Mustang and Bones had some kind of brief dickjousting conversation held via eye contact, which culminated in both of them agreeing how cool and great it would be if they all retired for the night. “How screwed are we?”

Mustang sighs. “Reports first. Get the observations down, shower. Then we talk.”

They all settle around the room, Ed choosing the floor at the foot of his and Al’s claimed bed to write on a hard surface. He might care more about whatever silent political messages were going back and forth with Mustang and Bones, but he’s a little preoccupied thinking about how magic shielding disrupts alchemy. Some kinds of shielding, anyway. He writes out his theories for that first, trying to describe how that might even work, mathwise; given the number of variables present he has to assign an entirely new one for magic/qi, which he shortcuts by scribbling an angry face into the equations and designating it his magic placeholder. If it felt like the shielding was corrupting the information aspect of the array, not power, maybe it was? Okay, well, time to un-collapse everything and isolate each executable component and see if there’s a way to test each individually.

Probably not, but hey. Ninety percent of science is figuring out what doesn’t work.

He pauses to uncramp his fingers and switch writing hands when he finishes fighting the math and moves onto observations. It’s kind of weird to bunk down with everybody all together. Ed’s usually in some shitty hotel room when out on assignment or staying with whoever he knows in town, and when he was camping out with Greedling and Darius and Heinkel it was mostly, well, camping, because they were all AWOL wanted enemies of the state. This here is a mildly surreal juxtaposition of real beds, campfire close quarters and seeing Havoc’s boxers in what’s technically a workplace setting.

They’re taking turns using the showers and writing reports, and through the miracle of shorthand and assuring himself he’d be able to understand or at least reverse engineer what he meant tomorrow morning Ed manages to finish his notes by the time Havoc exits the bathroom and frees up a shower stall. Ed finishes scrawling SHIT WIZARD GOV FUCKED, RECOMMEND FIRE + START OVER, grabs his pack and hustles. He can finally fucking shave his stupid face, even if he probably can’t use the big bathroom mirror since they’re all barracks-rooming it and he doesn’t want to crowd the counter any more than necessary.

The shower is fantastically hot. Ed almost nods off standing up with suds still sliding down his legs, and only the knowledge that the pale blur in the next stall over is Hughes motivates him enough to finish up and get out before the guy starts singing or something. And then sleep. Fuck, that sounds good right now. Fuck shaving, he’ll do that tomorrow. The second he gets out he’s taking a running leap into bed and transmuting himself into a mattress.

The door opens as Ed’s rinsing off, and he can tell it’s Al; Ed looks down, wiggles his metal toes and decides he might as well oil up in here where the tile is all easily cleanable. “Al? Can you get my oil can?”

“Uh huh.” Al rummages through Ed’s pack and then passes the oil up over the partition. “Where
do you keep your ration bars?"

The vague and unimportant recollection of his dinner plate pleasantly surprising him by turning out to have more food on it than he thought springs into sudden vicious clarity. "You didn’t eat?" Ed demands, throwing the stall door open and swinging his head out. "Why not?"

“Oh my god, can you not be naked at me?” Al complains, pushing him back in. “Just tell me where your stupid snacks are!”

“Why didn’t you eat? What’s wrong?” Ed has to grab onto the edges of the stall to keep from slipping onto his ass, talking garbled by Al’s hand on his face. “Are you sick? Was there something wrong with the food?”

“I didn’t like the… whatever it was, it’s fine, I have nuts and jerky, it’s fine. Where are your snacks?”

“You’re hungry,” Ed observes as Al shoves him back fully into the stall and starts determinedly closing the door on his fingers, “look at you, you’re hungry cranky, you’re hranky, why didn’t you eat -”

“Crungy,” Al corrects.

“- and I think they’re gone, I ate them all. Go steal Havoc’s.”

“Take mine,” Hughes offers, voice echoing and shape a ghostly blur in the other stall, which makes both Ed and Al scream a little. Hughes laughs, because he’s a demon. “Seriously, go ahead - Havoc actually likes those things, and I’ll just steal some of Roy’s if I need them. Go on.”

“Thanks,” Al says sincerely, and uses the moment to shut Ed back in the shower entirely. “I appreciate it.”

“Dick,” Ed informs him, picking up the oil can again and propping his metal foot on the taps to start working it over.

“I can’t hear you,” Al says primly, gathering up his things and leaving Ed’s pack half-open as he swans into the third shower stall. “Also, I’m using your toothpaste.”

Ed chooses to be the bigger person and let Al have the last word, because he’s the big brother and also if he doesn’t focus here the oil dripping out of his ankle joint is gonna make him slip and crack his head and die. Al will drag his corpse back to Winry and make him an automail brain and reanimate him just to laugh in his face about how he died in a wizard shower, and it’s just not gonna be a good headstone, is all. If you gotta go through the misery of chipping out a death date, the very least you should get is a cool consolation epitaph. ‘God Finally Had Enough’, or something.

He should put that in his will. He still has no clue why it legally can’t be two sentences: Al gets everything, put something cool on my tomb. Sign, date, boom. What else is there to say, really?

And that’s his sign to get the fuck out of the brain-hotbox that is the shower, because if he’s starting to get all deep and morbid who knows where he’ll end up.

Ed escapes with Hughes just starting to hum, leaving the bathroom damp and mildly oily and feeling a lot more like a person. It also nearly takes him right into Havoc, still shirtless, and by the sound of it regaling Jones and Arget with one of his stories.
“- so then I get impaled, and then the chief gets impaled, and then we’re both on the ground bleeding out. I’m just kind of lying there trying to stay conscious, but I’m thinking, well, that’s it, you know? She got us right through the guts, and I can’t even feel my legs. Then the chief says, I got an idea. I think I got something that can fix this. And I say, is it fire? Because I don’t want to know if it’s fire. Please don’t tell me it’s fire.”

Here Havoc pauses. “Can you guess what it was?”

“Fire?” Arget ventures, hypnotized.

“It was fire. So then I’m screaming, and he’s screaming, and there was not a lot of dignity in that room at that moment, I can tell you, but it did cauterize the wounds. Stopped the bleeding long enough for us to get to the hospital, though we got yelled at for like two hours each by doctors complaining about burns being huge infection risks. So yeah. That’s how I got this scar. And why it’s so fucked up looking.”

That’s not terrible, as Havoc stories go; it’s got the facts, more or less, and isn’t flattering to anyone involved whatsoever, but is still pretty entertaining and more importantly isn’t about breasts.

Havoc heaves a sigh. “Shame about her being a homunculus, though. She had an amazing pair of tits.”

Never mind.

“Impaled, though,” Jones says, looking slightly queasy. “Like… right through?”

“Yes. Came out my back here,” Havoc says, turning slightly and gesturing. “Only good thing about spine injuries, lemme tell you - if it gets ya real good, you don’t feel anything from the break on down. Still hurts like a fuck of a bitch everywhere else, but, y’know. Could be worse.”

“Is that three of us that’ve gotten impaled now?” Ed says. “Shit. One more and we can start a bowling team.”

“What, you too?” Havoc says, turning. “When?”

“Briggs,” Ed says, then rucks his shirt up, figuring it can’t hurt. “Did I seriously never tell you? Fuckin’ Kimblee dropped a mining tower on me. No pyromaniac first aid, though, thank fuck.”

“Huh,” Havoc says, inspecting the scar with his hands on his hips. “That looks… nasty. What’d you get stuck with?”

“Some kinda pipe,” Ed says, turning a bit to show Havoc the entry wound on his back. “Came in through here - thank fuck I was already on the ground, so it didn’t drag through me too far.”


Right. That’s why he doesn’t tell this story. “Some healing alchemy,” Ed says, which is technically true and also thank fuck Al isn’t in the room right now. “Detached the pipe, sealed the hole up long enough to get actual help. Darius and Heinkel were there, they got me to a doctor.”

“Those the two big guys with the…?” Havoc gestures vaguely around his face.

“Lion and gorilla chimerism? Yeah,” Ed says dryly. “They were assigned to Kimblee, but since he blew them up along with me and I got them out of the rubble, they decided to hang with a different
“Wow,” Jones says, only a little faintly.

“Everything they say about General Mustang’s people is true,” Arget mumbles.

“What are they saying these days?” Mustang says from where he’s passing right behind her, which makes Arget turn a very alarming color and look like she’s about to throw up her soul. “General Mustang sir!”

“At ease, Corporal,” Mustang says. “Saluting a man in his pajamas does nothing for either of our dignities.”

“You start half the rumors about yourself, bastard,” Ed says before Mustang can start playing with his food. “Don’t even pretend like you don’t know what people are saying.”

“It’s always useful to get an outside perspective,” Mustang says, pretty loftily for a guy in a AMESTRIS STATE MILITARY COLLEGE NATIONAL CHESS CHAMPIONSHIPS 1904 sweatshirt. “I don’t presume to know everything at all times.”

Ed rolls his eyes. “You can tell him,” he tells Arget. “He’s not gonna be mad if they’re sleazy. Pretty sure the sleazier they are the happier he gets.”

“She didn’t say General Mustang, she said General Mustang’s people,” Mustang points out.

“Stop talking in third person, it’s creepy,” Ed returns.

“It’s mostly gossip on which unlucky blonde you winked at in the past week,” Hughes says, exiting the bathroom with his towel wound around his head and his glasses still slightly foggy. “Who’s the work wife that actually runs your department, and so on.”

“That one is hardly new,” Mustang says with raised eyebrows, glancing at Hawkeye.

“Oh, no, chief,” Havoc says, a deeply satisfied grin starting to spread. “Don’t you worry. Nobody thinks Colonel Hawkeye is your work wife.”

Mustang pauses and turns fully to Havoc, who grins the grin of a man who has finally gotten fulcrum, target and leverage all in the same place together. “Hawkeye’s not the one who brings you coffee, or homemade lunches, or drycleaned uniforms,” he continues mercilessly. “She also doesn’t pass notes with you, or call you incessantly. You know who does do that, though?”

Mustang swivels in horror back to where Hughes is beaming at him in evil delight. “No,” he says with something like despair.

“Yes,” Hughes says inexorably. “Oh yes.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Don’t you accept our professional matrimony, Roy? Aren’t I a good wife to you?”

“You’re a terrible wife,” Mustang says. “All you do is show me photos of other women and nag, nag, nag -”

Ed, though, is a little bit stuck on the fact that there is somebody for whom he fetches coffee, willingly, and has brought lunch to, and has picked up a clean uniform for. As if dragged, he slowly turns to Hawkeye. “But then… that means…”
Hawkeye nods at him soberly. “I’m afraid so.”

Ed feels his mouth drop open and his eyes slowly round. “Oh fuck yeah,” he whispers.

Mustang has stopped bickering with Hughes and caught on to their conversation. “No,” he says, more intently.

“Yes,” Hawkeye says dispassionately. “Edward is my work wife.”

“Oh my,” Hughes says, pausing. “He is, isn’t he?”

“No he’s not,” Mustang insists, like repetition will make it true.

“I walk Black Hayate sometimes. She picked up extra automail oil for me just last week,” Ed says, trying not to sound too much like he’s bragging and probably failing. “I’m totally her work wife.”

Jones coughs slightly, drawing attention away from Mustang’s impending dramatics. “Well… to believe the rumors, one would say you’re all considered the General’s… work wives.”

Hughes cackles. “Ah yes. ‘Mustang’s evil harem’, wasn’t it?”

Havoc sighs. “Mustang’s stable of blondes,” he supplies, which makes Hughes hoot with laughter and has Ed grinning too until he remembers he’s blond.

“That better not include me,” he says, then turns with some desperation of his own to Hawkeye, only mostly joking. “Sir, tell me we’re monogamous.”

Hawkeye sighs like they’re all too stupid to live. “If our fraternization is so obvious that there is contention over which humorous name is more apt for our ‘clique’, General, I suggest you take steps to obfuscate.”

“My dearest Colonel, it is a little bit moot to pretend you aren’t of a faction once you have executed a coup,” Mustang says, all but sniffing like an offended maid - which answers the question of how deeply Jones and Arget have been sucked into this mess, Ed realizes. The poor bastards. They’re never getting out again.

“And that right there, that’s why people think you’ve got a harem,” Hughes says, pointing. “Dearest this, sweetest that. Mop the sugar from your mouth, it’s going everywhere.”

“In that case I can’t imagine why anyone thinks I harbor any affection for you.”

“Because you haven’t roasted us even a little,” Hughes says blithely.

“He did roast Havoc,” Ed points out, Havoc nodding indignantly.

“Medicinally!” Hughes protests. “He hasn’t tried murdering us at all.”

“And in that I have clearly been ruinously remiss,” Mustang says darkly.

“But kitten, you’d miss me so much! Besides, if anything it’s more of a cartel,” Hughes adds, flipping from glee to thoughtfulness in that heel-turn way he has. “Harem would have far more frequent mandatory VD testing.”

“Would you like more frequent VD testing? Because I can make that happen,” Mustang says silkily.
Al, exiting the bathroom at that moment, pauses and looks around the room. “What’d I miss?”

“Hawkeye took Ed as her bride,” Hughes informs him. “I believe you now owe her fifty sheep and a mule.”

“Don’t be silly,” Al says, patting his towel against his wet hair because he refuses to alchemize it dry and resuming his way to the bed. “Brother isn’t worth fifty sheep.”

“Hey!”

“And Colonel Hawkeye may be better off wedding the mule.”

“I don’t have a brother,” Ed informs the room of cackling hyenas, turning away from Al. “I think I had one once but he died of terminal stupidity way long ago. Tragic.”

“Be grateful, boss,” Havoc says, grinning. “According to the talk in Central he’s the only one of us not married to Mustang.”

“Oh, that’s a shame,” Al says, not looking up from putting away his toiletries. “I hear that bride price is nothing to sneeze at.”

Hughes shakes his head, clicking his tongue and tapping thumb and forefinger together. “Two packs of cigs and a gas station lighter,” he says regretfully. “Trust me, I’d know.”

“I’m divorcing you all,” Mustang announces. “Give me your reports. None of you are getting alimony.”

“Oh, darling, don’t be like that,” Hughes croons as the rest of them snicker and start organizing pages. “Not when you know we only married you for your money.”

Ed wanders over to hand off his notebook, open to the relevant pages, and grins when Mustang’s eyelid twitches at the scribble. “Enjoy,” Ed tells him, because he hasn’t bothered decoding shit for Mustang ever since he caught the bastard reading a brick-thick book whose cover said *Actuarial Adventures: The Role of Insurance Policy in the Agricultural Tax Legislative Process* but turned out to be Rienne’s fucking compendium on cryptography, the collected essays and methodologies edition. And Mustang was pencilling notes in it, book-desecrating deviant that he was, so Ed’s been acting for justice on behalf of all books since. As far as he’s concerned, bad handwriting is excellent practice for code enthusiasts.

“Thank you,” Mustang says, taking the journal like it’s a week-old sandwich. “I’d like a verbal report from you as well, Alphonse, when you’re ready.”

Al hms. “Observations on qi I would prefer to communicate in writing,” he says, meeting Mustang’s eyes briefly; that means whatever the fuck he saw during the demo - or hell, when those fucking twins took him - is something he really doesn’t want to take chances on the wrong person overhearing. Like, say, literally any wizard. “For completeness’ sake, of course.”

Mustang nods, eyes just the slightest bit narrowed like he’s on the exact same train of thought. “And the boy?”

“There isn’t much that’s useful at the moment,” Al says, shaking out his towel to hang on the headboard. “Hairy’s healthy. Barring new information, I don’t have any concerns about executing whatever procedures might turn out to be necessary. I’ll write up the full medical case, of course -”

“Whoa whoa, what’s this?” Havoc says, going over to Al and stopping him where he’s about to
pull on his sleep shirt. “Alphonse Elric, did you get a tattoo?”

“Hm? Oh, that’s our Teacher’s alchemy symbol,” Al says, glancing down at his chest. “She told us if we wanted to wear it as adults we’d have to get it tattooed like she did.”

Havoc turns on Ed, delighted. “Really?”

Ed grimaces and pulls down the neck of his shirt enough to show the edge of his own tattoo, because if he doesn’t Havoc will tease him forever and Al will find a way to ‘accidentally’ dissolve his shirt or something. “Really.”

“You should have seen him,” Al says happily. “Teacher made us do each other’s and Ed was hanging onto the chair like - well, you ever see a cat that doesn’t want to go in the cat carrier?”

Ed groans and flops back onto the bed, scooting himself across the mattress with his foot because Al likes to sleep on the right side. “Fuck needles, okay? Stuff going under your skin is fucking gross.”

“Ah, that reminds me - I have a little gift for everyone, should they want it. A souvenir from Xing,” Al says, bending down to his pack to produce a marker and gesturing for Ed to roll over. “Given we’re eating a lot of unfamiliar foods and it was mentioned that the terrorists prefer assassination… this is a blood filter array,” he explains, as Ed feels the cool touch of the marker on his left triceps. “It’s an alkahestric circuit that monitors your bloodstream and filters toxins, if it detects any.”

“Protection against poison,” Hughes’ fascinated voice says, now much closer to see what Al’s doing. “I’ve never seen anything like that before.”

Ed snorts into the mattress. “Xing was deliberately designing its imperial succession process to be a dogfight while we were still eating ass without a spoon over in Amestris. Fuckin’ ‘course they’d have better, whatever, anti-sneak-murder shit than we do.”

“Oh yes. That’s how my family came over,” Hughes agrees. “One of Grandma’s husbands got unlucky with a favored clan at the time and she decided better Amestris than beheaded, hanged, poisoned, drowned or thrown off a bridge. And now here we are! Though Grangran must not have had access to an alkahestrist. She’d have loved something like this.”

“Good to know paranoia runs in the family,” Ed mutters into the scratchy sheets.

“And the sense of humor!” Hughes agrees. “It requires an alkahestrist to activate, yes?”

“Yeah,” Al says, followed by the click of a cap as the marker lifts from Ed’s skin. “It needs to be along a qi meridian, but once it’s linked it only needs to be renewed every two weeks or so. Small pinch,” he says, and before Ed can react to that Al plants a hand on the back of his head and stabs him.

“Al!”

“Sorry,” Al says unapologetically, controlling Ed’s jerk with the hand on his head. “I did warn you.”

“Warn me? Did you just fucking stick me with your -”

“Shush,” Al says, not at all bothered about inflicting his horrible Xingese ‘medicinal’ needles on his poor, helpless, trusting older brother. “It’s for your own good. See, now it’s linked - it needs
access to both bloodstream and qi system to work properly.”

“Would it filter anything?” Hughes says, sounding closer again as presumably he leans in to look at Ed’s latest medical fuckin’ bodymod. “Or rather, is there anything it specifically won’t work on?”

“S’not gonna work against what I’m gonna fuckin’ do to you,” Ed growls at Al, thumping demonstratively at the bed with his metal foot. Al’s got him by the back of the skull in a way that’s somehow making it much harder to lever up than it should be, because the little bastard is way too good at pressure holds these days. “Let me up.”

“No,” Al says calmly, not budging his hand. “Relax. Ling’s probably got one of these tattooed. You can match.”

“I don’t want matching tattoos with Ling!”

“Then you can wash it off in two weeks,” Al says, unperturbed. “Psychoactive substances won’t be affected, and it won’t do anything to prevent, say, food poisoning, as that’s bacterial. If you have a specific allergy, this won’t prevent anaphylactic shock. But things like cyanide, arsenic, strychnine… most of the common killers, it’s specifically designed to catch.” He pauses. “Also, while it’s active you can’t really get drunk.”

“Hm,” Mustang says, now also right behind Ed judging by the voice. “Walk me through the formulae?”

“This, this, this and this are the anchor points that link into your bloodstream, and this is the component formula that specifies base state - it’s always active in order to monitor your blood, which is why it has to be renewed when the energy runs out,” Al says, moving Ed’s arm a bit with his free hand because of course now Ed’s just a convenient medical dummy teaching tool. “This is the filtering circuit, which activates only in case of detection - the first component pulls on your own qi to power that, and neutralizes any toxicity by binding any poison to salts and fat molecules. It’s similar to arrays used to filter the blood of patients with kidney problems - it works off homeostasis in blood composition and just generally removes foreign agents broad-spectrum along with a couple of specifically targeted compounds. Like strychnine, and so forth.”

“What does it do, in terms of physiological effects?” Mustang asks. “Would you notice when it activates, or…?”

“Not necessarily. If the dose of… whatever you’ve ingested is large enough, you’ll probably notice your body reacting and the array heating up. It filters out through your kidneys along with everything else, so expelling the poison is more or less just a trip to the bathroom. Anecdotally, you’ll probably get kind of sweaty. And nauseated.”

Ed finds his eyes sliding shut as Al keeps talking. He might’ve just been stabbed and alkahestried by his traitor snake brother, but he’s horizontal on a soft surface and the past thirty-six hours lasted eight billion years and he was doing alchemy for basically all of them. “There may also be some dizziness or lightheadedness, and if you see the array activate it’s generally a good idea to sit down and get some water and electrolytes in you, if you can. You may want to look into getting this tattooed, General,” Al adds. “I’m told it’s the traditional gift given to those who choose to go into politics.”

“And a sum to pay for a lawyer’s time so you can formally organize your will, so I hear,” Mustang says dryly. “Thank you, Alphonse. I certainly won’t say no if you’d like to apply the temporary version.”
“Of course,” Al says; Ed distantly registers him finally taking his hand off his head. “And everyone else, whoever wants it. Pays to be safer than sorry.”

“Of course,” Mustang echoes, and then some other things, and Ed’s pretty sure he hears the word *strategy* and *dangerous* only it’s hard to think over the sound of the bed eating all his thoughts. Al’s here. Shit’s fine. Sleep drops him like a rock off a cliff.

Chapter End Notes


also i made up all the blood filter medical stuff wholesale, whats a protein lol
Ed wakes up disoriented, disgruntled and eating his own hair, which after serious investigative cogitation he learns is because he went to sleep with it unbound, unbrushed and wet. Preceding events filter in at pretty much the same speed. Rolling over gives him the whole-body stiffness of having slept so deep he didn’t even twitch, which probably means no nightmares, good, but also doesn’t ever seem to actually alleviate exhaustion and leaves him feeling like a steamrolled sponge.

He zombies upright. The room’s empty; wait, no, that’s Arget at the little table in the corner writing in some files. She looks up, sees him, goes red and mumbles. Ed grunts and staggers off to take a piss.

The bathroom mirror shows him a horrifying specter of hair wronged beyond sufferance, but he’s too distracted by his tongue feeling like it’s made of towel to do anything besides gulp clumsily from the sink. Brushing teeth just makes the towel taste like toothpaste. Upon leaving the bathroom he falls forward to try and wake himself up with pushups, and it works, kinda, though mostly by his right arm reminding him it’s not metal and can’t be used to just break his impact however anymore. It’s a good thing he redid the floors in here when he shoved everything around, too, because otherwise bringing his face this close to decomposing wizard parquet would probably give him a respiratory infection.

It also has Arget staring at him with a weirdly intense look on her face when he gets back up, and it occurs that there should be other people around here somewhere. Ed spits some hair out of his mouth. “Where’s’vrybody?”

“Uh. Downstairs? I’m - the General said nobody’s to go anywhere alone, so - ”

“‘Kay,” Ed agrees, heading for one of the doors. Arget scrambles up her papers and trots to catch up.

Nobody’s in the halls, but as they hit the ground floor it’s obvious people are in the kitchen. Ed stumbles in and sees Mustang has a steaming paper cup in front of him, which conveniently decides his trajectory across the room.

One sip in, though, has him jerking the cup away from his face. “Fuck is this?”


“Yessir.”

Ed must have got the wrong cup. “Where’s yours?”

“That is mine.”

“Like fuck,” Ed says, searching the table. There’s a bunch more paper cups in the middle and Hawkeye and Hughes both have one but everything is unmarked and theirs is definitely both tea. “I haven’t had coffee in three fucking days, bastard, cough it up.”

Mustang sighs, takes another cup from the center and beckons for Ed to return his. Ed considers
not giving it - this weak catpiss dishwater is better than nothing and also, revenge - but it looks like
bastard might actually achieve something drinkable if left to his own devices, so he hands it over.
Then he looks around for a chair, but everything is on the other side of the table.

He sits down on the floor instead, sticking out his metal leg. Alchemy crackles quietly somewhere
up over his head. The weird carved table leg is cold hardwood, at least, and a decent place to rest
his forehead. He doesn’t have a headache exactly but he feels dumb and his eyes don’t want to be
open, which is annoying as shit. He compromises by squinting.

A hand with a thick, mottled stab scar in the middle appears in front of his face, wrapped around a
paper cup that smells much more familiar. “Put your gloves back on, bastard,” Ed mumbles,
grabbing the cup with both hands and inhaling deep; going unarmed around here is just stupid.

The other hand appears in front of him, pointedly waving in an ignition glove. Ed grunts and gets
chugging. The familiar spike of flavor rouses his tastebuds, collides with the residual tang of
toothpaste and slices down his throat; he can feel the burn hit his bloodstream and start to do some
good.

It’s still not quite right, though. Ed squints more and sniffs the empty cup. “This is still off.”

“No lemon juice.”

“Oh.” Ed blinks. “Why am I on the floor?”

“Reasons wholly your own, I suspect.”

Ed makes a face at the corner of table Mustang’s voice is coming from and levers himself up.
“Times’it?”

“Half to seven.”

Ed squints at the watery sunlight coming through the kitchen window. It feels much later than that,
but then, when they’d crossed over the divide it had gone from noon to night in a blink, so
everybody’s internal clock is probably still set to Amestris time. Then he looks around. “Where’s
Al?”

“Out with Havoc and Sergeant Jones,” Mustang says. “He found his breakfast preferences did not
match the available options and decided to find a grocery.”

Ed eyeballs Mustang mistrustfully. Al’s spent the past year wandering up and down every
backwater Xing could offer and can handle himself, and Havoc’s good backup, but fuckin’ wizard
world has already proven itself to be the kind of fuckparty nobody should underestimate. Though
the city out there is just normal people, not wizard cultists. “He got local money?”

“Yes. They’ll be back within the hour.”

“They aren’t going far,” Hawkeye says. “Five block radius.” She’s out of uniform - black
turtleneck, light grey jacket. Still work clothes. Mustang too, Ed realizes: the white buttondown is
the same as ever but the pants are black and aren’t tucked into his uniform boots. Hughes, of
course, looks like he always does in civvies, namely like he owns a gambling den fronting as the
kind of jewelry store with big WE BUY GOLD!! signs and cartoons of crudely drawn diamonds in
the windows.

“You guys went out too,” Ed realizes, looking at the collection of paper cups and seeing there’s
some little paper bags there too, amongst Hughes’ files and Mustang with Ed’s notebook and their
makeshift sheaf of reports. “Food?”

Hawkeye’s nose wrinkles very slightly, though she reaches over and hands one of the bags to Ed anyway. “The bakery we found only had desserts.”

Ed shakes the bag into his palm, a lumpy bready brown thing falling out; he doesn’t mind sweets for breakfast, even if it’s not really anyone’s first choice, and his nose reports *sugar* and *apples* which are both unobjectionable if definitely not enough to start a day on.

There is *way* more sugar than apples in this. “Mind the aftertaste,” Hughes says, deliberately after Ed’s already taken a bite. Ed pulls a face but finishes it, and takes a second one too, though Hughes wasn’t kidding about the aftertaste: gluey, chemical, weirdly metallic. “Is this *all* they had?”

“Nothing else was open nearby,” Hawkeye says. “Alphonse volunteered to stock us up on a few essentials, as we don’t know how long we’ll be dependent on civilian accommodation.”

“He *really* wasn’t a fan of that dinner,” Hughes observes.

Ed grimaces. After six years of not tasting, smelling or experiencing hunger, Al can get downright picky about food. Which he has a right to be! But Ed still can’t always identify what’s on the no-go list at any given time, and he hadn’t thought the wizard food they’ve had so far had been all that bad. He’ll have to pay closer attention, because for some fucking reason trying to talk to Al about this stuff just gets him more *it’s fines* and the occasional hand pushing him off via his face.

Winry-voice in his head likes to say a lot of things about how he needs to chill out and stop smothering Al and that every aspect of Al’s health and life and death aren’t Ed’s responsibility, but Ed’s generally much louder Ed-voice says that they pretty empirically are, actually. It wasn’t anybody else who vaporized Al’s body. Wasn’t anybody else who brought him back, either.

And he *should* know what Al can’t eat. What the fuck kind of brother would he be if he didn’t? “I got fed breakfast yesterday, I *know* they have meat and eggs and potatoes.” Ed frowns around the kitchen. “Where the fuck are the wizards?”

Mustang tilts his head in the vague direction of the stairs. “Not up yet.”

“What, really?” Ed squints out the window to check daylight again - then the rest of what Mustang said before clicks and he whirls, pointing a finger. “*Lemon juice!*”

Mustang sighs like a man about to plead guilty to manslaughter. “Yes.”

Mustang’s coffee, Ed learned from Kendra and Armstrong, was some kinda famous among State Alchemists and whatever unlucky fucks got deployed with him close enough to suffer his canteen preferences. Naturally Ed had to try it, and after the initial am-I-having-a-stroke sip he reluctantly understood the hype. That shit could focus a corpse into doing calculus. Recreating it for himself, though, turned out to be a challenge, because Mustang guards his ingredients and the array to combine them more jealously than a toddler hoarding lollipops and knowing the chemical composition of a food doesn’t tell you what’s actually *in* there.

“*Lemon juice,*” Ed hisses again, grimly triumphant. He’s gonna get the full list sooner or later and then he’s gonna make himself *coffee cake.* And then probably astral project his metabolism into a non-planar geometry, but that’s a problem for future Ed and honestly what else are you supposed to do for your birthday when four separate people with varying levels of authority have banned you from recreational drugs.

“Among other things,” Mustang says, because being a cryptic asshole gets him hard and he lives to
make Ed want to upend a cutlery drawer over his head. “The pantry here is somewhat... lacking. And I suspect that what they call  coffee here comes from a different variety of plant.”

“Lemon juice,” Arget echoes faintly, from where she’s lurking in the corner with her papers in her arms like a shield between her and the rest of their idiocy.

Hawkeye shakes her head. “Never try an alchemist’s coffee.”

“Not if you value your stomach lining,” Hughes agrees, stirring his own tea with a spoon. “I’m just waiting for the day we actually catch him pouring battery acid in there.”

“Alex takes his with raw egg in it,” Mustang says mildly.

“Which I’m not sure is a result of his personality or a contributing factor to it,” Hughes says. “Kind of a chicken or the egg situation there, honestly. Haha.”

“It’s probably been passed down the Armstrong family line for generations,” Ed mutters, looking around. Now that he’s gotten his fix he wants an actual drink, and the weird apple thing aftertaste really is getting stronger by the minute. “Got any extra tea?”

Mustang waves further into the kitchen, where a battered kettle is steaming on the stovetop. “That’s not what y’all’re drinking,” Ed says, but he’s already heading over to it. “Is there jam?”

A cupboard on his left swings open. Ed nearly hurls the kettle at it, because there’s nobody there and it takes him a second to remember the fucking house likes to swing its doors at him. “Fucking… fuck, fucker,” Ed mutters at it, which won’t win any eloquence awards or stop Hughes from snickering but is the only thing he’s got right now that isn’t transmuting a pickaxe and remodeling this kitchen again, this time the hard way. And the open cabinet turns out to have a bunch of jars in it, which includes honey and three kinds of jam.

Under other circumstances he'd probably try all of them, but the metallic apple syrup stuff is still pretty much coating his mouth so he sticks only a spoon of raspberry in his tea. He also pauses, idea forming, and says to the kitchen, “Ham and cheese?”

Not a shiver. “What, was that all of it?” Ed says, not sure what the hell a yes or no would even look like. “Did I eat it all yesterday? Is that it?”

“Should we be concerned that the house is feeding Ed?” Hughes says. “Or that he’s talking to it?”

“It just showed me where the jam is,” Ed dismisses. “And I found the ham and cheese on my own. Though it was in the cellar. Maybe there’s more down there, I didn’t really explore much… hm.”

“Why don’t we wait for Al instead of eating more wizard cellar food of unknown origin,” Hughes says in his Elysia, You’re Too Old To Put Things In Your Mouth voice, then immediately winces. “Sorry. Out of office, just came out.”

Ed scowls but waves it off, because he knows Hughes never does the Dad voice on purpose, if only because it makes Ed mean. He knows the guy can’t help it sometimes: Hughes has so much dedicated parenting going on that it occasionally hits critical mass and sloshes over anyone in reach. He always recognizes when he crosses the line, at least, and Mustang and Hawkeye politely investigate their drinks and pretend nothing happened like the champions of repression they are.

Ed has to feel kinda bad for Arget, though, who’s quietly taken the very corner chair furthest from all of them and is trying very hard not to exist too loud lest their freakishness notice and infect her. It’s a weird fucking op all around. While Ed’s pretty used to shacking up wherever and foraging for
breakfast in random shitholes in Fucknut, Nowhere, the rest of them are like lizards adapted to the Central Command ecosystem. Mustang and Hughes and Hawkeye have been their intense little triad of schemes for so long that Ed has literally seen all three of them communicate by blinking before, and they definitely aren’t fazed by seeing each other’s boxers in a workplace setting, but here they’re not just three soldiers, they’re General Sadism and his two right hands and they’ve gotta at least fake military professionalism for Jones and Arget. Who have to fake professionalism right back. It’s times like these that Ed’s pretty damn glad he has no professionalism to speak of, genuine or otherwise.

Mustang sets his coffee down again, and Ed’s eye catching on the faint oilslick sheen on the surface of his cup makes him thunk his tea down on the table and lean in, brain back on what really matters. “Hey. Did you transmute fucking argon? Into neon? You total asshole?”

Mustang gives him a warning look and flicks his gaze towards the stairs again in a pretty obvious don’t fucking say anything exploitable around the wizards; Ed waves it away impatiently and holds up two fists. “Diode. Gas.” He knocks them together sideways, glaring at Mustang over his knuckles. “One array?”

Mustang shrugs, turning his cup idly in his ungloved hand like it’s totally beneath him to even acknowledge that he’d worked out a circle that transmuted a noble gas - annoying as shit, stable elements don’t want to change - and then probably somehow caught the discharge as electrical potential, unbalanced it and directed it along the concentrated gas path, because as hard as that’d be it’d still be easier than incorporating a second stage for independent electrical current generation into the gas-shaping array. Which probably means that is what he did, the brickhead overachieving bastard. Seeing Hughes look questioningly between him and Ed’s glare, Mustang rolls his eyes slightly and zigzags one finger through the air in front of him, mimicking the writing gestures he used yesterday.

“What, that?” Hughes laughs, sitting back. “He came up with that for Elysia. Cheered her up drawing flowers in the air when we were in the hospital. Made it so she could wave her hands through it and it’d move, isn’t that something?”

Mustang’s got his face back in his cup now, drinking deep and refusing to look at anyone. Hughes leers affectionately at him from across the table. “Finally got some good out of you freaks. Knew we’d find a use for alchemists in the end.”

Okay, Ed can see that one, because if he had to sit vigil in a hospital for Al or Winry in a coma - week after week, nothing he could do - he would also be coping via codging together entirely incompatible array sets into horrible and largely pointless frankencircles. “It’s sure something,” Ed grumbles, vaguely wanting to steal Mustang’s coffee again. If he wants more he can just go ahead and make some again, with his dumb secret array and his dumb secret ingredients. “It’s a three layer cake of bullshit and he’s feeding it to us all on a bullshit plate with a bullshit spoon.”

“Eat up,” Mustang says blandly, because he’s an asshole.

There’s the sound of the front door opening, and then Al’s voice is in the hall, getting closer. “- with some peaches, basil, vinegar… though I don’t know about the available spices here. Oh, and yogurt, which’ll make brother throw a fit. So I suppose we’ll have to make do. Hey everyone!”

Al enters the kitchen carrying a bunch of stretchy-looking white bags and beams at them, Jones similarly laden down behind him. Havoc is at the rear, and if that’s not an entire wrapped sheep carcass slung over his shoulders Ed’ll eat his steel kneecap. “Look what we found!” Al says happily, setting the crinkly white sacks down on the kitchen counter as Ed and Hawkeye automatically get up to help him. “They have all sorts of food available here.”
“Is that an entire dead animal,” Mustang says, like being presented with fresh mutton is a deep misfortune instead of a fucking miracle.

“Yep,” Havoc says, like he knows his CO’s an inscrutable freak. “Found a butcher’s on our way to the grocery. I’d say we got a good price but who knows, with their money.”

Mustang does not look impressed by this conjunction of divine blessing and exemplary urban foraging skills. “Any particular reason why you got… this… instead of, say, pre-sliced bacon?”

“We figured that these people are being so nice, hosting us and feeding us, it’s only polite we return the favor,” Al says, virtuous as a schoolboy reciting the Amestrian national constitution: “Barbecue’s an easy way to feed a crowd, and we can make a firepit in the backyard. Reckon we can do chopped vegetables and pilaf for the side,” he adds to Havoc. “Don’t think we’ll have the time for any flatbread.”

Al’s inner gourmet is definitely out in full force here: his physical therapy got supplemented pretty thoroughly by the months they spent in Dublith, where Teacher made them butcher nearly every damn thing Mason brought in and indulged Al’s feverish culinary experiments by making the two of them responsible for all mealtimes. Ed looks over what they’re taking out of the sacks: rice, onions, tomatoes, what looks like a can of condensed milk, butter, salt... “What, you taking over all their cooking from the wizard lady?”

Al pauses, smiles very deliberately and says, “There was no seasoning in that dish whatsoever.”

“It wasn’t that bad,” Ed mutters, but not very loud. Al gets downright dictatorial when he’s like this. Anyone who thinks Al isn’t as much of a bulldozer as Ed has never seen him with a 2AM craving for chili toffee sticks.

“No surprises outside?” Hughes asks Al as Havoc sets the carcass on one of the counters.

“Nope, all good. No translation problems, nobody really looked at us weird. Here’s the local money - number symbols are the same as ours, isn’t that neat? And they’re in base ten too, though the bills go five, ten, twenty, fifty.” Al spreads out a stack of multicolored bills on the table, tapping each corresponding amount; they’re different sizes, too, in teal and pink and orange, which is just weird. “It’s a cotton-paper mix, but luckily the ratio skews mostly paper so we used some old newspaper and some thread from Havoc’s socks.”

Hawkeye nods gravely. “Your sacrifice is noted, Captain.”

Havoc nods back. “We all do our part, sir.”

Mustang doesn’t look as impressed by this ingenuity, though honestly when taking report his face tends to just get stuck like that. “And they accepted Havoc’s sock money?”

“Oh yes, no problems.” Al pauses. “I feel a little bad counterfeiting currency, but, well, I suppose here they aren’t counterfeits, being compositionally identical.”

“And you changed the serial numbers,” Havoc adds.

“Right, yes - the Captain caught that before we started using them,” Al says, nodding thanks at Havoc.

“I don’t think we have to worry about destabilizing the local economy,” Mustang says, meaning he doesn’t care. “Transport?”
“Well, we couldn’t read any signs, but we got to talking to the butcher and he said most people get around by car and train,” Havoc says. “They also have parking garages that you can just walk into. Dunno if engines work about the same here, but from what we saw looking through some windows everything seems to have the right number of pedals and things. So that’s nice. And if we get a quiet minute to pop a hood I can see about whether they’ll start without keys.”

Mustang gestures acknowledgement. “Very well done, both of you. Can we get the animal corpse out of the kitchen before our hosts come down and take issue with a dead pig in their food preparation area?”

“It’s a sheep,” Ed, Al and Havoc say simultaneously.

Mustang sighs like some kind of vegetarian. Ed grins. “Give it here, there’s a cellar. Anything else that needs to stay cold, bring it over.”

Al follows him down, opening the cellar door so he can maneuver the carcass through. “I bought you garlic and toast,” he tells Ed. “Well, garlic and bread. But you can toast it. I think.”

“What would they do to bread that wouldn’t let us toast it?” Ed says, hefting the carcass as he looks around; none of the shelves are big enough for it, but he spots a convenient set of meat hooks in the corner. They don’t look anything close to sterile, but the carcass is wrapped in a way that’s got a handy thick loop binding the hind legs that lets him hang it without puncturing the paper. “We better be able to toast it. I am not kidding when I say access to real carbs will be the only thing keeping me from going batshit today.”

“I know,” Al says soothingly, because he does know. “Come on. We’ll have some nice toast, and just think! No matter what happens today we’ll have barbecue for dinner.”

“I love you,” Ed tells him sincerely.

Al grins. “I know.”

The bread is thick dark rye - Al knows what Ed likes; Ed should know what Al doesn’t like - and toasts fine, so nobody has to die and everybody can eat an actual human breakfast. Al sticks a comb in Ed’s hand before he can start peeling garlic, but that works out okay because everybody else claims the middle bread slices and leaves the ends, which is the best parts as far as Ed’s concerned.

Day four in wizard world: okay, things could be worse.

“Barring any exciting new developments,” Mustang says when they’re all settled around the table and Ed’s scrubbing garlic into his toast, “today we’re still gathering information. Havoc, you and Colonel Hawkeye and I need to see the locations they keep promising us. Hughes - Malfoy. You two,” he says to Ed and Al, picking up Ed’s notebook, opening it and handing it back to him magic-disruption theorizing page first. “I don’t like this,” he declares. “Handle it.”

“Shit, I don’t like it,” Ed says, taking the notebook, skimming through the fevered mishmash of equations he’d spit up yesterday and then passing it to Al. “Original plan stands, though. If there’s no problem, there’s no problem.”

“Timeline?” Mustang says.

“No fuckin’ clue. By end of today we’ll know if it’s possible, though.”

Mustang’s face says that’s good enough for now, so Ed turns to Al and his study of Ed’s scribbles.
“This is only gonna matter if we can’t execute on the cancellation array,” he says, pulling his hair back over his shoulder as he leans in so it doesn’t cover the pages. “But just in case it can interfere with what’s essentially an absorption field, I wanna know how it’ll -”

He cuts off, because Psycho’s just wandered into the kitchen, looking annoyingly awake and weirdly pleased to see them. “Hey, good morning,” he tells them. Ed sees Hairy and Smartypants lurking behind him in the doorway, looking much more familiarly wary. “Early risers?”

Chapter End Notes

if jk rowling can have wizards shit their pants i get to have barbecue
Chapter 59

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s times like these that Mustang earns his keep, smiling at Psycho and taking on the social interaction that nobody else wants to deal with. “Good morning,” he says. “We’ve taken over the kitchen a bit. I hope you don’t mind.”


Ed wonders what the hell happened overnight to give him the fucking personality transplant. Al looks up, closes Ed’s notebook and sets it aside, smiling the Nice Elric smile at them. “Mr. Black.”

“Call me serious,” Psycho says expansively. “Everyone else does.” He looks around at Hawkeye closing her sandwich and Havoc and Hughes efficiently dividing the butter and gets real interested all of a sudden. “You went outside?”

“Groceries,” Mustang says, gesturing slightly. “With this many of us, eating every meal out of your pocket - we wanted to make sure we wouldn’t be straining your resources. Help yourselves.”

“That’s,” Smartypants says, stops herself and starts again. “Isn’t going outside - dangerous?”

For you, sure, Ed doesn’t say, mostly because his mouth is full of tea. Like, okay, yeah, it was a risk given lord windmill may or may not have seen all their faces thanks to Hairy Broadcast Nonstop Power Hour, but to actually find them he’d have to be out in the streets of the city picking them out of a crowd.

“We didn’t go far,” Al tells her, convincingly reassuring. “The stores are very well-stocked here. Oh! And - brother, look what we found in the grocery!”

Al bends down and rummages in one of the few crinkly sacks left in the kitchen, extracting a rectangular pink box practically as long as his forearm and excitedly passing it to Ed. “Look! It’s Winry!”

The front of the box is clear, plasticky, and displays what’s got to be some kind of doll: it’s a woman, with long stiff arms and legs, wearing a crudely stitched but recognizable mechanic’s coverall. She’s also got pink sandals, a big white smile, big blue eyes and long straight blonde hair.

“Holy fuck,” Ed says, staring. “It is Winry.”

“She’s even got a little wrench!” Al says, pointing. “I can’t wait to give this to her. We’re going to win at souvenirs forever.”

“What the fuck,” Ed says blankly, unable to take his eyes off the doll. If there’d been a headscarf he would’ve tipped over from weirded and incredulous to seriously creeped out. “Like… that’s really Winry. What the fuck.”

“Whoa,” Hughes says as the rest of them crane to take a look. “What are the odds of that.”
“Is that a Barby?” Smartypants says, sounding almost as weirded out as Ed is.

“Who’s Winry?” Psycho asks, leaning around her to look.

Al glances up at them. “Our best friend,” he says. “What’s a Barby?”

“The doll,” Hairy says, giving them a dubious look. “That’s what she’s called. Or… the brand. I guess.”

Hughes holds up a finger, digs out his wallet and pulls out the stack of photos he keeps in there, pulling one unerringly from the rest. “That’s Miss Rockbell,” he says, putting it on the table. “The resemblance is amazing, honestly.”

Ed didn’t know Hughes kept a picture of Winry in his wallet, but when he sees which one it is he relaxes; Ed’s in this one as well, the two of them straddling his bike in the Hughes’ driveway, Elysia sitting on the handlebars and all of them grinning squintily in the summer sun. “Oh, from when you were dating,” Al says to Ed, leaning over his shoulder to also get a look. “That was a fun weekend.”

“Merlin,” Psycho says, looking from the photo to Ed. “You bagged that?”

Ed narrows his eyes. This better be the translation rock wigging itself again. “Bagged?” he repeats. “That?”

“I mean. I’m just saying,” Psycho says in a backtracking kind of voice, seeming to recognize Ed would love an excuse to bounce his forehead off the table a couple of times using his prison haircut. “She seems like a very impressive young lady. Anyone would have to work hard for her attention.”

“No Ed,” Al says mildly. “He gets it mostly by accident.”

Ed snorts, settling a bit and putting the weird Winry-Barby box on the table. “And by getting my limbs ripped off.”

“Well, you didn’t do that on purpose.”

“Yeah, but you can’t really call that one an accident, either.”

“It wasn’t getting them ripped off, it was what you did about it after,” Al says.

Which is skirting dangerously close to making Ed have a feeling. “Paninya,” he retorts, more in self defense than anything.

“You and Paninya are way more alike than you think.”

“Oh believe me, I fucking know,” Ed mutters, because multiple very sweaty weekends in Rush Valley had proved that. Paninya’s not usually down for dick, but she’s pretty much always down for Winry, and if Winry happened to be a package deal then Paninya wasn’t above buy one get Ed free and Win definitely wasn’t either. Ed didn’t know it was possible to have waking sex nightmares until he had two automail freaks giggling naked above him.

“Gross,” Al tells him primly, because Ed made the mistake of telling Al after the first time Win and Paninya had ambushed him. Ed sticks his tongue out at him.

“She… likes you because you got your limbs ripped off?” Psycho says perplexedly, reminding Ed
that there’s three wizards staring in on this like they’re a ticketed audience.

He can’t let himself be lured into a false sense of security by Al’s presence and the smell of garlic toast. Ed rolls his eyes. “Yeah, she’s real into amputees, got a whole thing about it.”

Though it occurs that Psycho hadn’t been in the backyard yesterday when everybody had had such a fuckin’ revelation about Ed’s automail. He sighs and bounces his left heel under the table, the metal striking loudly against the kitchen tile. “I got a metal leg. She builds automail - that’s the kinda prosthesis, it’s osseointegrated and connected with nerve relays.” He pushes the photo back towards Hughes so he can put it away. “She’s my mechanic.”

“Wow,” Psycho says dutifully, clearly not caring very much about this extremely generous explanation. His eyes track the photo as Hughes takes it back for his wallet, then catches Ed deadeyeing him and hurriedly pastes a smile on. “The bike - that’s yours, is it?”

Ed watches him without softening his stare, because every other time he took issue with some dumbfuck thing of Psycho’s the guy ramped up instead of deescalating. “What about it?”

“Nothing. Nice bike, is all,” Psycho says, still weirdly conciliatory. “Makes me miss mine. Hagrid still got it?”

This is to Hairy, who also looks like he doesn’t know how to answer this. “Er,” he says. “Maybe. I haven’t seen it.”

“Shame. Think we could get it back from him?” Psycho says, a little wistful. “Haven’t flown in ages. Perfect time of year for it too - look at that, we’ve been getting sun for weeks. Bike’s as bad as broom if you’re caught in a thunderstorm a thousand feet in the air, and worse chance of being struck by lightning.”

Ed stares. “Your bike flies?”

“No,” say Al, Mustang and Hughes simultaneously.

“Yeah,” Psycho says, looking pretty smug about it. “Charmed it myself. It’s not quite up to broom speeds, not with what they’ve got now, but it’s got the same lift as a clean sweep and frankly a more comfortable seat.”

Why a bike that flies? Wouldn’t a car make more sense, with a roof and doors and things? Whatever, nothing wizards do make sense, there’s more important concerns. “The bike flies,” Ed repeats steadily, switching his stare to Hawkeye. She didn’t say no.

“Anyway,” Al says a little too loudly, “eat up, brother, we have research to do -”

There’s a pop, and a folded newspaper plops down out of nowhere in front of Psycho, by all appearances unaccompanied. “You can teleport objects!” Ed snaps on reflex, sitting bolt upright as Smartypants practically snatches it away. Then he remembers Al is right here with all of his qi-sensing, opens his mouth, remembers the wizards are also right here and closes his mouth.

He ends up just staring mutely at Al with full crazy eyes, but Al’s not Al for nothing. “Think fluid dynamics,” he tells Ed, sketching a curving shape with both hands in the air. “Toroidal flow. It inverts in place, don’t ask me the mechanism, and produces wormholes.”


Al nods, just as grimly determined, and taps the cover of Ed’s notebook reassuringly. “We’re going
Ed stuffs some toast in his mouth and nods too instead of yelling. Given how yesterday went he’s probably gonna shout himself hoarse by lunchtime, so he might as well conserve his yelling where he can. Wormholes, flying fucking bikes - and if Al thinks he can’t tell when he’s being distracted he’s gonna learn real quick. He’s just lucky that the distractions here are actual problems, and that Ed knows how to prioritize.

“Worm holes?” Psycho says bemusedly.

“Just some theories we’re working on,” Al says, polite-jargon voice dialed to the max. “We like figuring out how to apply mathematical descriptors to various energy-interactive phenomena. It’s kind of a hobby of ours. Mapping the energy’s topology, that sort of thing.”

“Ah,” Psycho says, looking appropriately bored by this. “That’s interesting.”

Smartypants, meanwhile, has the newspaper practically pressed to her nose. “Anything good?” Hughes asks her, which again reminds Ed that they can’t fucking read shit for themselves here. Can he teach himself their Inglish in a couple days? It can’t be that hard, can it?

Luckily Hughes has apparently already managed to train the kids from yesterday, because Smartypants starts talking as her eyes skim the page. “Mostly… who’s going to be replacing dumbell door as chief Wizengamot. They still haven’t appointed a new mug Wump either.” Her eyes flicker further down, and her expression darkens. “And they’re calling Hairy a liar again.”

“Isn’t he supposed to be missing?” Hughes inquires, tone light in a way that probably means he can’t wait to find out how the wizards have weaponized their ineptitude and blasted down through the absolute rock bottom of his expectations this time.

“He is,” Smartypants says, flipping the bottom half of the paper towards everyone, showing a fairly big picture of Hairy giving the camera a good glower. Occasionally it blinks. Ed presumes the big bold headline under the magic photo says HAVE YOU SEEN THIS TEEN!!!! or whatever. “But it just says there was an unauthorized use of underage magic at his residence and that he hasn’t been able to be located by the authorities. It doesn’t even say there were dementers,” she says acidly. “It just says to come forward if there’s any information and then goes on to repeat the same trash about how, well, it’s only to be expected, isn’t it.”

“This is front page news?” Ed says skeptically, then remembers. “Oh, right. He’s like famous or whatever.”

“Yeah, famous as anything,” Hairy says tartly, glaring. “Can’t go five minutes without someone asking to see my scar and the day my parents got murdered is a national holiday.”

“Yikes,” Ed say, not entirely without sympathy. “Good thing you’ve officially disappeared then.”

“Oh yeah, I’m having the time of my life here,” Hairy says with impressive sarcasm. “Chased by dementers, nobody wants to tell me what’s going on, and everyone believes I’m a lying Nutter who’s making it all up for attention. Going missing will solve all these problems.”

Ed rolls his eyes. “Who cares what idiots believe? The important thing is you’re not dead yet.”

“It’s not just idiots,” Psycho says, still in his weird mediating tone. “The daily profit’s read by almost every wizard ing family in Britain. It’s a bit of a problem when the kindest thing they start calling you is delinquent.”
Ed tries not to roll his eyes again as he goes back to his tea. “The magic wizard news thinks you’re a mad bad kid. Yeah, I can see how that’s a problem.”

It’s Smartypants’ turn to level a glare at Ed. “How would you like it if the news called you a delusional liar?”

Ed, halfway through a sip of tea, snorts so much he actually chokes into his cup. He’s not the only one. “What haven’t they called me,” he coughs, thumping his chest a bit to clear the pipes. “Shit, you wanna talk press problems? Crazy liar is nothing. Crazy liar’s a love bite when it comes to journalists, they’re going easy on you.”

“Going easy,” Psycho repeats with some of his bite back, though Hairy next to him looks fully ready to throw his fork.

“Ah,” Al says, a little bit strained from holding in the screaming laughter. “Colonel Hughes, how many children does brother have? According to the papers.”

“Oh, anywhere between eight and twelve,” Hughes says, clearing up his snickers just enough to put his Very Serious Officer face on. “And as for brides left at the altar, grooms jilted, secret marriages denied - where are we now, Ed? Twenty-six? Twenty-seven?”

“We got a special bin for his mail,” Havoc puts in, gesturing with his fork. “All the alchemists do, but the boss’s is twice the size and had to be made of metal after some farmer mailed him a four gallon keg of moonshine that cracked in transit and soaked everything in nearly hundred proof real flammable booze.”

“The secretaries have a wall of fame,” Mustang says lazily, because the bastard knows it makes Ed growl. All mail to State Alchemists goes through Security - their home addresses are classified for a reason - but Ed’s the only one that Mustang’s given the mail guys free rein to openly razz over. “I think so far the illustrated love letter that also claims to be from his long lost cousin is currently the department favorite.”

“We have scorecards,” Hughes informs a horrified and vaguely disgusted Hairy as Ed scrubs the garlic with increasing violence against his toast. “There are only so many times you can review claims that the Fullmetal Alchemist stole someone’s car and slept with their spouse before you start playing bingo.”

“The Fullmetal Alchemist is two meters tall, rides around in full plate armor and has an arm that turns into a flamethrower,” Jones says very seriously.

“The Fullmetal Alchemist is secretly a woman,” Havoc says, grinning.

“The Fullmetal Alchemist is secretly three women,” Hughes corrects, “named Mina, Tina and Serena, all taking turns wearing the red coat of power and the blond wig of justice to let them be in several places at once, and he - sorry, she - once rode a bear into a bank vault during an armed robbery -“

“Okay, I didn’t ride it,” Ed says exasperatedly, thunking his garlic down. “I was chasing it. Some two-bit chimerist wannabe was keeping it in his backyard and turned it loose when I came knocking, and the damn thing went skipping off right down the fuckin’ street and into the open doors of - you know what, you can read the fuckin’ report yourselves. My point is, people are gonna make shit up, okay? All the time. You can’t stop ‘em, you can’t out-yell ‘em -”

“Believe me, he’s tried,” Al murmurs.
“- and reporters are like cockroaches, they’re unsquashable. You tell one to shut his mouth about you, five more crawl outta the woodwork -”

Mustang’s staring at the ceiling. “Fullmetal. Stop threatening reporters.”

“I don’t anymore, I just said so, don’t you listen? It’s not worth it, they fuckin’ love that shit. Alleman fucking Herdman from the Times fucking begged me to punch him last month, and I mean literally, he said please and everything and looked way too excited about it -”

Mustang’s pinching his nose with his eyes shut now. “Did you?”

“No! Now stop interrupting, I’m trying to explain something here. You, you’re famous too right? Fuckin’ serial killer and all?”

Psycho might’ve been all sour about it yesterday, but now he looks almost as into things as Alleman fucking Herdman had been. “Mass murderer, but yeah,” he agrees, watching Ed like he’s about to solve P=NP before his very eyes.

“And they’re blaming all sorts of other crimes on you, because nobody knows where you are? You’re, whatever, under everyone’s bed?”

“Yeah?”

“See, that? That’s great,” Ed informs Hairy, pointing at Psycho with his toast. “That’s exactly what you need to do. In fact he should be popping up himself in a couple places - don’t tell me you can’t, you fucks have got teleporting. And you can drink the, whatever, magic juice shit that makes you look like other people - fuck’s sake, this is easy for you. You get some buddies, you show up all over the place with your own Mina, Tina and Serena, and you make some fucking noise. Have people reporting fake sightings of you so much that whenever the cops get a real report they just go ‘oh, not another one’ and toss it in the fucking bin. And for you -” Ed jabs the toast at Hairy - “Same fuckin’ principle. You want it not to matter what gets written about you in the paper? You do enough crazy shit, people won’t know what’s true. If they think the news just spits out propaganda and whackadoo alien abduction bullshit, then when they do call you a crazy liar, people just won’t care. Or they’ll think the exact opposite is true.”

Psycho is staring at Ed with his mouth slightly open and a look disturbing similar to the ones Arget gets on his face. “You’re saying I should go outside more,” he says hazily. “And be seen. On purpose.”

“Duh. If people are already reporting fake sightings of you, you might as well play into it if you’re not just gonna go completely off the grid.” Ed sits back, done waving his toast. “Fuck up their intel, tie up their resources. If they can’t trust the reports they’re getting, they’re not gonna take the situation seriously.”

“Basic information theory,” Hughes agrees, leaned in attentively with his hands clasped on the table in front of him. “If you can’t hide the signal, bury it in noise.”

Smartypants is looking between Ed and Hughes like she can’t decide whether to take notes or shake them like a couple of coconut trees until more information falls out. “How do you make a newspaper report the truth?” she says. “Not sure even you can put a lid on all of that.”
Hughes shrugs. “You can definitely become head of the censorship office. That takes time, of course.”

“We don’t want to censor things,” Hairy says sharply. “People should know the truth.”

“That, what, evil terrorist guy came back from the dead?” Ed says. “I don’t wanna be the one to tell you this, but resurrection is a big fuckin’ pill to swallow even when you’re talking to the guys who think reality is a simulation controlled by dolphins. You’re better off telling people the terrorists have just reformed and started acting again under a new leader.”

“Then… why hasn’t the ministry done that,” Psycho says, brows meeting. “I mean - hell, they could say I’m leading them, it’d work with their whole story. They wouldn’t have to admit you know who returned.”

As earthshattering as it clearly is for Psycho to be groping his way through basic politics, Smartypants and Hairy don’t look like they’re seeing the same light. “People should know Voldemort has returned,” Smartypants says, a mulish tilt to her mouth. “He’s one of the most powerful wizards Europe. If the Aurors are expecting only death eaters, they won’t be prepared for him. People will die.”

Hughes sighs. “I doubt you can count on the newspaper for that.”

“Why not?” Hairy says, because if Smartypants is mulish he’s the whole pen of donkeys with a fence-stuck ram on top.

“State propaganda lies, buddy,” Ed tells him, figuring he’d better use small words for this life lesson. “That’s what it’s for. Fuck’s sake, you only have one newspaper - that’s a big fucking sign telling you the government’s working damn hard to make sure y’all only know what they want you to know. The state is not your friend, okay? That’s true even when it’s not as glaringly compromised as yours obviously is.”

Mustang puts a hand on Ed’s elbow in the specific stop talking way, which makes Ed break off to scowl at him. His rant on power always benefiting the few over the many isn’t classified, it’d practically be self-help for these dingdings, but a second later Breakfast Lady pushes into the kitchen and stops short, looking amazed to find all of them in here. “Oh! Good morning, all - you’ve - made breakfast?”

“You worked so hard over dinner yesterday, we wanted to give you a break,” Mustang says graciously, standing to guide her over to their impromptu sandwich assembly line. “I’m sure it’s simpler than you’re used to, but please, help yourself. There’s tea, toast, coffee…”

“Oh, well - it’s no trouble, you’re our guests…”

Ed tunes out the butter-up and focuses on eating his own food, occasionally eyeballing the elaborate tomato-cheese toastie Al is lovingly smearing mustard into. He shouldn’t be lecturing kids on Intro to Real World anyway when he’s got braincells to burn on fucking wormholes.

Well - what the fuck did he expect, they already teleport here, and demonstratedly collapse space like reality’s a fucking accordion. That it’s apparently a specialized technical feat that requires equipment does not reassure Ed much, because - like, he’s known it was possible to rip apart space since he was eleven. It’s not a question of possible. It’s just that the only other thing he’s ever heard of that can do that is the fucking Gate, and gets triggered by fucking around with souls and the accompanying massive energy payload. That wizards are accessing this shit with a wish and a smile is probably never going to be something Ed can be blase over. And he really doesn’t like the
implications of that on mediums, like, say, time.

**Wormholes.** They can teleport objects, they can teleport themselves, they can fold and unfold space, mass, matter. Do the atoms just all get crunched down small? Does it all go somewhere else? The Gate stored Al’s body in… whatever fucking pocket dimension Truth lives in, and that had to have been a physical place, given his body laid there and grew for years and Ed fucking used his own as an Envy escape hatch. And a massive energy expenditure isn’t always necessary to access the space, come to think of it: Ed’s body kept Al’s alive for years, exchanging nutrients pretty much constantly, and when it came to Ed and Hawkeye - they didn’t go there at all, as far as Ed can tell, but it was Al performing the transplant and Ed can’t imagine how else it would’ve passed between them.

Ed’s recollection of the actual experience is unreliable: he doesn’t have a lot of times when he’s so fritzed that waking memory craps out on him, but this is one of them. A lot of his first automail surgery is like that. He doesn’t know if it means anything that this apparently fell into the same psychosomatic category, but to be fair, he’d been pretty fucking stressed in both circumstances. When the brain’s that unhappy it takes steps to remove itself.

This train of thought is starting to make Ed’s garlic toast taste sad, which is fucking unacceptable, so he shakes himself and gets back to business. The point is, Ed and Al have also, arguably, made wormholes. Not the same kind as the wizards are making, most likely, but a localized interdimensional rip in reality is a localized interdimensional rip in reality. He’s also suddenly real fucking grateful that the teleporting doesn’t feel anything like dropping through the fucking Gate doors, ’cause if it’s bad for him - well, he only got an arm and half a leg atomized. It’s got to be worse for Al.

“Can’t believe none of my children are up, but since you’re here -” Breakfast Lady’s voice filters back in. “Hairy, Hermione - we’ll be going to diagonally today. Dumbell door thinks it would be a good idea, to get all your school supplies before the rush. And be seen about, of course,” she adds, in the tones of one determined to make the best of something she doesn’t agree with but can’t change. “So that there’s no suspicion that we’re harboring Hairy.”

“We haven’t gotten our book lists yet, though,” Smartypants objects, glancing at Hairy. “Have they even announced who’s going to be the defense against the dark arts professor?”

“Dumbell door’s making a special exception and getting yours sent early - what they have finalized, at least. We’ll pick up your things too, of course, dear,” Breakfast Lady says apologetically to Hairy, like school shopping is some fantastic treat that she knows is not to be missed. This whole conversation is making Ed glad anew to be a dropout.

Hairy, though, droops visibly as she talks, though it’s less of a wilt and more of an angry hermit crab scrunch into himself. Psycho does not fail to notice. “Hey, it’ll be just you and me,” he says, jostling the kid’s shoulder. “We can - dunno, maybe take buck beak around the backyard for a bit.”

*That* reminds Ed that he needs to check on the fucking chimera. The thing’s the size of a fucking horse, probably is part horse; that is not an indoor fucking animal. The magic fuckin’ backyard’s big enough for some kind of temporary pasturing situation, or at least it will be when Ed’s done with it.

“Would you mind terribly if we joined you?” Hughes says to Breakfast Lady, smiling at her in his own version of Mustang’s *you like me* moves. “We’d like to do some shopping ourselves, and if you’ve got the room for us we’d love to tag along. You know the area best, after all.”
Breakfast Lady looks a little bit flustered - Hughes going all *you can trust me* tends to have that effect on moms - but not like she’s gonna say no. “I - all of you?”

“No no - just me, Sal and Marilee here,” Hughes assures her, gesturing between Jones and Arget.

“And Jean,” Mustang adds, gesturing to Havoc with his own smile. “He’s very good at carrying shopping bags of all kinds.”

“Well,” Breakfast Lady says, smiling a bit helplessly back. “I don’t see why not. We’ll have to check with Tonks, of course, but - I don’t see why not. We’d be happy to have you.”

“Wonderful! We really appreciate it,” Hughes beams, as Smartypants looks torn between hunger and alarm. “When do we go?”

Chapter End Notes

ed: anyway yeah i’m more famous than the beatles, have a sick ass bike and i keep accidentally having threesomes. You should totally go outside and do crimes

sirius, dazedly: oh my god. you’re like if marilyn monroe were me. we wed in june
Hughes deciding he’s gonna go frolic off on a wizard shopping spree is definitely not a plan he discussed with anyone else beforehand, judging by Mustang’s studiously blank expression and Hawkeye’s deadeyed No. 53, Surely We Can Come Up With A Better Idea. That’s not Ed’s problem, though, not with the whole magic question to solve. With a parting harangue at Hairy (“Where the fuck’s the report, kid? Are you gonna make me ask you a fourth time? Take this seriously, sheesh, it’s like you don’t want the Malbuy guy caught,”) Ed leaves the kid spluttering as he and Al clean up their breakfast debris and go. “You take this seriously!” follows him out of the kitchen, but Ed just waves without turning around and heads off to do bad things with science.

“Hey, brother?” Al says from behind him as they reach the stairs.

“Mm?”

“Look left for a second?”

Al’s deceptively mild tone gets Ed for just the split second it needs to. In a flash Ed realizes what’s about to happen, but even as he tries to leap it’s too late. Al’s cane is already between his knees, tripping him, and Al himself moves like a fucking snake and has Ed in his least favorite armlock in seconds.

“Al! Let go!”

“We go through this every time, brother,” Al says firmly, shifting his grip just enough to lift Ed, struggling bitterly, right off the ground. “And you put up this fight every time, even though you never win, and you admitted it’s good for you. You think I don’t notice when you don’t turn your head on one side all morning?”

Ed didn’t even realize he wasn't turning his head on one side all morning, but before he can yell about this Al gives a slight grunt and twist and does the thing to Ed’s back and shoulder that makes it crackle like cooked bacon and abruptly unlocks every muscle and joint on his right side.

He tries not to gasp audibly at the sudden jelly feeling as Al sets him back down. “There,” Al says. “Now are you going to hold still for your neck or do I have to do it Mei’s way again?”

Mei’s way involves three pressure points and ten minutes of Ed not being able to lift his arms. “Fine.”

Al cracks his neck too. “Go shave,” he orders Ed, who is now eighty percent wet noodle. “You look like a vagrant. Meet me in that second floor room, I’ll start setting everything up.”

Ed teeters off up the stairs, Al following to pick up the pack of measuring equipment from the Camp Amestris room. By the time he’s changing out of his pajamas his balance is back to normal and his joints are all reporting for duty again, which is good given he’s got to raise both arms to sort his hair out given the state it’s in even after a combing. His high-neck is kinda sweaty from yesterday, so he figures he might as well stick with his sleep shirt for the day; fuck, there better be some kinda laundry situation around here. He never packs much for work and while cleaning clothes alchemically is possible it’s also super annoying and isn’t very good about dealing with smells. For some things soap really is the answer.
He examines his doubled-up diamond and steel bracers by one of the windows, seeing the couple of scorch marks in full daylight. Must be a heat component to their magic light flashes, then. Or an exothermic reaction gets triggered when their lights hit something like diamond. Probably won’t affect his and Al’s calculations for defining what magic is, on the whole, but might be something to explore, if it turns out their base hypothesis is wrong and they need to experiment further.

Boots, bracers, braid. Time to go fuck up someone’s day.

The room they’d identified as labworthy is tucked out of the way around the stairs; Al has Ed’s notebook pulled apart on the little table in there, the binding transmuted open so he can arrange the pages next to each other for ease of access. He’s also found or made a bigger sheet that’s closer to the butcher paper they usually use for drafting arrays. “We’re building this one from first principles, base up,” he instructs as Ed hooks a foot in a chair and sits down across from him. “If magic is what we think it is, we better make sure the energy target is very specific before we try it on anything.”

“Yes,” Ed agrees, pulling his emissions testing notes from yesterday and scanning them over, then glancing back up. “Talk about qi?” he says in Xingese, then grimaces reflexively when he remembers that won’t work to prevent eavesdroppers here.

Al half grimaces back, but then gets a thoughtful look and goes a little distant in his I’ve-got-a-legitimate-sixth-sense way. “We can probably talk,” he says after a moment. “Last night people were going up and down the stairs, walking around a lot. There’s nobody near this room right now.”

“It’s so fucking useful that you can do that,” Ed says, for the hundredth time.

“You could learn too, you know,” Al says, also for the hundredth time, completing what’s basically their catchphrase at this point.

“Yeah, well, if Lan Fan couldn’t beat qi-sense into me I don’t think anything can. I probably don’t have the right chakras or something.”

“You’re just allergic to meditating.”

“Wow, sitting for hours and trying to think of nothing? Why would I be bad at that?” Ed says sarcastically.

“Well, you sit for hours plenty, on trains and in libraries, and I often look at your behavior and understand very clearly that you think nothing at all -”

“I’ll kick your ass qi-free, you little snot. Tell me about the magic.”

Al easily deflects Ed’s half-assed bop towards his forehead and pins his hand to the table. “They’re drawing from ambient qi, as far as I can tell, and channeling it through themselves,” he says. “Or their… wands, when they’re doing spells. Like how alkahestry draws it in through circles, kind of. Only they don’t need arrays.” He meets Ed’s eyes, amused. “Like us.”

“Ugh, as if.” Ed tugs his hand free to flip his braid over his shoulder, grimacing. A whole population of people who’re just… born as though they’d already gone through the Gate. Kind of. He doesn’t know how he feels about that. “So they’re doing alkahestry but not really?”

Al teeters a hand. “I don’t want to make any definitive claims on parallels because their qi is different here, and I’m not sure in what ways. The fact that their shielding disrupts transmutation on some level…” He eyes the pages that have Ed’s math spitting from last night. “What you
described doesn’t sound like what Scar’s brother’s array did, but there may be similarities. If
they’re not using any kind of equation or array, though, I’m not sure how we’d study it to find out.
And their qi is different.”

“How different? You said it’s like, real fuckin’ dense here, right?”

“A lot more dense. If dense is even the right word.” Al looks vaguely dissatisfied with the lack of
available qualifiers for magic bullshit. “I haven’t really read much on different kinds of ambient qi.
Medical alkahestry focuses pretty narrowly on internal qi systems. That’s pretty much always only
one kind, so it’s described with - nóngdù, yāsuō. Thickness, thinness. Concentration.” He blows out
a breath. “I’m pretty sure I read somewhere that some monasteries in Xing are built in places where
the ambient qi is supposed to be thicker, but I don’t know if that’s been quantifiably proven or even
tested in any meaningful way.”

“But you can use it, right?”

“Yes,” Al says, but there’s a but lurking in there somewhere.

“What?”

“I’d… like to test it more, I think. Properly. I’ve only used the one array with it so far, to give
Hairy an EEG, and that was with a fully static array with a set power intake… well. It might not
make any difference.”

“You told Mustang the weird forehead qi was discrete from the kid’s life force,” Ed says. “Is all
the other magic shit different from ambient qi too? Like - they’re drawing on it, but like alchemy -
we pull from tectonic energy but it gets translated into alchemical energy through us. Right?”

Al nods. “It feels like - frequency isn’t the right word. Or maybe it is? Pattern, maybe… it doesn’t
move the same way.” He considers the array paper, then pulls out a pen and starts drawing
squiggles. “I don’t think I can graph it, since it’s more of a feeling… in three dimensions… moving… but it’s kind of like that.”

Ed considers the two diagrams. “That looks like the first time I tried to braid my hair.”

Al sighs. “I know.”

“Not something we can include in calculations, then.”

“Nope.”

“Let’s stick to the electromagnetism for now, then.” Ed taps his emissions notes. “I can define a
range from this, probably. If we take EM scripts and stick ‘em to the drain component of the
fuckin’… soul muncher circle then it should give us something to start with.”

“Electric Storm’s arrays?” Al guesses.

“Yeah, only the groundwork though - we don’t need any of the pulse stuff, just the descriptors.” Ed
pulls a free sheet from his vivisected notebook and starts writing out the formulas for Al. “You
gotta meet Kendra when you’re back. If this works right we’re gonna owe her dinner.”

Al leans in to see what Ed’s writing, turning his head a bit to read upside down. “She translates
alchemical energy directly into EM?”

“Ya, it’s cool. Efficient.” It’s why Mustang had paired them for the hydrodam job; in practicals it
was the right choice because it was a giant fucking power plant made of hundreds of thousands of tons of cement, and Kendra’s half an electrical engineer and Ed does cement in his sleep. What Ed actually specializes in, though, is energy systems, and Kendra’s an expert in alchemical manipulation of electromagnetism. The formulas Ed’s writing out now are from the set she developed to describe current, voltage and magnetic fields in order to translate alchemical energy into electromagnetic.

They’re lucky she was as happy to exchange shop talk as Ed was. Though really, her arrays are in the same boat as Mustang’s - even if you know how they work, more or less, that doesn’t do jack fuck for you when it comes to actually controlling the reaction.

Al pulls the emissions notes over while Ed finishes writing the descriptors. “You’re going to have to make an average for the energy target,” he says. “We should have as few variables as possible for this. Ideally, just the one.”

“Yeah,” Ed agrees, pushing the finished sheet to Al. “Here. We sub this in, define the target, and we should be good to test.”

They both know the philosopher’s stone array by heart. It’s not something Ed’s probably ever gonna be able to forget, and likely not Al either. It’s a fairly complex circle, fifteen aspects across four stages and a fifth central focus, but it’s very straightforward in terms of purpose and effect: extract energy, compress it down, bind it into battery form as a stone. Its targets and directivity are clear and distinct. Ed can see pretty much exactly what they have to move and replace to get what they’re going for, and he’s pretty sure Al can too.

They look at each other.

“So,” Ed says.

“So,” Al says.

“What else do we need?”

“Just to draw it out, I guess.”

They both look at the floor, standing up and nudging the desk back in tandem to evaluate how much space they have. “Might have to push the walls back a bit,” Ed says. “We should have it big enough to stand in.”

“Wait,” Al says. “If the house is magic. And… maybe sentient. And we’re making an array to cancel all of that -”

“Outside,” Ed says immediately.

“Outside,” Al agrees, and they traipse down to the backyard.

Mustang finds them out there half an hour later. “This is not the third floor second door on the right,” he tells them pointedly, standing over where they’ve flattened a big square of dirt and packed it hard enough to take chalk easily; Ed’s doing most of the drawing out since there’s only room for one person to stand between the two main circles, so Al’s sitting off to the side extracting copper and zinc from the ground since Ed explained to him the plan to make Hawkeye bullets. His eyes travel over what they’ve got drawn out, and then narrow dangerously. “This is -”

“Yeah,” Ed says brusquely, standing up and dusting his hands off. “Relax. It can’t go live at all until we connect all the aspects.”
“We took it outside because we didn’t want to destabilize the magic house by accident,” Al explains.

“Yeah, if we blow that up it’s gonna be on purpose.”

Mustang doesn’t look appeased. “And you decided the yard whose physical dimensions are supported by magic would be better?”

“Well, we figured it’d be okay since it’s expanded right now and probably works on an accordion principle,” Ed says. “Where the fuck else would you have us do it? In the street?”

Mustang ignores that the way he always does when Ed gets the conversational upper hand. “I’m glad you had the presence of mind to secure a workspace,” he says to Alphonse, like he doesn’t know damn well it’d been Ed to raise a couple walls around their circle of dirt. The last thing they need is some squirrel scampering across the array and smudging just enough that activating it blows the whole thing to fuck. He turns a much more jaundiced look on Ed, gesturing at the array. “Well?”

“Well, welcome to magic-be-gone, your one-stop shop to fixing all your wizard problems,” Ed says sarcastically, rounding the array to point down at the equations with accompanying flourish. “Don’t flip your wig, it does the job but leaves buildings standing. Intake here, here and here - it’s modified for EM only, there’s the range.”

“This is the general version,” Al puts in. “If the intake doesn’t work without a specifier, we’ll try that next.”

“A biological specifier,” Mustang says flatly. “To direct the intake to target lifeforms.”


“We’re testing it on magic shit first,” Ed says shortly. “Paintings, flowerpots, whatever the fuck else. If it works on objects, we won’t need to modify it.”

Mustang folds his arms. “Walk me through it. All of it.”

Ed sighs hugely, hands on his hips, and tries not to sound too sing-songy when he talks because he does actually see why Mustang’s got a live hedgehog up his ass here. “The base array we’re pulling from -” he’s not saying philosopher’s stone array out loud anywhere near this house - “is essentially an energy harvester with a secondary stage of compression and binding. We don’t want a battery, we just want shit gone, so we stripped all that out and just set it to discharge as light.” He points around the circle as he talks, showing Mustang the explicit equations - they aren’t shorthanding anything, which is tedious but necessary when you’re setting up the scaffolding on a reaction meant to channel the kind of power that rips spacetime. “So we get an energy harvesting array, made to suck up magic via EM frequency. Which might have some weird visual effects because it reads as light, mostly, and testing might prove we need to give it a more efficient offload than light, though if we introduce a heatsink it’ll be a separate linked array because we don’t want to splice anything into the main one. For obvious reasons.”

“You said magic is qi. My understanding of the Dragon’s Pulse is that it’s in everything,” Mustang says. “How does this array differentiate between the magic and anything else? Or is that unnecessary?”

Al wrinkles his nose as he thinks about how best to explain. “Well… everything has qi, but not all qi is the same.”
“Living qi and like… free-floaty qi, right?” Ed says.

Al grimaces at him. “Not quite. Animals feel different from humans, and living plants feel distinct from the… huánjìng liúliàng.” He waves a hand. “Ambient flow.”

“So we calibrated to the narrowest frequency possible, the average of all the magic emissions we tested,” Ed says. “That shit feels different to Al and is the only measurable type of qi so far anyway, so… it prooooooobably won’t eat life force. Or souls.”

Mustang’s eyes narrow further. “It’s a pretty narrow frequency window,” Al says reassuringly.

“What is your testing plan?” Mustang says.

“I told you, flowerpots. Paintings. No point throwing it anything more magic-y until we know if it’ll even work.”

“This is going to take human trials,” Mustang says unequivocally.

“Well yeah, if it works, so I’ll hop in there for the first go, and if it does start sucking my soul out Al will cut the circle,” Ed says. “There’s a margin of error here, we’ve got enough of a window to test safely even if it goes tits up.”

“We should add a feedback loop, so after initial activation it powers itself,” Al adds, mostly thinking aloud. “We need to be able to check for any delayed or gradual reactions. It’ll ease some of the offload too, bring down the chances of everything blowing up.”

“Do not blow anything up,” Mustang says, like they need fuckin’ reminding. “Put limiters on the intake. If you don’t control how fast it absorbs or how much there’s a chance it could overclock the array. And do not make it self-powering until we’re all very sure it’s not going to shred whatever gets near it.”

Sheesh, someone’s fussy. Though it’s not like it’s a mystery as to why. “Yuh huh. So Hughes is just gonna go off with the wizards? And Havoc?” Ed says, skeptical not so much of Havoc’s abilities as backup so much as Mustang’s ability to let Hughes loose without full body armor and a protective escort that includes eight alchemists and a tank. He had gone amazingly nuts when he’d thought Hughes wouldn’t be waking up again.

“We need information,” Mustang says, the way other people say I’m having a root canal. “Getting an idea of the society we’re operating in is critical, especially if it comes to leveraging the local resources.”

Now, with any other officer this would be just another pat bullshit sentence about mustering the whatever and evaluating the terrain, but in Mustangese it means something pretty fuckin’ specific. Ed’s eyes slowly go round. “You’re sending Hughes looking for hookers.”

“Oh no,” Al says.

“You’re sending Hughes looking for hookers. With Havoc.”

“We need information,” Mustang repeats, with only slightly gritted teeth.

“You’re sending them looking for hookers,” Ed repeats, because genius like this deserves exploration from all angles. “In broad daylight. With a bunch of kids doing school shopping.”

“With Havoc,” Al repeats, staring into a private, likely prescient inner universe of tragicomedy.
“The radios also need testing over distance,” Mustang soldiers on like they haven’t said anything, which is a bullseye indicator that he fucking hates this plan too but doesn’t have anything better. “I don’t like that the wizards are so very baffled that our technology keeps working in this magic house of theirs, and we don’t have access to local phones.”

“How Havoc know he’s looking for hookers?” Ed says, ignoring Mustang’s sentences right back. “Did you tell him? Does he know it’s wizard hookers he’s looking for?”

“Maybe it’s like a sort of magnet technique,” Al suggests. “Colonel Hughes is very married, but if any professional saw Havoc walk into a bar -”

“- that’s easy meat,” Ed finishes. “Holy shit. Is that even humane? It’s like pushing a puppy into a piranha pool.”

Al sends a faintly sad look Mustang’s way. “That’s very cold, General.”

“You would deny him a chance to promote his natural talents?” Mustang says, but his heart isn’t in it; he’s clearly too distracted to properly bastard. He’s probably gonna snap and start bellowing at Ed today at some point, so Ed makes a vague mental note to poke him with something sharp after the array’s finished so they can shout each other out properly. Ed barely even got to punch yesterday and for all Mustang’s failings the guy shouts like a champ.

“Testing automail should wait until Arget returns,” Mustang continues, to Ed. “If it turns out an analogous system isn’t enough to test properly I’d rather we lose half a hand than your ability to walk. Did you finish making the chromoly steel?”

Ed pokes their spare pack enough to show the iron and coal inside. “Nah, I need your array’s carbon content numbers. And whether you’re carburizing or I am.”

Mustang purses his mouth but takes the notebook and pen Al helpfully passes him, bracing it on one of the dirt walls to sketch his array. “If those are for bullets, don’t make every round explosive,” he says, jerking his head at Al’s neat cubes of dirt spiced with copper and zinc. “Hawkeye will need hollowpoints as well.”

“I know her usual,” Ed says. He didn’t like the way his brain kept replaying Hawkeye laying out her rifle, after Void, so he joined her at the range a couple times when she did her long-range firing practice. She didn’t say anything about it, just let him hand her the brushes and cloths and oil and worked aloud as she disassembled and cleaned both Kerchatka and T-60. Ed’s never going to be okay with guns, but tech specs are tech specs and better knowledge than ignorance, always. “We’ve gotta test ricochet somewhere we won’t blow out some neighbor’s window. Are they gonna take us anywhere today or just keep popping in and out complaining about their shit government?”

“Bones sent her… wolf to say she’d take Hawkeye and myself to see that school castle they want to use as an ambush site,” Mustang says. “She’ll be here before noon. Finish the chromoly before we leave. Even if we don’t have an opportunity to see about shielding Hawkeye will still need to test fire. The sooner the better.”

That’s true. Who the fuck knows what might pop out of the woodwork next. “What’re you gonna be doing?” Ed asks.

“Making sure nobody comes out here asking what you’re up to,” Mustang retorts, which, okay, Ed meant about whether he’ll clue in Bones about how he can blow things up or not. “And that Hughes and the rest have a way to get back here without relying on any wizards. Come get me
when you have something workable. *Before* you start chucking paintings in there just to hear them scream.”

Mustang finishes by handing Ed the chromoly array notebook and swishes off, leaving them with their circle. “Y’know,” Ed says thoughtfully, “sometimes I think that guy needs a vacation.”

“Screaming paintings,” Al says, not quite a question.

“Yeah, there was - wait. Deconstructing that one painting got rid of it, completely, and that thing was apparently magic as all fuck - did I tell you about that?” Al gives him a patient look that says he’s *been* trying to get Ed to tell him about that and that he’s glad Ed’s finally boarded this trolley. “There was this asshole painting shouting in the hall that the convict guy was trying to get rid of,” Ed says. “It was a portrait of his mom, can you fucking believe? Anyway, since their photos move too, they say there’s like zero chance any of it is involved with souls, so I deconstructed it for him. Came apart just fine, felt like only plaster and paint and all the usual stuff. Probably other magic shit will deconstruct the same.”

“Doesn’t address how we’d deal with teleporting, though,” Al points out. “Or their light flashes.”

“Deconstruct them?” Ed suggests, wiggling his fingers.

Al rolls his eyes. “Okay, *Scar*. Let me know when you have any bright ideas that aren’t murder.”

“All my bright ideas aren’t murder.” Ed appreciates that Al’s meeting him in morbidity, given they’re messing around ass-deep in the shit that gave them so much grief in their teenage years. He taps his notebook on his thigh and looks down at the array, blowing out a breath. “Come on, let’s connect up these dots.”

Chapter End Notes

* hughes: just because i almost died that one time doesn’t mean i shouldn’t get to go to curseworld hell disneyland
Connecting everything up doesn’t take long, but Al makes them double check every single chalkmark like Teacher’s gonna vault out of the bushes and beat them with her sandal if they have a single angle off. Which is probably the right attitude, but honestly, there’s like zero chance this will do something worldbreakingly wrong unless someone’s actually in the circle, and right now there’s no chance of that. This is just the test to see if it’ll activate at all, though frankly if it doesn’t Ed’s gonna go and request a Teacher thrashing himself because that’d mean he needs to relearn, like, discrete math.

“I hit the switch, you watch the qi?” Ed says, when they’ve dusted the chalk off their hands and are standing over the completed array.

“Together,” Al counters, which historically hasn’t worked great for them with this sort of thing, but Ed can agree that yeah, he wouldn’t let Al light this fucker up alone either.

“Alright, on three,” Ed says, which has meant on two since even before they had to learn to coordinate ambushes against Teacher. They both crouch at the same time, side by side, and press their hands to the outermost edge of the circle.

The array activates. Light flares, blue-white, brighter than is normal for an electrical array even, and Ed and Al backpedal in tandem even as the flare stabilizes and slowly dies down into a steady glow. It’s bright even in full daylight, halogen-white, and Ed blinks a bit to get rid of the afterimages; it’s all emanating from the circle, every line of it lit up, which at least means they’ve balanced it perfectly.

“It works,” Al says.

“Guess so,” Ed says. “Is it sucking, like, ambient qi in?”

“Not… really.” Al says slowly, staring blindly at the array. “I think it is drawing in light. Not that we’d really be able to tell, but… there’s not really any qi flow within the circle.” He gestures vaguely with one hand. “It’s not affecting the ambient qi, I don’t think, but that’s - it’s everywhere, you really only sense it when it gets moved by something.”

“And the circle isn’t moving it?”

“Not that I can tell.”

“Guess we’ll just have to see in testing, then.”

They look at each other.

“We should probably make sure -”

“- it doesn’t eat people first,” Ed finishes. “Yeah, okay. Human trial one, here we go,” and he steps over the line into the array.

There’s a fizzle that makes Ed twitch, but nothing explodes or sears with pain or otherwise launches his soul out of his body like a cantaloupe from a catapult, so he stays put. “You - oh, for
goodness’ sake,” Al grumbles, but his eyes are already unfocusing again in Ed’s direction. “It’s... not affecting your qi.”

Ed exhales. He’s pretty sure he would’ve noticed internally if anything was going wrong, but it’s good to have it confirmed. “There might have been a fluctuation just as you stepped in?” Al continues, then refocuses and narrows his eyes. “But since you didn’t warn me I didn’t quite catch it.”

“Like what, a qi fart? And what did you think was gonna happen, I’d push you in instead?”

“One year in Xing and I forget all about how you’re a thundering idiot,” Al mutters. “Can’t imagine why I ever thought I could put those brain cells to better use. Do it again. Slowly this time.”

Ed rolls his eyes but hops back over, though a moment later circle’s light dims, fading down and winking out completely as the initial charge runs out. Ed restarts it alone this time, and they play hop-in hop-out for a few minutes. It turns out there is a little blip whenever Ed crosses the threshold, but according to Al it’s comparable to the qi fluctuation he’d experience if an alkahestrist healed a minor cut and thus negligible. The circle continues to fail to rip Ed’s soul out, so he wanders over the lines a bit more to make sure it’s not a fluke and then they switch.

“No detectable change in my qi, either,” Al reports after a moment.

“What if we both stand inside?”

That also fails to trebuchet their souls out of their bodies. So far nothing interesting has happened at all, which is objectively good given it means everything is going exactly as it’s supposed to, but all that’s really doing is activating the suspicion generators installed at the very center of Ed’s hindbrain. Plenty of things in life do go off without a hitch, exactly as planned, and it’s not exactly a shocker that an Elric array is doing exactly what it should, but on something like this it’s probably not a survival advantage to not try and stress test it out the wahoohie.

They look at each other again. “We should like, really test this, huh,” Ed says resignedly.

Al nods. “Long-term exposure?”

They rub out some chalk and write in a feedback loop, which takes longer than completing the entire first design did in the first place because they end up bickering over whether to redirect the energy via the intake or output stages. (Ed wins through superior intellectual debate, though as usual with Al that manifests as grabbing all the chalk out of reach until Al throws up his hands and says “Fine! Fine! Who cares! Have it your stupid way, stupid!”)

Then Ed sits in the middle of the circle for the next twenty minutes, which is boring enough that once he finishes writing up their notes he undoes his braid, makes Al condense him a palmful of water and starts combing out the kinks that come from sleeping on it wet. Doing alchemy while within the circle would constitute confounding variables, they both decide, so it’s Al who makes the chromoly steel, shaping it into a neat set of ingots with the exact percentages and carbon content embossed into the tops. He’s way too nice to Mustang. Ed would’ve given him a gargoyle-shaped lump doing double middle fingers if he’d been feeling that generous.

Ed’s flat on his back, one foot on the ground and knee pulled up with his automail leg propped on top, cleaning his nails with his boot knife, when Mustang comes back, rounding one of the dirt walls and announcing his presence via immediate bitch. “You - What did I say about coming to get me before testing?”
Ed doesn’t bother to sit up, because if this is the shouting they’re still public enough that Mustang will need help with the warmup. “Chill, bastard. Al’s the spotter.”

“And that’s worked out splendidly for you in the past.”

Ed rolls his head to give him an unimpressed look. “And what would you’da done if it did suck my soul out? Throw a bouquet after Al handles it?”

“Your soul isn’t the only consideration here,” Mustang says, doing the I’m-holding-my-patience-in-both-hands-here-but-god-you-make-me-want-to-squeeze thing.

“So? If it did blow up and kill us both, you shouldn’t have been near it, because that way it leaves at least one alchemist for the team so they can finish the job.” Ed gives him a smug smile that he knows for a fact raises blood pressure. “And you say I don’t think ahead.”

Mustang looks like he wants to hang Ed upside down from the nearest tree but doesn’t actually start yelling, which is mildly disappointing in an oh-well-guess-there’ll-be-more-for-later way. He scans over the circle, tangibly packing away all his murdery little urges until he’s just an annoyed bastard officer again. “Can you perform alchemy within the field with the circle active? Or alkahestry?”

“That’s next,” Ed says, deciding to let it go. For now. “We already did both of us in the circle, so multiple points of interference don’t fuck it, and theoretically any kind of energy transfer shouldn’t make much of a difference given we apparently did lock the target down.”

Mustang eyes the glowing lines bitchily for a moment, then steps inside. He snaps his fingers, and a single plume of flame leaps up. “Alchemy works,” he says critically. “At least at this level. Can you ascertain the size of the generated field here? It won’t do much good if they fire their light projectiles at head height and the field is only effective five centimeters off the ground.”

Which is actually a good suggestion. Mustang’s terrible like that. “That’ll probably require magic to test effectively,” Al says. “Seeing as the circle hasn’t really moved any qi so far that I can tell.”

“Yeah, and I got seven more minutes in here before we can say for sure my qi’s not gonna turn into banana pudding.”

Mustang’s gaze casts over the circle again, then returns to Ed and lingers on his posture. “Really?”

Ed scowls, because it looks like instead of a good straightforward shouting match Mustang’s decided to be catty instead. “What?”

“I’d have thought you had enough of rolling in dirt yesterday, but it seems once again I’ve underestimated you,” Mustang says, because apparently it’s one of those days where he’d rather wallow in his snit than shout his problems properly. Sometimes Ed just does not understand the guy. “Though perhaps that’s not the right word.”

“I’ll get him into a salon someday soon, General,” Al promises, like a traitor.

“What the fuck, this again? I told you, there’s no point,” Ed complains. “Anything they do is gonna get fucked to shit when I get sent out on the next assignment. Or, realistically, three minutes after I walk out the door?”

“That’s not the point,” Al says chidingly. “You need to take better care of yourself. You only get one body, you know that.”
“Empirically untrue,” Ed says, pointing at Al with the knife.

“He washes his hair with hand soap,” Al says to Mustang, because apparently family means nothing and all kindness is a lie and there is naught but treachery in his soul. “Not even liquid soap. Bar soap. He could just transmute it liquid. He doesn’t.”

“I saw him washing his hair in that little fountain in the park behind Command once,” Mustang returns grimly. “He said it was easier than getting a room set up at the barracks.”

“I’d just gotten off a nine-hour train, asshole!” And he’d gotten jam in his bangs from the sandwich he got on his way back to HQ, but Ed’s not gonna say that aloud; he has his dignity. “And it was ’cause of you that I had to report in right that fuckin’ minute, bastard, don’t act like this was some kinda daily fuckin’ thing.”

“This was before I got him the apartment?” Al says, ignoring him.

“I can only assume so. In fact I fervently hope for it.”

“What is this, a grandma’s gossip circle?” Ed demands. “Are you here to talk about the array or complain about my hair?”

“We’ll be passing back through the capital in Xing. Mei can get us into the Imperial baths there,” Al promises Mustang. “I’ll take care of it.”

“You do your country a great service,” Mustang tells him seriously.

“You know what, getting your body back was a mistake,” Ed says to Al. “You should’ve stayed stuck with one giant skirt and no hair for the rest of your life. Complaining about food, whining about soap consistency, wearing ties and sweater vests -”

Al smiles indulgently and doesn’t rib him about how his voice went all yay, you have a body! towards the end there. “And you,” Ed rallies, jabbing his knife at Mustang this time. “My hair this, my face that - do you want a sexual harassment claim?”

 Mustang practically spells out try the fuck harder with his eyebrows. “Why, Fullmetal. I didn’t know you wanted the disciplinary committee’s attention on your dress code violations that badly.”

“You should look nice when Alleman Herdman and all the others take pictures of you,” Al says, before Ed can tell Mustang all about what he can do with his disciplinary attention. “Or at least not like a homeless cage fighter. People talk.”

“You are a celebrity, as you so helpfully explained to the natives,” Mustang agrees, examining his own gloved hand like he’s checking a new manicure. “You keep showing up on the front page looking taxidermied, you’re going to ruin Mina, Tina and Serena’s reputations.”

Ed snorts. “Like they care, when they’re so busy ruining mine.”

“You wrote me a whole letter about how you came in from fixing that farmer’s field and his wife nearly shot you because she thought you were their scarecrow, come to life and animated by demonic forces,” Al says mildly. “That says something.”

“Yeah, that she was eighty-seven and half blind.”

 Mustang must not find it interesting enough to keep bitching when he’s not the star of the show, gesturing to interrupt and then holding his hand out in a give it here. “The chromoly?”
“Right here,” Al says, passing the sack over, then pats the dirt near the glowing array. “We’re going to need to test this on a wizard.”

“Duh,” Ed says. “If this works on the Hairy kid, it’ll work on anything.”

“We need a wizard who isn’t underage, I mean. To start with. It probably wouldn’t look very good if we used him as the trial run for an untested array.”

“We did test it. Look at how not dead I am.”

“You’re not a wizard.”

“What, are they biologically that different that it will rip their souls out?”

“No, but it’ll probably affect their ability to access... magic. We don’t know what kind of secondary effects that might have. If any.”

“I’m sure someone will volunteer,” Mustang says, in a tone that says if no one does he sees nothing wrong with tripping the nearest wizard into the circle. “If we explain matters. This is ready for live trials?”

Ed shrugs and nods along with Al, because so far nothing has needed tweaking. “Yeah, let’s get - hey.” Ed sits upright. “The house is supposed to be full of cursed shit. That’s gotta be like, malignant qi, right? Let’s toss some of it in here, see what happens first.”

Chapter End Notes

    ed: ugly rights! Ugly rights!
    al: i got bad news for u brother :/
“Do you want us to bring you anything?” Hermione asks Harry, who’s sitting on his bed and watching her and Ron get ready to go to Diagon Alley. Sirius is there because Harry hadn’t seemed to want him to go, and between his own urge to provide some bucking up and Moony giving him a pointed look when the situation was explained he’s got some gloom-lifting to do.

“I’ll get you some broom kit refills,” Ron says, because he’s a good kid. “And owl treats for Hedwig, yeah? Hey - Hermione, think if we put a Freezing Charm on a sundae from Fortescue’s we can get it back here before it melts?”

“I’m fine,” Harry says, scowling. “I’ll write Elric his bloody list. Not like it’s anything new, not going to Diagon Alley,” he adds. “I’ve been not going to Diagon Alley all summer.”

There’s a bit of an awkward pause. Sirius should probably say something - Harry’s clearly… got opinions… but Ron steps up first, thumping down next to Harry on the bed. “I don’t have to go,” he says bluntly. “Bet Mum can get my books for me, not like she doesn’t have the list. They just need to see Weasleys about, yeah? There’s bloody eleven of us, nobody’s gonna notice if I stay back - Hermione, you go with them, stand next to Fred or George and from the back everyone’ll think it’s me -”

“No, you - you go,” Harry says, now looking at Ron like he’d just offered him a place on the Chelsea Chimaeras in his own stead. “I just - it’s fine. If I go they’ll probably just set dementors on all of us or something.”

“Yeah, and Mum will have to chase them off for us,” Ron jokes. “I’ve never seen her Patronus, you know. Bet you anything it’s a Howler.”

“You should write that list, though, Harry,” Hermione says. “Anything you can remember. You can give the Amestrisans the names, but - you’re the one in most danger, and if things keep up like they have been - we should be doing our own research. Just in case.”

Here she darts a glance at Sirius, who obligingly puts his hands up and says “I’ll just go check on whether the emergency portkeys are ready, shall I?” and heads out of the room. Harry will tell him if those three plot up anything good.

Harry trusts him. It’s a warm little knot in the center of Sirius’ chest, made all the warmer by all the years of everyone he’d known believing he really had killed all those muggles, betrayed James and Lily, been working for the Dark Lord the whole time. Things are better now, even shit as they are, but he doesn’t know if that rush of relief will ever go away, whenever someone treats him as Sirius, as he really is, and not just another half-mad blood-soaked son of Black.

Sirius passes through the kitchen just as the backyard door opens, and Mustang comes in carrying a heavy-looking pack. Elric is right behind him, which explains where he and likely his brother had buggered off to. Mustang gives Sirius a distracted sort of smile and nod and passes by, likely on his way to the drawing room where Tonks and the rest are sorting out taking some Unplottables to Diagon Alley. Sirius wouldn’t mind joining them himself, but since Harry’s staying there’s not even the excuse of joining them as a dog.
Elric, though, goes straight for Sirius. “I need a bunch of your cursed shit,” he says, no preamble.

“What,” Sirius says, then, a bit more intelligently, “Why?”

“So I can do what I did to your stupid screaming painting,” Elric says impatiently. He has to look up to make eye contact; Sirius finds this equally hilarious and charming. The brother might be taller, but he also smiles and dresses like a Danish exchange student working at one of those children’s libraries full of interactive colors and shapes and things. This Elric looks like a bulldog constantly on the edge of giving into the urge to bite. “Give it.”

Well, if he wants to rip up more of the Black family treasures Sirius is not going to be the one to stop him. “You can’t touch most of it with your hands,” Sirius has to tell him, though, because his family had kept some pretty nasty things, and even when Elric hadn’t yet revealed himself to be a beautiful champion of righteousness and backhanding, Sirius hadn’t really wanted him to run afoul of that. No one should, really.

“So I’ll use gloves,” Elric says, in a slow you dim dear boy voice that tragically detracts from his fitness not in the slightest. He waggles his gloved hands demonstratively. “I’ve worked with reactive stuff before, it’s not the end of the world if something’s a no-go for skin contact.”

“Well, alright, mate, but that’s not going to be enough,” Sirius informs him, eyeing the gloves. Why white? Seems like it’d get grubbed up fairly quick, and doesn’t seem to match the rest of Elric’s commitment to black. “Some of that stuff you can’t even hover. Let me go to talk to Moony - I mean, Lupin. He’s worked with cursed objects before, he can pick out what he’s been through so far and see what he can give you.”

Elric scowls deeper but doesn’t argue. “Where is he?”

“Making portkeys for your lot,” Sirius says. “What, you need it right this second? He should be done in a bit, we can bring the cursed junk out to you.” And maybe get a look at whatever they’re doing back there. If Sirius can’t be going out with the rest of them the least he can do is be in the know about whatever the Amestrisans are cooking up to use against Voldemort.

Elric makes a face but doesn’t seem to find this worth contesting, just waves a hand like he’s deigning to allow it and heads right back out to the yard. Sirius bemusedly watches him go, sparing some admiration for the thin cotton of the sleep shirt Elric hadn’t bothered to take off; the bloke’s got the shoulders of a troll. Sirius wonders vaguely if there’s a pair of his own leather pants left in this house somewhere that his mum wouldn’t have burned and if so whether wearing them would be construed as a bit over the top.

The door closes behind Elric. “Ungrateful sot,” Sirius says appreciatively, and heads back upstairs.

Harry is up in the master bedroom with Buckbeak, staring out the window they’d used to watch the backyard Order meeting last night. Sirius steps over and sees Elric heading back into the strange little enclosure the brothers made back there; from this angle Sirius can just about see some vague white markings on the ground between the three blocky, disconnected dirt walls. Harry is watching Elric like that braid is a particularly ornery Snitch, and it suddenly occurs to Sirius that - well, Harry’s that age, isn’t he? Noticing - people? And Ginny Weasley’s made no secret that she’d say yes in a heartbeat if Harry asked her to broom riding or Giant Squid watching or frankly dragon dung shoveling, and Harry doesn’t seem to have noticed a bit. But he’s watched Elric with narrow-eyed focus every time they’ve been in eyeshot of each other, and Sirius remembers him talking lots about the Malfoy boy.

James was just as dense, though, especially at that age. And he ended up with Lily alright. Odds
are Harry’s as normal as they come. There’s probably nothing to worry about. And what would Sirius even say if there were? He does wish he’d had someone to say something, but, well, what is there really to say? Listen, if you fancy blokes, can’t lie, it’s no picnic, but cheer up, it’s not the end of the world? If you think it’ll ruin your life, don’t worry, there’s plenty of Death Eaters about to make sure you have much bigger problems?

Thinking about how his own perspectives - grown thick in his handful of post-Hogwarts years, staring down the barrel of a life wholly on the outside of normal and abruptly readjusted by being framed by one of his best friends and bunged in Azkaban - is starting to really get him down, and Harry doesn’t look too happy either. No matter what he told Ron and Hermione he can’t be happy at all to be missing the annual Diagon Alley trip. He’s essentially on house arrest just like Sirius is, hiding from the Ministry, and no amount of fit blonds striding around can change that, even if Harry did demonstrate an interest in anything other than trying to find out what’s going on.

“Hey,” Sirius says, struck with brilliance. “Why don’t we go and take a peek?”

Harry looks at him immediately. “You mean go down there?”

“Yes,” Sirius says, enthusiasm building. “I’ll go dog, you take your cloak. They’re going to try and destroy cursed objects, they said - bet that’ll be a bit of fun. We can go and watch the fireworks.”

Harry’s gaze immediately skips to his trunk, unshrunk out of Fred or George’s pockets. “Wouldn’t they wonder about a dog around the place?”

“Nah, they’ll just think it’s somebody’s pet. People always do. Hermione brought Crookshanks, didn’t she?” Sirius bounces his eyebrows and grins. “Besides. If we get caught then no harm done. We’ll tell them we were just practicing. They’re the ones who told us to go off and break the rules, didn’t they?”

Chapter End Notes

nothing_can_possibly_go_wrong.exe
Maes, on the whole, considers himself to be a pretty easy-going guy. You don’t last long in Intel if you can’t laugh instead of crying, and you can bend over and kiss your ass goodbye if you can’t deal with weird when you roll with Roy Mustang. Maes has been in Intel for over ten years and he’s been rolling with Roy since that shitty little bitch stole his quiche in the Academy, so at this point he has a graduate degree in weird and a teaching fellowship at laughing at literally anything.

Wizards, though. These are some real stress-testing motherfuckers.

Usually bringing Roy in on a field op is like firebombing a daycare to fix a broken doorknob: the original problem is gone, sure, but mostly because it’s been replaced by screaming children and rubble. Roy was supposed to be here to smile and talk pretty. That’s it. Edward was supposed to be here to figure out whatever weird alchemy problem they’re having, because he’s far less destructive than Roy is when it comes to fieldwork. For this, though, screaming children and rubble would be a serious improvement, because diplomacy here is going to be shotgun class only given the state of their state. The more Maes learns the more he’s certain that attempting to contact the government in an official capacity is going to do nothing besides paint giant neon targets on their backs.

Things are going to get percussive. Maes isn’t glad he spent almost a year in a coma, per se, but he is fairly glad he missed the last round of this. He’s pretty sure if he’d been awake and around for the previous staging of this specific apocalypse he would’ve gotten a little stressed out.

He’s supposed to avoid stress these days. Doctor’s orders. Usually this works out fine even given his job, because he gets to go home to his wife and daughter every night and their angel faces, cooking experiments and occasional wall to wall glue and glitter explosions immediately deep-six anything that may have happened in the preceding eight hours. Neither Gracia nor Elysia are here to damp the fuse on this firework factory, though. This is good, because it means they are safe at home, doing crafts and going to garden parties! And it is also bad, because Maes is going to gut someone.

Like the wizard president, when they get their hands on him. Their Minister Fudge - the head of state - had directly ordered an on-the-spot execution for the captured terrorist who was instrumental in the kidnapping that led directly to the resurrection. That’s not the behavior of someone who’s not trying to cover up a conspiracy - like, oh, say, a nationwide death array. That’s what you do when you need to silence an overwhelmingly compromising leak, because the cost of whatever they might reveal is higher than the risk of such a blatantly corrupt move. Placing a gag order on the law enforcement department and choking out any possibility of investigation is just the cherry on this massively corrupt cake.

On the other hand, this speaks to incompetence, or at the very least an exploitable tendency to panic. If Maes needed to eliminate a witness, fast, he wouldn’t issue an executive order using a high-profile state weapon and have it carried out practically in public. That’s the kind of thing that makes certain people suspicious. It’s the kind of decision that says there wasn’t quite a lot of thought going on as there maybe should have.

Or maybe the minister just didn’t care. This happened four months ago. It’s not like there’ve been any consequences since then.
Maes is no longer surprised Director Bones went to Olivier Armstrong for help. Usually asking Armstrong for help is like asking a crocodile to eat you out sans prophylactics, but Bones had clearly seen that the situation was well past the point of worrying about a few gaping flesh wounds to the groin. Even if she isn’t yet suspicious enough to consider the minister complicit rather than just incompetent, she’s the most clearsighted of this vigilante lot and understood that if her own community couldn’t curb this infection, bringing in an invasive species would have to do.

Good old Olivier. Maes does have to wonder how she and Bones broke up and on what terms they parted, because Roy Mustang is a hell of a thing to send your ex.

So Maes is collecting information. They need to corroborate what they’ve gotten so far from the Order, and if this little shopping trip is being sent out for show since they think they’re being watched, Maes wants to see who’s doing the watching. Arget’s expertise likely won’t be as applicable here, but Jones is a legwork specialist Maes poached out of South, and he should be able to spot any unusual attention or tails. Unless, of course, there’s extra magic bullshit involved that they can’t even begin to speculate at.

Though Tonks is apparently a police officer, and presumably would know what that magic bullshit would entail. Self-confessed as fresh out of the academy, but a rookie with training is better than nothing. Certainly better than a civilian who thinks they’re the cobra commander, ready to take on all society’s ills with their homebrew justice. Maes has met successful vigilantes - or, as the courts recognize them, serial killers - and has not been impressed. When the state won’t act then obviously communities and individuals take matters into their own hands, but usually the types that decide to prance down this particular path decide that the greatest social ill they need to be rid of is the local ethnic minority group or rival church.

And those who genuinely want to go terrorist hunting are typically highly underequipped for the task, because terrorist hunting is not a sport, except for maybe people like Ed. Maes is devoutly grateful every single day for people like Ed, and specifically for the fact that they are one in a million. Ed is a dear and precious rarity and should fucking stay that way. Al is doing the right fucking thing by pumping the brakes on whatever Ed has passing for a love life, because if an Elric breeds the last fucking thing Amestris needs is for it to be accidentally. Schtupping the Emperor of fucking Xing is by no means a low-risk endeavor but at least it doesn’t automatically carry a risk of creating babies, known affectionately in the business as hostages, and the Yao clan can afford to hire as many bodyguards as Ed’s had hot dinners.

Maes sincerely doubts that every one of these wizards is an Ed, even if they do appear to be very focused on the resurrection aspects of this nutshittery. If it ends up relevant, fine, but how the mystic flow enters the fifth dimension and sixty-nines with some math to fall out of a wooden stick as ‘magic’ is not his department. If Maes wanted to deal with that shit he would have become an alchemist. He’s more concerned with how to get ahold of their bank records and freeze their assets and tap whatever ghost animal relay they have that passes for a phoneline, and figure out whatever the hell else it is wizards do when they have armed and violent criminals running around in their idiot country. They won’t need Roy to set fire to all their magic pencils if they can access the real power at the core of every society: accounting.

He’s still dealing with mystic bullshit regardless, though, because now they’re asking him to teleport via fireplace.

“You want us to step into the fire,” Maes tries to clarify. “Because this will take us… somewhere else.”

“You have to shout the destination,” says the redheaded gentleman with the ponytail and earring.
“Otherwise you can get really mixed up.”

The redheaded gentleman with the ponytail and earring is named Bill. Upon introduction Maes refrained from endearing himself via jokes about whether he’s got any siblings named Receipt or Invoice, because some of the names are pretty fucking strange here and for all he knows his own translates to Donkey Nuts in the local anyway. “Right,” he says. “Shouting the destination, very important. Kind of like communicating with a cab driver when you’re drunk. Is there a reason we aren’t just teleporting?”

“Oh, not everyone can do side along apparition,” Bill says. “And since there’s a fireplace set up here, we may as well use it and go to the leaky cauldron direct.”

Bill works at a bank. More specifically, he is contracted especially to design and assess security systems for a bank. This isn’t precisely a lottery winner, but given the givens it’s close enough: he’ll at least know more about the industry than anyone else they’ve got here. Maes innocently wondered if Bill was available to join them, given he was apparently off work for the moment - maybe read them in on the finer points of local finance, show them around? And dear Bill kindly obliged.

He seems a very patient man overall, which Maes supposes is a survival trait for the eldest of seven children. He’s been happy to answer questions and lasted through six photos of Elysia last night before starting to look desperate around the eyes. “Any questions?” he asks now. “It’s dead easy, but I know it can be a bit strange to those who’ve grown up muggle.”

They exchange glances. “We just,” Arget says hesitantly, “step in?”

“I guess that explains the fireplace design,” Jones says, sounding resigned.

“This… address shouting,” Maes says. “It’ll work fine with the translation rocks, I assume?”

Tonks opens her mouth, then pauses. “You know, I hadn’t thought of that.”

“Should be fine?” Bill says, though he does not sound nearly as certain as Maes would like him to be. “I know loads of tourists come through diagonally and use the leaky cauldron flue because it’s got the traditional archway entrance. And I know in France if you say atrium of the ministry Anglais it takes you to the atrium no problem, so I think there’s translation magic already. Percy would know better than -”

Here he cuts off and glances guiltily around the room, then seems relieved. “Sorry,” he tells Maes and the others. “My brother Percy, he’s… he works for the ministry. He doesn’t want anything to do with the order. What with everything else going on… It’s been hard on mum.” Now he just looks tired. “We try not to mention him in front of her.”

“Works for the ministry,” Maes repeats. “In what capacity?”

A grimly amused sort of smile passes over Bill’s face. “Junior assistant to the minister of magic.”

“Ak,” Maes says. Of course. Naturally there’s another opsec hole in the form of an exploitable vigilante family member apparently under the minister’s personal eye. Why not! They’ve already got an ex-terrorist calling himself Comrade Vigilante with the rest of them, a hostage house elf determined to sell the group out and a dubiously telepathic teenager potentially beaming his every waking moment directly into Voldemort’s head. This couldn’t possibly be enough risk factors; they just needed at least one more. Maes grins at Bill. “Right in the chimera’s den.”

“Yeah, that was Dad’s thought too,” Bill says, giving Maes a mildly weirded glance but mostly
just going back to looking tired about it. “He told Percy he’s pretty sure Fudge only promoted him because he wants to use him to keep an eye on us, because we’re close to dumbbell door. Percy wouldn’t hear a word of it. Ended up walking out. Personally, I don’t think the order needs anyone who doesn’t want to be here, but it’s a bit… well, you know. He’s family.”

“Probably for the best that he stays out of your way, then. If they start hitting him with rubber hoses and asking delicate questions like ‘how long do you want your mother to go to jail for’ it’s best if he honestly has nothing to report,” Maes says cheerfully. “Especially since you have ways to force people to tell the truth.” Allegedly. Arget’s come up with a whole slew of options they can try, if it turns out the terrorist tattoo genuinely does what they say it does and their truth potion turns out to work too. It’s all written out in a rigid color-coded flowchart with cross-referenced annotations. Maes loves nerds.

“Right,” Bill says, now giving Maes a much less mild weirded out look. “Anyway. We’re not using portkeys to get there because we’re not supposed to have unauthorized ones, so the ones Lupin’s going to give us are for emergency use only. The leaky cauldron’s the most popular entry spot, so there’ll likely be plenty of people to see us arriving; that’s good, we want that, but it also means we’re going to have to act a little bit. If anyone asks, you three are my friends, visiting on holiday from… well, it’s going to have to be America.” He casts a critical eye over Maes with Arget and Jones beside him. “You’re probably going to stand out a bit dressed like that, but everyone knows Americans are a bit weird anyway. They’ll just assume you’re tourists.”

Maes raises an eyebrow. All three of them are in civilian dress, and while that means Jones looks like a preschool teacher for extremely athletic toddlers and Arget looks like she’d find reading tax law to be a wild Friday night, he wouldn’t exactly call the outfits weird. (Havoc got sent out of the room to change his dishwater civilian buttondown back to his black uniform undershirt. They need him looking young and dumb but financially stable, not like his closest female relationship is his mom.)

Thought frankly between the earring and the leather jacket, Bill’s the one who looks like he wouldn’t mind shopping at wherever it is Ed gets his leather pants and has only toned himself down because he’s had to dial it back for professional day wear. Of course, out of all the Order members, he and Tonks look like the ones most likely to frequent nightlife or at least admit that they know what a sex worker is. This works out splendidly for Maes, because they’re going to need some help navigating in a place where they can’t even read the signs and ideally he’d like to start in a place that works on a higher budget than the ones that advertise by painting breasts on the door. If the terrorists really are largely comprised of the wizards’ idle rich then they’ll be visiting the more discreet places, indistinguishable from boutique hotels except for certain specialized furniture.

Maes isn’t looking forward to buying a three grand glass of champagne per head or whatever else the cover charge is going to end up being around here. Those places don’t even let you through the door without weighing your wallet, and what he’s going to be asking for is not going to be cheap. Usually he’d enjoy the flashbacks to the early days of his and Gracia’s courtship - her in the most fantastic outfits, him happily handing over a month’s paycheck every date until Roy finally took pity and properly introduced them - but he’s not exactly jonesing for nostalgia on this op.

This is just to scout things out, anyway: weekday daylight hours are likely to be the slow times if the businesses are even open at all, and while working boys and girls are much more likely to sit down for a chat when they aren’t busy pulling customers, the last thing Maes needs right now is for them to be memorable. They’ll find a likely place, scout the situation, establish themselves as well-tipping tourists and then come back and consult with Bill and Tonks and the other wizards to determine what kind of approach might work best. Maes needs to know what the popular sentiment
on the street is regarding the terrorists, because it might be safer sending him or Jones to pose as radicalized individuals looking to join up instead of plainclothes police looking for an informant. Asking a sex worker to sell out a paying client can be a tricky proposition, triply so when the client is part of a highly organized and publicly violent gang, and whoever they approach might decide they'll be safer if they sell them to the terrorists instead.

Which is why they'll have to come back later during proper business hours and let Roy do the talking. Maes might be fluent in this particular dance but he's not a native, and Roy can talk a leopard into selling him its spots. If they need someone to compromise their own safety by turning out a john, Roy's the guy to make it happen.

“We can be tourists,” Jones tells Bill and Tonks agreeably, because he’s a people person. “Anything in particular we should do, or avoid doing?”

“Not really,” Bill says. “Just stay close, I suppose. We’ll be a bit apart from the others and we don’t have to go into all the same shops and things - doubt you have any interest in school robes.” His eyes scan over them again, pausing on Arget’s shoulder-holstered sidearm; she could use a bit more practice adjusting her stance to conceal it properly, but Maes is pretty sure Bill’s focusing there because he was in the room to see her put it on. “What are you looking for?”

“Information,” Maes says sincerely. “And largely from you, I hope! We’ve got all sorts of questions we’ll be relying on you two to answer.”

The children choose that moment to pile into the room en masse, now no longer in pants and sweaters, wearing the dark, loose dresses of varying lengths that seem to be the preferred local attire. Molly Weasley heads up the rear, sporting the familiar look of near homicide that is the universal hallmark of motherhood. “All of you, in line,” she snaps at the children. “If you think I’ve forgotten about yesterday’s stunt -”

She catches Maes’ eye, smiles hurriedly and swipes some frazzled hair away from her face; Maes smiles back in a fellow-parent way that he hopes conveys that yelling at other people’s children doesn’t bother him. “You lot behave,” Molly tells her pack. “One toe out of line and it’ll be me that takes your wands, am I clear? Good. Now! Are we ready?”

The door opens again, this time for Havoc, who is much more appropriately dressed even if does have that hunted-chicken look that means he probably ran into Roy and got sartorially criticized. "Jean!” Maes welcomes him, which makes Havoc very nearly glance side to side in a who? me? before he remembers that for this little jaunt he's not Captain, he's incognito. Maes can't wait to tell him his job is going to be floor bait while Maes talks to the local madame. "Look at you, that's much better! Ready to go?"

"Yes sir," Havoc says resignedly, taking up position with Jones and Arget. "Are we touching a flowerpot again, sir?"

"Oh, no," Maes says jovially, happy to spread this particular news around. "We'll be stepping directly into that fire right there! Which can also teleport us, just like flowerpots! And also like flowerpots, presumably without third degree burns."

"What," Havoc says blankly, staring at him.

"Oh, don't worry, flue fire doesn't burn," Bill says reassuringly. "It's one of the safest methods of travel."

Havoc does not look reassured, but before he can try to tell Maes he's quitting his life to run away
and become a yam farmer the door opens again. Remus Lupin enters the room, holding a handful of loops of string and his usual quietly distracted air in full effect. “I’ve charmed the port keys,” he says, holding out some string to Tonks and Bill first. “This seemed the most unobtrusive option - untie the knot and it’ll take you back here. That way it’s unlikely to trigger by accident.”

Maes smiles wide at him and accepts his own loop of string when it’s his turn. Remus Lupin doesn’t hold himself like a trained combatant, but then these wizards wouldn’t, not with the way they use the magic. He hunches his shoulders. He doesn’t stand up straight. His voice is always quiet; his remarks intelligent but subdued, useful but never in the spotlight. He holds himself like a man balancing a jar of acid between his fingertips: careful, precise, exactingly controlled. Aware of consequences. Aware of his own image. Aware of exactly the kind of damage he could do.

Exactly like Roy held himself, in the handful of weeks after Ishval ended and before he learned how to hide it.

Maes really, really, really doesn’t like it when people remind him of Roy. There’s usually nothing so worthwhile as what Roy’s got underneath.

Luckily - or perhaps unluckily; Maes generally wants dangerous unknowns up close and right where he can see them, but he can’t afford to be distracted on this trip - Lupin is not accompanying them, and steps back quietly to the edge of the room once he’s handed out his teleporting friendship bracelet goodies. “That’s us ready to go, then,” Bill says, looking around. “Tonks, you want to go first?”

“Yep. Ta,” she says, stepping forward to take some powder out of the bag.

“Remember, you’re our Auror guard,” Bill tells her solemnly. “Be sure to send back a Patronus screaming for help if the place is Chocka with death eaters.”

“Ha bloody ha,” Tonks says goodnaturedly, tossing the powder in. The second it touches the fire the flames roar to head height, abruptly lime green and oddly uniform in color; she steps in, unhesitating, says “Leaky cauldron!” and disappears.

The fire immediately dies back down to normal. There’s a moment of silence where the wizards mostly watch Maes and the other two. “Wow,” Jones says dutifully.

“See, nothing to it,” Bill says. “You ready? Here, I can throw the powder for you.” With that he takes a pinch, tosses it in and steps back as the flames once again roar green.

Maes would very much like Roy to be here to step into the breach first, only Roy’s fucked off with Riza and Director Bones after giving Maes theburningly bitchy look that said if he dies in this wizard backwater Roy will go and remind everyone he’s an arsonist. He’s gotten so much worse at hiding that he cares about Maes beyond fantasies of violently smothering him with a pillow, and this teleport-via-fire shit is exactly the kind of nonsense he’d hop into just to measure his own dick. Instead Maes has to be the cobra commander here, take a deep breath, give Arget and Jones a nice reassuring leaderly nod and step into the green flames.

Chapter End Notes

maes: roy might not be a real sex worker, but you definitely come to him if you want to get screwed
also yes, if you're rereading, i edited this chapter, because on the first go around
[drumroll] I FUCKING FORGOT HAVOC
Bones teleports them herself, Roy on one arm and Riza on the other. They land on wet grass, Roy’s boots squelching as his weight suddenly reinstates itself on gravity. They’re at the very edge of a forest, all towering pines and thick moss, and there’s a castle directly ahead of them. It’s not close, standing on a ridge some two kilometers or so distant over the edge of a vast lake, but there’s nothing between them and it besides open moor.

Riza does a 360; Roy breathes in deep. He’s developed a fairly decent intuitive sense for humidity calculations over the years, mostly learned through trial and error; if the air feels like *this* the reaction will do *that*. This island is... wet. When Maes was making cheerily innocent small talk about the weather the wizards mentioned that it did in fact rain often here, sometimes multiple times a day, in showers that came and went in otherwise sunny weather, which is just about what Roy is starting to expect from this isle of blight. This is going to be… seventy percent, maybe sixty-five. Workable.

“That’s hog warts,” Bones says, jutting her chin at the castle and then gesturing with a hand in the opposite direction, towards a cluster of buildings down the slope of the hill away from the trees. “And that’s hogs mead, down the way. The hog’s head is at the outskirts - that’s the bar Alastor said they’re thinking of using, to stage your ambush. I thought we could... walk and talk.”

Ah. “What an excellent idea,” Roy says. They’d understood each other quite clearly, then, across the dinner table last night. Good. Bones is a resource he would prefer to use fully, and one he would rather not have to do without. Ideally Maes would be here for this - and Fullmetal too, for the experience as well as his unerring gift for stumbling on the very ugliest bones of any situation, even if it does usually end up sending him head over ass to do it - but as is they’ll just have to make do.

“It seems very remote up here,” Roy adds, looking out at the admittedly impressive view as he scans for the nearest road or path or, given the deeply pastoral look of the distant buildings, abandoned goat trail. “Hardly a soul for miles.”

“And no listening or tracking spells, too,” Bones agrees. How direct. “We’re just outside the edge of the hog warts wards here. We can speak freely.”

“How nice,” Roy says. Riza’s watching the castle. “Quite open, however. I imagine anyone looking out from, oh... any of those towers will have a perfect view of our walk.”

“Well, let’s us just go and follow the edge of the woods then,” Bones says, in a *can’t hurt to humor the paranoid* tone. “And what exactly is it you don’t want anyone in the castle seeing?”

Plenty. “Oh, just a precaution.” That’s the magic school for little magic children that dear Albus is headmaster of, and if it’s anything like any of the military academies Roy grew up in it’s both fortress and personal microstate for whoever’s at the top of the pile. Who the fuck knows what might be watching. “You said yourself that a death eater impersonated one of the order for nearly a year. I’d rather we be a little overcareful than end up paying for negligence later.”

Bones snorts. “You’ve got me there. This way, then, watch your step.”
Roy falls in behind as Bones sets off around the curve of the treeline, Riza at his right with the pack of chromoly ingots over her shoulder. Bones is promisingly receptive and refreshingly blunt, which will likely translate into exactly the kind of largely unlayered conversation Fullmetal would benefit from listening in on. Roy really does need to make more of these opportunities for him. Fullmetal is showy, powerful, loudly abrasive about it and publicly treats Roy like a dimwitted poodle, which makes him an irresistible distraction for anyone trying to outthink Roy in real time and handily convinces them Roy’s as dumb as he looks to boot. People get angry at Fullmetal. They get off topic. They say things they don’t mean to share. And then, best of all - Roy enjoys this part, it’s like watching a six-car pileup in slow motion - they start to like him. And they start to want to help.

Bones, though, is working on a metric set by Olivier Armstrong, who thinks Fullmetal would be pretty okay if he got over his sad pansy wibbling about murder and upon his reenlistment sent him a bearskin rug with the head still attached and a charming little note inviting him to come back up North and get his ass kicked anytime. Roy still doesn’t know what in the raw stupid hell Edward did to regain his alchemy, somewhere in between swanning off to Xing every three minutes and developing a disturbing aptitude with knives, but he can be patient. It hasn’t come around to bite them yet, and he cannot deny it’s given him a priceless asset with an almost infinitely variable alchemical skillset. A real asset this time, not just an opportune wildcard that turned out to be wilder than anyone could have expected. The brat had his chance to leave the military: Riza presented him with the extremely generous medical discharge papers herself. Instead he’d come back, kicking Roy’s new office door in so hard it lost the knob slamming off the rebound, and promptly gave Roy a heart attack by clapping and transmuting it back on. And Edward - newly nineteen, brother whole and healthy, apocalypse averted, well-off and well-connected with plenty of job offers - had ignored all demands as to what the hell he’d done, planted his newly matching fists on Roy’s desk and grinned like he was daring Roy to refuse him.

Which means Roy’s going to drag him hair first into political competence whether he likes it or not. If Edward wants to stick around he’s going to learn.

To think Roy had entertained vague thoughts of making Edward play attaché during some of these meetings. Have him fetch coffee, cut his teeth on certain kinds of negotiations, use him as a power tactic. Hello, wizard nation, here is my subordinate who incidentally singlehandedly just tied up your terrorist problem and presented it for you in a nice little bow; yes, isn’t he just darling, we definitely have fifty more just like him, be very afraid, let’s talk. What a fucking pipe dream. Roy has been breathtakingly stupid to ever consider the terrorists a separate problem. Domestic terrorism is generally a giant thundering clue that all is not fucking well on the home front, and that’s even without the news that someone like Lucius Malfoy is the prominent public head of a major political bloc.

Quaint little country, Olivier said. No organized military, Olivier said. No wonder they’re asking for help. Roy should’ve fucking known this would never have been a mere intelligence-gathering civil little jaunt. That the director of law enforcement was the one to ask Olivier for help doesn’t negate the fact that she’s the national director, even if their nation isn’t so much a country as a couple of rival cartels engaged in gang war over control of their cult. The actual country they all live in is unaware of their existence, save an unlucky few always living under threat of memory erasure. The wizards aren’t even running a shadow government, they’re just hiding.

And as far as Roy’s concerned they can stay that way, because of course the terrorists have philosopher’s stones and dreams of world domination. Of course. He didn’t sign up to run a takeover on alien turf, thank you, Olivier, but given that around here terrorists and state are now definitively one problem that’s what it’s going to have to be. Does she think he likes coups? Does she think he wants to make this a hobby?
Riza would probably tell him the reward for digging the best hole is a bigger shovel. Fine. So no politics for Fullmetal, because building the killswitch takes precedence. Also fine. Bones is here and ready to listen to Roy, even if she isn’t the core player of the vigilante cartel and defers to Albus still. And Albus has made it clear he thinks he is operating at a level above mere politics.

That’s fine too. There’s a lot you can get done from underneath someone, as the callgirl said to the construction crew.

“So,” Bones says as they further round the forest and the castle slips further beyond the trees. “Anything in particular you’d like to share, or shall I start with questions of my own?”

“Oh, we can start,” Roy says, glancing around and stopping at the base of an impressively damp-looking tree. “I believe you wanted to see more of my alchemy.”

He snaps. A few yards away a patch of grass roils into flame. He watches Bones turn sharply to look at it, then bring her gaze back to him when it snuffs out as suddenly as it began, having burned wet plant matter hot and hard enough to leave only a perfect circle of char.

“Flame Alchemist,” Roy says blandly. “You get the gist.”

Riza had glanced over when the fire lit too; now she walks over and toes the ash with her boot, then starts scraping it clear to uncover the dirt underneath. Bones narrows her eyes slightly, not looking away from Roy. “That scales up, doesn’t it.”

“Yes.”

Bones nods as though confirming something. Roy would very much like to know what kind of brief Olivier sent her about him; dangerous but dim, obviously, but in what detail? “You really don’t trust Albus.”

Roy raises his eyebrows. “And you do?”

Bones’ mouth tightens. “I don’t know what his game was with not warding Potter’s house. It’s true wards stand out, to anyone looking for magic, but for Merlin’s sake, the boy was placed with muggles, no record of him anywhere. He didn’t have a wand until he went to school, so anyone trying to find him would’ve needed to already have some of his blood or a lock of his hair, and when he was left with that family he wasn’t old enough to have hair. No one would have been looking for wards in some Muggle town in the first place. He should have been warded.”

“And the single posted guard conveniently disappeared right before the attack,” Roy says mildly. “Something isn’t adding up here, Director.” Over by the charred circle, Riza digs a stick of chalk out of her inner jacket, crouches down by the cleared earth and begins to draw.

Bones sets her jaw. “Look - Albus is old. He’s twice my age, and he was a scheming old meddler before I was out of nappies so I’m not shocked if at a hundred and fifty three he’s starting to lose his grip.” Roy carefully doesn’t move a muscle at that little horror of a sentence. “But he’s still the most powerful wizard in Britain. He did a lot to rein in the pure bloods as mug Wump and he’s the reason we’re not all wearing ‘Grindelwald is Great’ underpants and speaking German. He wants Voldemort dead as much as the rest of us.”

“No. I want him dead by any means necessary,” Bones says, coldly matter of fact. “Albus is convinced it won’t stick without fulfilling the prophecy. I don’t care. I asked Livvie to send me
anyone she could spare who could do the legwork my Aurors can’t, stuck under the ministry’s thumb. Maybe Voldemort can only be slain by god Rick’s sword on a full moon by a troll in a tutu, but what we need to do is cut the death eater numbers. Before they overrun the whole bloody country this time. Albus can do whatever he likes with his prophecy when Voldemort has no army to send out and no lackeys to hide him away.”

“Lucius Malfoy,” Roy says coolly.

Bones bares her teeth in an ugly smile. “You think we haven’t tried? He’s careful. He knows I’m not the only one who’d throttle him barehanded if he ever let himself get caught alone and unawares. He was Voldemort’s right hand for a reason. I’m not sending anyone charging in on a suicide run when our position’s one foot on a bloody roller skate as it is.”

Here her grin turns disturbingly reminiscent of Olivier at her happiest, which is usually heralded by the charming accompaniment of blood plink-plinking off her sword. “But now you’re here.”

Yes. Now Roy is here, and Olivier’s going to remember that people who use him tend to regret it. “Your confidence is an honor,” he says aloud. “We will of course do everything in our power to achieve the objective.” If only because they really don’t need an immortal wizard armed with philosopher’s stones deciding to munch through Xing and bring Amestris back onto the war-on-all-fronts merry-go-round. “We are, however, working with a lot of unknown quantities. You understand when I say we are looking at some operational difficulties when it comes to working with civilians whose guiding tactical light is a... prophecy.”

Bones’ mouth twists slightly. “Most of the order are those who have either lost family directly to death eaters or would be first to die if Voldemort takes power. They’re motivated. They aren’t trained Aurors but they can hold their own in a fight and you don’t need to be Fillyus flit wick to cast a shield charm. They can charm portkeys for you and apparate your lot around, at the very least, if you don’t want them in the fight.” She jerks her chin at Riza, who has finished with the chalk. “What’s she doing?”

“Yes. Now Roy is here, and Olivier’s going to remember that people who use him tend to regret it.”

“To establish the equipment,” Riza says, stacking the last ingot in the intake loop and sitting back on her heels. “We had to cross through another country to reach the Divide. When traveling in an official capacity, taking certain kinds of firearms across international borders can be considered military provocation.”

“So we create workarounds.” Roy crouches down opposite Riza and presses a hand to the circle’s edge.

This array is familiar, inasmuch as any metalwork transmutation can be. Roy first transmuted part of a firearm for Riza in Ishval, when constant use warped her T60’s barrel enough to start seriously compromising accuracy; resupply was sketchy enough that the odds of her getting any new gun were a joke, let alone a specialized long-distance rifle. They’d improvised. These days both of them know this array by heart: the latest version, refined over the years. After the Promised Day, on nights too dark to sleep they’ve spent more than once sitting up in Roy’s kitchen and running what-ifs and contingencies until the sun comes up: on how to communicate more effectively when
under surveillance, on how to move and store supplies, on the options available to them now that Roy can clap to create arrays.

It makes his skin crawl still, despite all the practice. Likely it always will, but it’s been a long time since anything so trivial has affected Roy’s ability to perform. He’s not stupid enough to throw away such a tool on mere distaste alone, and doubly so for having bought it in blood.

And his distaste is only a fraction of Riza’s, and far less entrenched besides. She has never hesitated for a second. Neither will he.

This array, though, requires no clapping whatsoever. He has to focus to exclusion for a moment, because metals aren’t his forte and this array doesn’t control shape at all, merely substance; he has to separate the gun into its mechanical components even as he combines it into one assembled piece, adjusting the shoulder mount and barrel to Riza’s preference, hollowing out the stock to make it lighter. It’s already going to weigh too much - the Kerchatka is designed for caliber switching, dependent on bolt and barrel exchange, which allows for either incendiary or high-velocity armor piercing rounds and makes it a monster of a thing to carry around. But Fullmetal was right about arming for homunculi, and more importantly Riza agreed, though hers was phrased as a very dry I don’t like it when I shoot something in the head and it doesn’t die.

“This is a recreation of a Kerchatka anti-materiel rifle,” Riza tells Bones, watching the gun as it rises slowly out of the array. “It’s primarily used against military equipment such as vehicles, installations and ordinance. It can also be an anti-personnel weapon, but its main purpose is piercing armor and destroying fortifications. Hence our interest in magical shielding.” Riza reaches out and lifts the rifle out of the circle, and Roy lets the transmutation go as she stands. “Could you describe the hog’s head building to me, please.”

“Describe the building?” Bones says, more skeptical than confused as she eyes the gun.

“You mentioned it was on the outskirts,” Riza says, hefting the rifle once by its rail grip and then handing it to Roy. “Single-story building, two-story…?”

Bones turns to squint at the collection of huts down the slope, pointing after a moment. “That one there, I think. Two stories, pointed windows in the roof. We can go in, should be open even this time of morning, but we’ll have to go as customers. Best not to stand out.” She casts a dubious eye over the rifle. “Do you need me to cast a shield…?”

“Not at the moment.” Roy sets the rifle down to lean upright against his side, the barrel rising over his shoulder, and takes the empty pack Riza hands him. “We don’t have the right kind of ammunition with us, and firing this here would attract more attention than we want, I think.”

“So you’re…”

“Scouting,” Riza says, unbuttoning her jacket as Roy folds the thick canvas of the pack in his hands. This transmutation takes a clap: Roy concentrates, touches his hands together and directs the energy into the cloth. It splits down the middle, one half writhing into a single wide strap, loops forming on the ends; Riza takes it from him as the crackling dies, and in return he extends an arm so she can drape her jacket over it. “If we’re going to stage the operation here we’ll need to know the terrain.”

Riza attaches the makeshift strap to the rifle in a few efficient moves and slings it across her back. It looks almost comically oversized on her, making Roy wonder if he can shave a few ounces off the stock, even though he knows for a fact she can do more than one pullup with his entire bodyweight hanging off her waist. He’s not going to suggest it. She’ll let him know if she needs
more maneuverability.

“Well,” Bones says, eyeing Riza like she’s now wearing the world’s most deeply gauche outfit and she’s trying to figure out whether to say something about it. “The hog’s head sees some strange types, but I don’t think even we’ll be able to blend in with that.”

“Oh, I’m not going in,” Riza says. She tugs a pair of tac gloves on from her belt, resettles the Kerchatka and heads for the trees.

“And now she’s…” Bones watches Riza go. “Climbing a tree,” Bones says, in the resigned tones of someone watching the only sane person they know pull their underpants onto their head and start cartwheeling.

“Getting a better vantage point,” Roy agrees, folding Riza’s jacket over his elbow and picking up the other half of the canvas pack. Riza’s unlikely to end up firing from treetop - not high enough for the current distance - and only then if they transmute a platform. The Kerchatka weighs almost as much as Riza does and can only be fired lying prone, unless she wants to dislocate her own shoulder. Fullmetal or Alphonse or even Roy can raise her a tower out of dirt, and likely will have to do so regardless of what the terrain is like wherever they end up doing this. She’ll need a spotter, which is a resource allocation they’ll likely have to make on the spot. If Riza’s going to be separated from the rest of them on long-range support Roy wants her with an alchemist, and both he and Edward are almost guaranteed to be on point kicking doors in, so to speak; that leaves her with Alphonse, who is certainly formidable but also their only medical support.

This is an argument to keep him back, out of any close range combat with Riza, and given teleportation, if someone gets hurt badly enough to put them out there is a much better than usual chance they can get any casualty to him before any damage becomes irreparable.

Those decisions can be made later on. Bones is looking at him. “Alastor says you want to take Malfoy head on,” she says assessingly.

“Yes. Given the situation, it’s unlikely we have the time for a more circumspect approach.” Maes will be exploring all the options, of course, because if it turns out they can’t shut off magic Roy’s not sending anyone on any suicide runs either. If wizards can break each others’ shields, however, the plan remains fairly straightforward: locate the terrorists, lure them out and have the vigilantes address the shielding while Roy and Riza go to work. That’s going to practically eliminate any chance of taking prisoners alive, but, Roy thinks with heavy irony, they are here representing Amestris, after all.

“You want to take him at home?” Bones continues, not skeptical so much as advisory. “I’d recommend against that. His family has had generations to fortify their manor. Not that taking him anywhere else will be easy. He’s got bodyguards, he never alone in public and he will put up a fight. However you decide to go at him, he’s not going to be an easy mark.”

“Mm,” Roy contributes, holding out the pack canvas enough to connect his fingertips again and transmute it into an extremely rough cover for the Kerchatka. It’s no weapons case, but toting around a giant stick thing in a ratty bag is still better than hauling a massive gun through any public spaces.

Bones doesn’t look like she thinks he’s heard enough warnings. “He’s no idiot, either. If he sees he’s outmatched, he’ll either run - or summon the dark lord to him. For Malfoy, he’ll probably even come. And if you suddenly find yourself fighting Voldemort, you’re going to lose people. Full stop.”
Yes, this dreaded dark lord. “If we fail to plan correctly, likely yes.”

Bones’ expression isn’t exasperated or condescending, at least, just coldly frank. “People have underestimated death eaters before. They died.”

If Bones wants his credentials, she can have them. “Let me put it this way,” Roy says clinically. “We’ve been tallying up the death toll from your last… war… with Voldemort. His group is estimated to have been responsible for the murder of approximately four hundred and eighty-four people. Over a decade.” He meets her gaze evenly. “I personally had a higher body count before my twenty-fourth birthday. Olivier didn’t just walk into the officer’s lounge and ask who wanted to travel to new places and meet interesting new people, Director. My team are specialists; this is not our first time dealing with this kind of problem. We are not intimidated by Voldemort.”

Bones’ eyes have narrowed, but she’s looking at him with a faint gleam of approval at the edge of her perpetual half-frown. Unsurprising. There’s a certain kind of old-battleaxe officer that might not strictly approve of mass slaughter but certainly likes that Roy’s capable of it. He gambled on Bones being the type, and struck right. No wonder Armstrong likes her.

“Now. Amestris does not have teleportation, nor forcefield shielding, nor what I’m sure are other advantages in the magical arsenal,” Roy says. “Taking on a superior opponent, however, is only a matter of preparation. You and Alastor seem well versed on the kinds of defenses Malfoy may employ. I am confident in my team’s ability to address them.”

Bones chews on that for a long moment, but Roy can tell he’s made contact with a lever attached to something she wanted. She can think him a sociopathic jackass all she likes; she can clearly separate personal feeling from professional assessment, and what matters is that she thinks he’s the kind of sociopathic jackass who can solve her problem. “What are you going to do with Albus,” she says.

Ah. The real question. “You tell me,” Roy says mildly. “What kind of trouble is he likely to be?”

Bones scowls, a little of her business face relaxing into irritation. “He could stand to share a little more information now and then, but he’s not an idiot. He knows you’re here to help. Getting a straight answer out of him can be like pulling Nundu teeth but he knows we can’t afford not to use every resource.” Her scowl deepens, and here there’s a shadow of pain, and regret. “Or at least he seems like he does. I really don’t know what he was thinking, not putting wards on potter’s house.”

“He does seem to be getting on in years.” Roy’s not necessarily convinced that mere senility is at play, but then again, it’s not something to rule out for a hundred and fifty three year old, either. Albus didn’t interfere when Bones took over security arrangements for the potter house on the spot, but at that point it would’ve looked even worse for him if he did. The fact that Bones is defending Albus to Roy even after such a glaring red flag says a lot about the kind of cult of personality Albus has going for him. A hundred and fifty three - well, that’s a long time to cultivate a reputation. If you prove yourself still sane and capable at a hundred and twenty why should people presume you’d go batsypoo a mere thirty years later?

Bones gives Roy a look. “Mistakes or no, we need him. He is the most powerful wizard in great Britain. We want him close, if only to have something to throw at Voldemort if he swoops in with Merlin knows what and starts blasting his thricedamned curses.”

There is that. “If he’d prefer to concern himself with his prophecy, I don’t see why he wouldn’t leave operational planning to us.”
“And if he doesn’t?”

Roy raises an eyebrow. “You tell me, Director,” he repeats. “What is he likely to do, if things aren’t going the way he wants?”

Bones looks disgruntled. “Tell us even less and go off doing his own thing even more than usual,” she grumbles. “For you - well. He refuses to use the killing curse, and the rest of the order tends to follow, even though fighting bloody death eaters for your life has been found an acceptable defense for it in court. He doesn’t like to engage any death eater directly, and I have to agree with him there - you said it yourself; they’re civilians, mostly, and personally I’d prefer if we didn’t lose any more of the order.” Her mouth takes that grim twist again. “They’ll fight. But if dumbell door believes they can’t win without fulfilling the prophecy - the rest of them believe it too. And that affects how they think about things. How they think about the fight. And the methods they’re willing to use.”

“I see,” Roy says. They aren’t killers. He doesn’t disapprove, both morally and because it lessens the likely internal dangers his own team faces. There’s a difference between killing someone and making decisions likely to get people killed, however, and Albus has already proven himself dangerous in that regard. “We also, of course, would prefer to take every target alive, so that they may face appropriate legal justice.” Roy smiles thinly. “Which brings us to the larger problem. What are you going to do, when your state falls?”

Bones doesn’t look taken aback so much as skeptical. “When?”

“Lucius Malfoy heads a major political faction. Your minister, through either voluntary complicity, coercion or sheer incompetence, acts to defend them. Someone is sending unauthorized war weapons out into the field,” Roy says evenly. “If we are successful, all of these will very suddenly no longer be in any position to hold office. That is quite a chunk of power to remove from the board. Who takes charge, when these pieces are no longer in play?”

Bones stares at him, not quite thrown but certainly not expecting this. “Dumbell door,” she says. “I don’t see how it could be anyone else. He was stripped of his titles only recently, and - for a situation that’s... abrupt…”

She’s starting to look wary for the first time, if not of Roy then at least the scope of the situation he’s laid out for her. “Public opinion of him isn’t good right now, but if Voldemort is exposed as returned, it’s likely to turn around quick.” Her expression is settling fast, going evaluating, considering. “I don’t see who else it’d be,” she repeats, somewhat more slowly. “If not dumbell door.”

“Then we’d best make sure he’s worthy of the responsibility,” Roy says calmly. “Even if only to publicly name an appropriate successor before retiring. Peaceful transition of power is preferable, after all.”

“He would step down,” Bones says, certain of it. “Albus has been offered minister before, he didn’t want it. He only took mug Wump because it would’ve been him or Carrow and the entire Carrow family are nightmares of the first degree… it’s elections anyway. But you’re right. Whoever he endorses would be the shoe in. Especially if it’s clear that Voldemort really is back.”

“And who would he support as a successor?” Roy asks.

Now that’s a politician’s face. Bones eyes him, thoughtful frown stilled just enough that he can tell she’s pinned it on to do her thinking behind it. “Historically,” she says, with just a trace of self-aware irony, “many heads of the department of magical law enforcement have gone on to head the ministry.”
How convenient. “And you are already part of his private organization,” Roy says idly. “So you
tell me, Director. Do I need to do anything about Albus?”

Bones appraises him for a long moment, and Roy watches the numbers tick into place for her.
Accepting foreign aid always opens you to debt, even if you’re asking a childhood friend; she’s
already running that risk, and it’s not a small one. One day Olivier might ask for something in
return, and given how little their societies know each other, Bones has no way to predict what that
might be.

And Roy is not Olivier, and what he’s proposing is a little more complete than just arresting her
death eaters.

But she is a politician, not just a police chief. “No,” she finally says. “Not at the moment.”

Roy inclines his head in a very slight bow. “Then that is your answer. Though I would like to say
that as charming as this excursion has been so far, we cannot stay long, and I do not intend to make
the trip again. The intent is to take care of what needs to be done the first time around.”

“I see.” Bones regards him a moment longer, then turns to watch the distant blue shape of Riza
nearing the top of the tree. “I wouldn’t want to see anyone… hurt,” she says carefully.

“Neither do I,” Roy says with complete honesty, though of course what he wants has so little to do
with anything she might as well be commenting on the color of her underwear. “You don’t have
control of the press now, but as I said, if we are successful I imagine a lot of opportunities become
open to you very quickly. Albus was offered the minister position last time for defeating
Voldemort? Well, this time it will be you. Given our methods, it’s unlikely that keeping the results
quiet will be the problem, but feel free to compile a list of likely reporters and prepare a discreet
tipoff for when the time comes.”

Here Bones gives him a disbelieving eyebrow. “Amestris doesn’t want credit?”

Roy eyebrows her right back. “Why should we care what gets printed about us in a foreign
newspaper? We are a very distant country, after all. To anyone who matters, our work will speak
for itself.”

And if Fullmetal manages to build a scalable magic off switch without accidentally creating some
kind of doomsday machine, it’ll speak quite loudly indeed. No, Roy’s not worried about the
wizards forgetting what Amestrisans will do.

Bones’ expression has taken on a tinge of a new dog owner who has brought their mastiff home,
fitted it with its shiny new spiked collar and is only now realizing the size of the shits she is going
to have to shovel. “This is what I get for asking Livvie for help, isn’t it.”

Roy gives her a look of polite surprise. “Did you expect something different?”

“I don’t know what I expected. And I’m certainly getting it.” Bones blows out a breath and fixes
him with a look. “If that’s your way of things…”

“I am here to secure an open line of communication between our countries, Director. That works
best when there’s a stable, competent government on both sides,” Roy says. “I don’t particularly
care who’s in charge, so long as they pick up when Amestris calls and aren’t too busy fending off
their own homegrown homicidal necromancers.”

“Bloody mercenary as anything, the lot of you,” Bones mutters, but she sounds approving. “Well.
That’s that, then, isn’t it. All that’s left is to actually do it.”
Yes. Installing the police chief of a local cult to the highest office in Cult Government. Good grief.

“So.” Bones jerks her chin at the charred remains Riza swept out of the dirt circle. “Think you can kill a dementer with that?”

It’s Roy’s turn to narrow his eyes. The dementers. Fullmetal had been genuinely rattled by those things. *Like the Gate, but wrong.* If Edward thinks anything about that nightmare place can be right then Roy does *not* want to find out what wrong is. The fact that Fullmetal handled them easily enough doesn’t negate that they don’t know what the actual cause of death was, and thermite may well turn out to be the only effective method. If it’s heat alone Roy can create oxyhydrogen for fuel, but it’s not the standard array on his gloves and pretty much every option for upping his firepower comes with caveats in any case. He *could* split the water in the air, if he wanted to waste a few seconds on the secondary reaction and also introduce undirected hydrogen into what’s already an explosion, and hydrogen does *not* play nicely with fucking anything on top of being slippery as hell to control.

And that’s aside from other environmental considerations, when it comes to combat. Roy tends to shape his detonations around a fuel concentration with a single elemental chain that carries the spark from his gloves acting as the fuse. They’re more difficult to establish on windy or very humid days; they’re impossible in rain. Even if what he’s detonating is a solid fuel source, the spark wouldn’t make it more than a few centimeters from his ignition point due to the “fuse” constantly interrupted by falling droplets. Splitting water is an equal headache when it’s rain, a million discrete droplets unconnected to each other and demanding a serious alchemical drain just to connect the dots enough to split them into their component molecules again.

Roy might have the destructive edge, but in some ways Fullmetal is far more reliable. Atmospheric alchemy is temperamental. It’s not just gases, it’s everything suspended in them: water vapor, particulates, all of it constantly in flux due to a dozen evolving factors: temperature changes, objects in motion within the media, wind. The calculations are guesswork by default, and it’s not enough to get the numbers right: once you’ve gotten ahold of the elements, you have to move them where you need them to go. *Exactly* where you need them to go. And it is dependent on the weather.

There was a time when Roy enjoyed the challenge. Well, now here’s something to challenge him again. If the killswitch is nonviable the next logical power move will be to continue killing these things the wizards consider unkillable and keep going until there aren’t any left, and if it comes to mass exterminations of any sort it’s going to be Roy doing the work. Call it a preventative measure.

To Bones, Roy shrugs. “If we encounter any more I will certainly try.”

“You may well might,” Bones says, grim. “In the last war, the dementers defected to Voldemort en masse. They feed on fear and pain as well as souls, and he offers them enough to choke. If he moves openly, they’ll likely flock to him again, and there’s nothing the ministry can do to stop it.”

And to think Roy was almost starting to have a decent morning. “Yes,” he says delicately. “It’s time we got into the details.”

Chapter End Notes

Roy:[peels human skin off] ahh thats better
bones: ok yeah that’s about what i expected
The place called Diagonally turns out to be a tightly crowded shopping district made up entirely of aggressively narrow streets and alarmingly tilted buildings. Maes shouldn’t have bothered worrying they’d stand out; when the entire troop of them exits the bar they’d fire-teleported into they slot quite neatly into the throng of families who apparently also consider shopping to be an all-hands-on-deck no-man-left-behind experience. The noise level is a charming blend of hooting children and yelling animals, many of which appear to be equally off leash.

It’s very… quaint. If Gracia were here she would smile very indulgently and find something kind to say about the charm of cobblestones or crown molding or whatever. Unsafe construction, unsecured animals… yes, this place definitely looks a lot like the time Maes took Elysia to the traveling craft fair with an impending migraine.

They spend the first hour or so as retinue to the school shopping trip, Bill playing tourguide with Tonks providing asides as he points out ice cream and book stores and ‘potions ingredients’. Maes relegates all details of chocolate frogs and racing brooms to the spacious mental folder labeled *DRINK HEAVILY* and dedicates himself to being wowed by the rundown so Jones and Arget can pay attention to any potential irregularities in the crowd. Given the circumstances, they’ll need all the help they can get. A shrieking child careens into Jones’ legs and goes zooming off on a literal broomstick, hovering a few feet off the ground; an owl causes a temporary halt when it flaps off its perch and lands directly on Arget’s terrified shoulder. This provides great entertainment to their wizard retinue, especially the teenagers, and Maes mentally tacks on extra days to Jones’ and Argets’ already sizeable leave allowances.

It’s good field work experience for them, at any rate. Not sure how applicable any of the specifics will be, but throwing people in the deep end is a time-honored cornerstone of Amestrian higher education. Maes is pretty sure most of the Order thinks of them as capable but deprived peasants come down from some distant mountain to find the world contains things much more complicated than mud huts and hitting each other with sticks. They were surprised and dismayed in a not very invested way at the revelation that there are no wizards in Amestris, and seem to think it quite appropriate to regard them with a tint of good-natured pity every time something like their lack of possessed paintings or flying broomsticks comes up. Maes isn’t sure it’ll help to inform them that their estimated total population is less than the student body of the high school by his house in Central. The non-wizard people around here are the ones with roads and cities and cars and trains and radios, and the wizards seem to regard them with the benevolent pathos moneyed couples give plucky orphan children from a country they’re not interested in adopting from.

Well, what did he expect. It’s a scale problem, and cults are known to be insular and isolating, it’s practically a defining trait. They aren’t stupid, they’re just people. Maes would love to explore the broader society if they weren’t all under an invisibly ticking countdown courtesy of yet another aspiring genocidal entity with philosopher’s stones and a god complex; figuring out how this wizard/non-wizard divide came to be would doubtless give insights into the way they operate now.

But as things are they have no cultural experts and no time for the holistic approach. Maes casually asks Tonks about her work, trying to see if the beat cop ground level view corroborates the top down one; Bones had said there’d been no uptick in arrests, no ramp up in executions or judicial irregularities, but information isn’t intelligence until it’s verified by an outside source. Tonks does
happily report that nothing seems out of the usual, but it turns out when she says she’s junior she means *very* junior, not even assigned a division yet. Then some more conversation reveals to Maes that their police department doesn’t even *have* departments, and he has to downshift again.

“Well, there’s hit wizards,” Bill says. “But most of them got killed off in the first war - you know who targeted a lot of them first. And with the defense against the dark arts curse on the hog warts professorship, it’s been, well. I don’t think the numbers have ever gotten back to what they were.”

“Right now it’s mostly a double list,” Tonks says. “Some Aurors are on call as hit wizards, if they’re needed, but since they’re really only necessary for apprehending dark wizards there hasn’t been much call for them. They train and all, but all the calls I can think of in the past year were to help deal with magical creatures. Or Azkaban security. Moody was a hit wizard,” she adds. “Back before he lost his leg and went back to being a regular Auror.”

“You’re going to get training for undercover work, right?” Bill asks her.

“Yeah, but. Well. With one thing and another… doesn’t help much that I’m serious black’s cousin,” she says, somewhat rueful but not with any resentment Maes can see. “And it does mean I can help out more with the Order, since right now I mostly get assigned as security escort for visiting officials and things.”

That does make sense, for the profile of a police officer who would join an aspirationally paramilitary vigilante group. Family member wrongly imprisoned, suffering career repercussions at work for something out of her control; that makes sense. Bones, too, has ample motive to be spurning the state despite her *very* senior position: she’d lost her whole family to these terrorists, Olivier told Maes, all of them save her niece.

The group splits when the children go for what Maes understands to be uniform fittings, so he sends Havoc and Jones to stay on them and continue to try and see if anyone’s following them; Bill and Tonks offer to get a drink while they wait. There’s some confusion where they assume that means a takeaway coffee or something but turns out that no, the wizards mean sitting down at a dim bar at half past noon and ordering something called butter beer.

This turns out to be nonalcoholic, after an explanation that they are, in fact, on duty, and drinking is officially frowned upon in the Amestrian armed forces unless you’re actively bleeding out. Arget is braver than she looks and also finished her cadet deployment in Briggs, where they dump sheep lard into thrice-boiled tea to keep the chill away, so she gamely agrees to try some. Maes sticks to water. The Armstrong family doctors who had kept him alive via a long and complicated regimen of tube feeding had made it very clear what would happen to him if he tried to consume anything not on their approved list. He’s pushing things as it is, eating and drinking in not one but two foreign countries not a year after he’s been allowed solids again, but there comes a time where a man has to say fuck it and there is only so much even Gracia, culinary genius that she, could do to mitigate the mushiness of mush. Nourishing, healthful, medically very necessary much, but still… mush.

Maes isn’t reckless enough to haul off and eat five-spice liver and double-fried catfish and bomb his digestive tract over a craving, but on dark nights he does worry he’s developing a fetish for spiced crackers that’s starting to get upsettingly sexual. Better not try his luck by throwing any wizard beer into the mix.

He trusts in Al’s filtering array on their inner elbows to take care of anything too dire, at least, and after some negotiation Bill and Tonks agree to sit on one of the few rickety tables outside, backs to the wall but with a clear view of all passerby.
“Oh, and there’s Gringotts,” Bill says as they sit down, pointing at a big white columned building across the street. “Main branch. I’m not there too often, really - they don’t need curse breakers here much, they prefer to process what they can on site where it’s found - but it’s headquarters.”

“Perfect,” Maes says, deciding they may as well get to the point. “Let’s talk money.”

Bill gives him a politely wary look, glancing at the butter beers he’d paid for. “Do you… need some…?”

“Oh, no,” Maes assures, figuring it’s probably best not to bring up that between Ed and Al they can have their own fully operating mint set up in under an hour. “Not mine. Our dear associates on the other other side of the law. With those charming tattoos of the skulls and snakes and such.”

Bill and Tonks casually glance around, and Arget follows suit, somewhat more discreetly. “Go on,” Bill says, no less wary.

“Any operation requires funding, yes?” Maes says. “Food, bribes, equipment, wages - even wizards have expenses.”

“Well… if they’re run like the order, maybe not.” Tonks says, brows meeting. “Everyone’s on their own coin, more or less. And Mal - many of the, uh, group, are rich. Or their families are.”

“So who do we bribe to get their assets frozen?” Maes says reasonably. “Or at least seize their financial records.” Getting ahold of that is the first step to breaking the terrorists’ supply lines and starving them of resources: if you have to directly engage an enemy, it’s better to face a hungry, evicted and underequipped one. “We know some names. We also know the state is fully compromised, but that doesn’t preclude us from working unofficially. Connecting on an individual level, as it were.”

Bill and Tonks both look warily uncomprehending. “We don’t need their accounts to be officially frozen,” Maes clarifies, deciding that directness and small words are going to spare them all a lot of suffering. “If we can introduce red tape, holdups, technical difficulties - use anything that would interrupt their cash flow. Throw anything that works. Usually that takes some favors or a bribe. You know the industry - what’s likely to be the going price?”

Bill, whose expression has been going significantly more disbelieving, says “You want to bribe the goblins?”

That’s very much a you want to put your dick WHERE? kind of voice. “Goblins,” Maes repeats. “Ahaha. This is local slang for bankers, yes? A charming euphemism?”

“What?” Bill says. “Oh, no. No, that’s… Merlin.” He looks like he wants to rub his temples. “No werewolves, no animate paintings, no house elves in... Amestris. Right. No goblins either. Look - the goblin nation is… they’re like people, they just look different, and they have their own ways and their own magic. They run the banks. They make incorruptible currency and they provide neutral ground for deals and vows and things. And they run the bank.”

Like people, Maes notes. “Incorruptible currency?”

“Can’t be melted down,” Bill explains. “It’s protected with their magic. Can’t be replicated with wizard magic either.”

Something to mention to Ed and Al, then, Maes notes instead of internally screaming about goblins, in case they do have to end up minting. They’ll probably be able to figure it out.
“Just one bank?” Arget asks, looking like she already knows the answer and is grimly staving off flashbacks of the discovery of one newspaper.

“Since the goblins handle the banking… yeah,” Bill tells her. “They’d hardly make two.”

“So it’s considered a foreign nation entirely? Not at all subject to your own state?” Maes asks.

“Well… after the goblin rebellions there’s been a kind of… agreement,” Bill says, turning his own butter beer glass but watching Maes with a thoughtful line between his brows. “They weren’t able to pass anything formal in the Wizengamot, but this got everyone to stop hexing each other and got the banks reopened, so it’s held as a compromise so far. The goblins value gold, see? And precious metals and stones. And witches and wizards need to use money, so the agreement is the goblins control the currency and the ministry doesn’t interfere in their affairs. Not everyone likes it, and there’s still disagreements over wands and things, of course, but. It works.”

It’s not exactly a political history briefing, but it’ll do. “Goblins don’t like wizards much, I take it,” Maes says.

Tonks snorts as Bill quirks the side of his mouth. “You could say that.” His expression returns to seriousness. “I don’t know that… your proposal… would work. Goblins take their security very seriously, and they don’t trust humans at all. They protect their own first. They kept the Lestrange and Carrow and black vaults open during the last war - didn’t want the dark lord coming after them. Angering one of you know who’s followers is not a chance they’re likely to take, not even for a price.”

“The Mal- the, uh, family we’re talking about has their own vault, and the goblins won’t stop them accessing it, not so long as they have the right keys,” Tonks says. “A lot of the old pure blood families have home vaults too, and Gringotts doesn’t control those at all.”

Maes hmms. “So they’re more responsive to threats.”

Bill and Tonks’ expressions slowly freeze, like a couple of penguins who’ve spotted the orca circling the ice floe. “You want to threaten the goblins?” Tonks says.

“Threatening goblins is a bad idea,” Bill says, with the controlled alarm of a drill sergeant who suddenly finds it necessary to explain exactly what happens when you pull the pin from the grenade. “Very bad idea. Do not do it.”

“But it gets results,” Maes points out. “The terrorists retained access to their finances by threatening violence. If giving a sweeter carrot won’t do it, we’ll just have to be the bigger stick.”

They might not even need Roy, probably, if it comes to it. Ed killed those dementer things. Depending on how the next couple of days go, Maes might need to make sure that news gets around.

Bill’s looking at Maes like he also saw the brief mental image of Roy entering the bank across the street and turning those nice clean white columns into soot-blasted rubble. “You want to make the goblins more afraid of you than of Vol - you know who?”

Maes smiles, eyebrows up. “Well, no one really believes he’s back, don’t they? If they think he’s dead, why shouldn’t we be the new scariest things come to town?”

“Threatening the goblins will start a war,” Bill says slowly and clearly, like a man determined to exhaust all other options before he starts shouting.
“Did it start a war when Voldemort threatened them?” Maes asks, because it sounds like it sure fucking didn’t.

“... No,” Bill has to admit, looking deeply pained and mildly horrified by this. Then he rallies and says, “But there was already a war on.”

“So? So’s now,” Maes says. “That’s the whole reason we’re here, isn’t it? Just because it hasn’t officially been declared by the state doesn’t mean people aren’t already dead.”

Bill doesn’t look like he likes that any, but also doesn’t have anything to dispute it with. “There you go,” Maes says. “Besides, I’m sure it won’t come to that.” It'll absolutely come to that. In negotiations Roy doesn’t even start shopping for carrots until he already has his hands full of great big sticks. Haha.

Maes grins at the wizards, deciding that further conversation on the finance topic can wait until they’re in a more secure location and everyone has calmed down. “Never mind that, though. Tell me, what do people do for fun in these wizardly parts?”

Bill and Tonks just stare at him for a while. “We’re not going to go off threatening anyone now,” Maes assures them, because it looks like they need to hear that for their cognitive processes to continue. “That sort of thing takes preparation. Research. Some of which you can help us with right now, actually! So. Fun?”

“Well, there’s… going out for drinks,” Bill says slowly, like he fears revealing the existence of bars will make them invade the nearest dive and start threatening the bartender. Maes sometimes wishes he were less familiar with this as the typical response to exposure to an Amestrisan military officer.

“People play Quidditch,” Tonks says, equally wary. “And just fly their brooms sometimes. When the weather’s right. Statute of secrecy and all.”

“What kind of bars?” Arget asks, valiantly trying to pick up the slack that normally Jones would be handling. “Is there… cabaret, and that sort of thing?”

It’s blunter than Maes would like, but he hasn’t got any correction for her; they have an objective to meet here. Usually he’d prefer to let conversation spool out more naturally, building the relationship as much as gathering information - you want the mark to offer up the information of their own accord, no direct questions to trip any alarm bells, nothing obvious that they can point out and say that’s what they were fishing for - but they just don’t have the time.

“There are plays,” Bill offers, like it’s a sacrificial goat thrown to the wolves so that the bars might have a chance to get away. “There’s a theater down the way, past flourish and blots. Are you looking for something else to do? I mean, I don’t think Mum and the others are going to be much longer, but. We could get ice cream.”

Arget opens her mouth, but is clearly at a loss as to how to steer the conversation the way they need without her directly asking where people go to see some tits around here. Well, they aren’t going to get anywhere at this rate. “Bill, I’m going to be frank with you here,” Maes says, placing his hands on the table to lean forward and look him sincerely in the eyes. “We’re talking about prostitutes.”

Bill’s eyes widen, and not in a promising way. “What?”

“Sex workers,” Maes clarifies, in the meager hope that this is nothing more than another silly
translation oopsie. “Body artists. Carnal professionals.” Maes can see on Bill's face a flicker of hope that he's talking about creative dropouts who do unconventional things with paint and nudity, but it dies at the mention of ‘carnal’. “You know. Hookers. We need to talk to some. Ideally the most popular ones.”

“What?” Bill repeats, much more squeakily.

Is this one some kind of virgin? Maes abandons Bill and turns to Tonks. “If not most popular any bigger house will do. Do you know where the largest establishment is around here?”

But Tonks just gives an uncomfortable half-smile, like she’s unsure whether to laugh or not. “Is this like with the hair? It’s, you know. Hard to tell when you lot are joking.”

“Haha, yes,” Maes agrees, because that had been hilarious. “Not this time, though. Look, you don’t have to come with us, but we’d appreciate at least getting directions.”

“To…” Bill trails off, faint.

“A brothel,” Maes says helpfully.

“Here?” Tonks says incredulously.

“Well yes,” Maes says, smiling. He’s starting to get a little testy. “This city is the capital, yes? And we are in the wizard community’s downtown?”

“You want to find *prostitutes* in *diagonally*?” Bill says, strangled, just as Tonks says, “That’s illegal.”

Ooohhh boy. “What’s illegal?” Maes says, feeling his good old friend Impending Doom settle a friendly arm around his shoulders.

“*Prostitution,*” Tonks half-hisses, glaring up at him: she’s starting to go red, and there’s anger in the blush, not just embarrassment.

Maes can’t unpack all of that now, though, because - what? “How is *that* illegal?”

Tonks just stares back at him like he asked why it’s not okay to scalp puppies. “Some… religions don’t allow for it?” Arget tries uncertainly, glancing at Maes.

“You can’t,” Bill starts, keeping his voice down, then seems too uncomfortable to continue whatever *that* thought was going to be. “It’s not - look, it’s not *religious,* just - it’s - you’re not supposed to do that sort of thing.”

“What, have sex?” Maes says, momentarily too incredulous to be polite. “How do you *reproduce?* Do you find each other in the cabbage patch?”

“No, that’s not - just. It’s… it’s not right, to pay for it,” Bill finishes lamely, though now he’s started to go red too.

“How are we even *talking about this,*” Tonks says, red to her ears and looking deeply aggrieved about it.

Maes feels a thousand years old, and not only because these two grown adults are acting like fourteen year olds being asked about their crush. “I see,” he says generously. “It’s a *cultural* thing! I completely understand. So how is this enforced? Are all kinds of sex work forbidden?”
Bill stares at him like he’s just asked if he personally prefers anal. “I don’t think we’ve got… kinds,” he says after a long moment, like he’s trying to be tactful to someone he’s not sure deserves it.

“Prostitution and soliciting prostitution are illegal,” Tonks says coldly, clearly trying to recover her composure despite her still-flaming cheeks. “You aren’t going to find any in diagonally.”

“Do the police get involved often?” Maes asks, because if they conduct raids then they’ll at least have a general idea of where the brothels are.

“Aurors don’t really get called out for that sort of thing.” Tonks says flatly, the redness definitely now edging more anger than embarrassment. “It doesn’t much come up. If someone calls in a tip on someone doing that sort of thing they get summoned to court and fined.”

Maes frowns. “How?” Sex workers take on professional identities for plenty of reasons, and he’d imagine it’s only more necessary when the work is illegal; Maes hadn’t learned Gracia’s real name until that junior officer party at Madame Chris’, where Roy, with the glassy look of a man parasailing over his own personal hell, had taken Maes aside and said listen if I tell you something about me and you keep it to yourself I can get you in the champagne room for free with Trixi. “Is this like tracking the wands?”

Tonks frowns back. “What?”

“How do they get summoned? Is it by name? If someone reports this as a crime, how do they get the identities of the people involved?” Because “called in as a tip” usually means some annoyed civilian trying to get back at their neighbor. Policing sex work in general sounds like a shitshow; if hearsay is enough to convict someone of the act - though, aha, they have their truth telling potion, don’t they. If the confessions are obtained and considered valid that way, then there’s no need for a trial: either you did it or you didn’t, according to the magic juice.

“It’s usually a relative,” Tonks says, even more coldly. “Or someone who recognizes them.”

Good grief. Maes briefly exchanges looks with Arget, who looks just as blankly dismayed as he feels. That must be one hell of a cultural taboo. Sex work has never been strictly respectable even in Amestris - where, as the Cretans say, everything is legal and if it’s not you’ll find it anyway - but it’s not treated like this. Everyone visits the party districts sooner or later, for the shows and dancers if not for the more expensive offerings, and the police tend to keep their interventions to bar fights and emergency calls; every brothel Maes has ever been to keeps bouncers, usually ex-soldiers, and they aren’t shy about dragging a client to the local lockup if someone gets rowdy. The cops can get lazy because of that, knowing private security is always on the scene, and as usual soldiers and police get along like rats and snakes, but nobody wants to piss a brothel off too badly. They blacklist.

That’s long been why Roy’s network is so useful: straddling every social class, it’s the trough at which every horse can drink, so to speak. And outlawing something doesn’t mean people won’t buy, sell and use it. It’ll just likely be harder to find the tenderloin district here. It’s not like brothels are usually in the best neighborhoods in Amestris either, especially in more provincial towns or those with the more ascetic religious sects; if sex work is outlawed wholesale, that probably means brothels have followed in the footsteps of all other criminal enterprise and either set up shop the worst areas or started operating under a front. Most likely both.

Maes, Jones and Havoc likely won’t be able to just come in for a drink and some company as prospective clients, either. He could theoretically send Arget; Jones is one of Maes’ best officers because he can be at ease in any company and situation, and Arget is often his field partner
because she’d probably feel socially awkward alone in her own bedroom. In some cases, though, sending in someone obviously inexperienced achieves the objective more effectively than a seasoned expert. Anybody looking at Marilee Arget in civvies is going to think tax accountant, not cop, and given they don’t even have a military here it’s even more unlikely anyone will think soldier.

“Listen,” Bill says, bringing Maes back to the conversation in time to catch his sideways glance at Tonks. “You can’t just ask people where to find prostitutes.”

“Well, we can’t exactly look them up ourselves,” Maes says, because while accommodating local cultural norms is often more a matter of survival than politeness, they are here to do a job. Taboo or not, they still need information. “The translation rocks don’t extend to writing.”

“Still,” Bill says, red-eared but dedicated to his cause. “It’s inappropriate.”

Maes reevaluates the leather pants, earring and aura of determined embarrassment regarding Tonks and mentally shifts Bill closer to the Ed Elric category: dresses to bite but can’t help the occasional fits of sweetness. Usually misguided. Tonks doesn’t look like she needs any help setting her jaw in a ask-again-at-your-own-peril angle.

Then Bill glances over Maes’ shoulder, expression immediately cracking into relief. “There they are,” he says. “Looks like they’re all done. Come on, we can see if they need help carrying anything.”

Molly Weasley and the teenagers are all headed towards them down the street, looking like they don’t need any help at all given plenty of their purchases are apparently hovering weightless alongside them. It doesn't stop Bill and Tonks fleeing the table and the conversation like they think Maes and Arget are going to rip their clothes off and demand they all lick cherry syrup off each other. Maes sighs and pushes back from the table more slowly, partly because of existential dismay and partly because there’s a lot of scar tissue across his chest and abdomen these days that dictates what he can do and how fast. “We’ve learned something new, at least.”

“They think we’re sex maniacs, don’t they,” Arget says sadly.

“Very likely,” Maes acknowledges. “Can’t always plan for unexpected cultural nuances.” He sighs. “Let’s hope Jones and Havoc haven’t been experiencing anything equally educational.”

The entire group adjourns down a quieter and even more cramped side street with a dead end, where the teenagers start shrinking down their stacks of books and unpleasantly organic-smelling lumpy packages. “Eye of newt,” one of the twins explains as they edge past with their noses wrinkled. “Got to have it for potions class. Otherwise Snape will try to kick us out of class and the order.”

What a charming reminder that the ex-terrorist is also a schoolteacher as well as a comrade vigilante. “Any tails?” Maes asks Jones and Havoc, not lowering his voice to any suspicious whispering but angling the conversation towards privacy, shifting his shoulders to face away from the wizards.

“None that we saw,” Jones says. “A few people stopped and said hello to them in the shops, but they could identify everybody who watched them without coming up.” He pulls a face slightly. “Not that it might matter here, with their body snatching toenail juice.”

Havoc shudders with feeling. Maes doesn’t blame him. The explanation of how their poly juice potion worked went directly past Maes’ DRINK HEAVILY cabinet and straight into the WORST
“SHIT I’VE EVER HEARD” trophy shelf. “We can debrief the wizards properly when we get back, I suppose. We’re going to need more information in any case. Our next move needs some strategizing.”

Jones frowns slightly, glancing between him and Arget. “We’re not…”

Maes sighs. “Sex work is illegal in this society.”

“How do you mean illegal,” Havoc says blankly, as Molly Weasley does a sharp double take at the edge of Maes’ vision. Ah. He didn’t exactly mean to have this become a group discussion, but with seven kids it’s unsurprising she’s got the ears of a bat and the shit-hitting-fan radar of manure farmer in windmill country.

“I mean it’s against the law,” Maes tells Havoc, because they might as well get this out of the way, and despite the sudden dead silence and proliferation of bugged looks on every single teenager Maes highly doubts he’s sharing anything they don’t already know. They aren’t exactly children.

“So our plans have changed slightly.”

“Wait, but,” Havoc says, looking like he just got invited to his own goldfish’s funeral: ready to mourn, but mostly just bewildered as to who organized this and why. “Prostitution? Illegal?” One of the redheaded children makes a 

hnee? noise. “Cultural misunderstanding, cultural misunderstanding!” Bill says quickly, stepping forward and waving his hands between his mother and Maes like he’s trying to do a nothing to see here. “He doesn’t mean - that, he means - er -”

“What do I mean?” Maes asks, half annoyed, half honestly curious as to what Bill might come up with. “Do you have something instead of prostitution?”

“I think the translation stones may be acting up again,” Bill says just slightly too loudly, making hard eye contact with Maes of the you are NOT HELPING variety. “You know, maybe we should give those things a break, cast that translation spell loop in used instead -“

Okay, Maes can understand not necessarily wanting to discuss hookers in front of your own mother, but Bill is acting like she’s going to snap and start chasing them with a chainsaw if she hears the trigger word prostitution one more time. “We just need to know where they are,” he says. “I doubt we’ll have time for a visit today.” Especially if it turns out they are being followed and the brothels aren’t part of any standard entertainment district.

“Why are we looking for - oh. For the chief,” Havoc finishes glumly. “This is why you made me change my shirt, isn’t it.”

“Completely illegal?” Jones says doubtfully, brows furrowed. “All of it?”

“It could work in our favor,” Maes tells them, trying to orient back around to the immediately relevant. “Criminal activity tends to cluster together. It’ll probably be more difficult to access them as a resource, given they’ll be taking steps to disguise their business, but given we have inroads to the justice department it’s possible we may be able to cut them a deal. Indemnity, potentially expunged past criminal records, that sort of thing. Hmm.”

He notices the variety of expressions coming his way from the wizard contingent, and it occurs that the past ten minutes of conversation could, actually, sound a lot like they were looking for a titty party at eleven in the morning on a Tuesday. “We aren’t here for entertainment,” he says, because it seems like this is going to need explicit clarification before any of them are going to be
able to continue. “We’re looking for information regarding our work. People talk. Sex workers listen.”

“Oh,” Bill says, looking massively relieved. “Oh. It’s just - they’re just looking for information,” he pronounces, not quite in the direction of his mother. Molly Weasley continues to stare at Maes like he just suggested they all go have an orgy in the nearest park, so he’s not sure how much of a dent that’s making. They really don’t like talking about sex around here.

“What kind of information?” one of the twins asks, deeply fascinated, and immediately his mother raps out “George Weasley!”

“The information we’re all looking for,” Maes says mildly. “Where you get sex you get all kinds of other adult fun. Drink, drugs, gambling, arms smuggling. A little light terrorism.”

“Mister Hughes, they are children,” Molly Weasley says sharply. “We are not going to discuss this here.”

“You’re the one who told Ron what a scarlet woman was, Mum,” says the formerly possessed child - Ginny Weasley, looking up with well-crafted innocence at her mother. “It’s alright, we already know all about that sort of thing.”

“That is not the same,” Molly Weasley barks, then visibly recalls that they are still technically on a public street. “This is a discussion for later. All of you, pack up your things, we’re heading back to Gr- home.”

All the teenagers and especially the twins continue to look rabidly curious - unsurprising, really; forbidding a thing only makes teens want it more, and sex work is outright illegal here - but they do resume shrinking their purchases. Tonks, though, blows out a breath and looks directly at Maes; she meets his eyes squarely despite a tint of red rising in her cheeks again, this time seeming more embarrassed than angry. “Sorry,” she says, apparently sincere. “It’s just, well. Bit of a sore subject. People like to make jokes and things, when you’re a Metamorphagus.”

“Whoa, really?” That’s Ginny Weasley again, pausing with a pungent smelling sack in hand to stare up at Tonks like she’s just admitted to some secret celebrity status. “You’re a Metamorphagus?”

“Yeah, didn’t anyone mention?” Tonks glances around, and all the teenagers shake their heads, magic things paused mid-shrink.

“What’s a Metamorphagus,” Maes asks, because in this culture shock ping pong match of an op it seems it’s now the Amestrisan serve to warily ask what the hell they’re talking about.

“Oh,” Tonks says, the redness starting to creep higher on her cheeks. She looks between Maes and Arget, looking slightly sheepish. “Sorry, I - thought you knew that, it’s why I - anyway. It just means I can do this,” she says, and her face -

- changes.

Maes goes cold. His sleeve knife is in his hand. Not enough. He doesn’t have a gun in easy reach, not in civilian dress. He has to - he -

There’s no red light. No crackle. The woman’s face warps, but it’s not the same. Clothes, hair - didn’t change. Body didn’t change. Just her face. Her nose. No one’s panicking.

“Mister Hughes? Are you alright?”
His breath skips from his lungs and then comes right back doubletime. Shapeshifter. He - they have them here. He knows this. They were warned. This is not new information. Not new enough to draw on, civilians be damned. Jones - Jones, Arget. They’re right there, hands on their holsters, watching the perimeter. Watching the woman.

“Colonel Hughes?”

Shapeshifter. Again. Maybe he did die in that phone booth and everything since has just been one big joke of an afterlife, bestowed by some real comedian of a divinity. People’s souls getting sucked out, disembodied children, homunculi… his life used to be normal, full of war and genocide and corruption up to the neck. Alright, that all turned out to be all about the damn freak superalchemy shit too, but it’s not like war and corruption and so forth are unique. Plenty of other countries have those. It’s just Amestris that got the honor of hosting the garnish of all that other extra freak shit, and for some spectacularly stupid reason when fleeing for her life Grangran decided that that’s where settling down would be a great idea.

“Colonel Hughes?”

It’s Jones, one hand still tucked inside his jacket on his sidearm, expression carefully not too concerned. “Sir?”

Maes inhales, exhales. “Just surprised!” He sounds too bright, too sharp, but his expression is under control. “We don’t have that in Amestris either!” Not unless things have gone to absolute shit. “And only you can do that? What did you say your species was called?”

“I’m a Metamorphagus,” Tonks says, now sporting an entirely new very hooked nose, looking a little concerned by Maes’ smile but not enough for him to give a shit. “It’s not a species, some wizards and witches are just born like that. It’s - fairly rare?”

“Oh good!” Maes says, meaning it with every still-vibrating cell of his body. He has to tell Roy, only he can’t tell Roy, because Roy will wear this girl’s skin as a warning. No, he can communicate this correctly, he can share relevant intelligence in a way that won’t lead to fire and screaming. “So you’re one of those shapeshifters we’ve been told about. We weren’t aware there were any among your group.”

“Well, I wouldn’t really call Metamorphaguses shapeshifters,” Tonks says, but she looks uncomfortable and the teenagers are all giving each other deeply unpromising glances. “I can only change my hair and face, really. Nothing big.”

“Amazing!” Maes says, turning his grin to Molly Weasley. “You know, you’re right. This really isn’t a conversation for the street! Let’s all head back, shall we?” He needs to get his back against a wall right fucking now, and preferably one where Roy can find him. “We’ve got lots to talk about.”

Chapter End Notes

maes: when i said “where the freaks at” this is NOT what i meant
“So what’s our plan Z?” Al says. “What are we going to do if this doesn’t work, and simulating cardiac arrest doesn’t either?”

“Well, we’re not killing the kid,” Ed says irritably, flopping back on his elbows onto the dirt. “Are you seeing a reason plans alpha gamma delta wouldn’t work?”

“I’m just considering the options.” Al sits more carefully, because his joints aren’t always happy with him and it’s better to take things easy when he has the opportunity. “We’re working with a lot of unknowns and a lot of unpredictables. If the testing doesn’t go like we think, we’d better have something we can start work on right away as backup.”

“Ugh. Ya.” Ed sits up off his elbows and puts his palms out like he’s weighing a couple of pineapples. “Okay. So. We got two souls -”

“Two qi signatures,” Al corrects.

“- ya, double qi, okay. And we have the physical anchor for both.”

“A human body.”

“Right. So if we set aside human transmutation and the whole thing where we’re talking about fucking around with souls again -”

“- it’s just a question of finding what else there is that can detach a human soul from a body anchor.” Al sighs. “Which brings us right back around to my simulating mortal shock idea. What else could we try?”

“Beardy and the others talked about their lord wingwang splitting his own soul,” Ed says consideringly. “And Hohenheim’s fuckin’ stunt double split off bits of himself to make the homunculi. The potential to separate is there.”

“If the homunculi weren’t just corrupted Xerxesian souls,” Al counters, because while he personally is reserving judgment on the feasibility of true soul splitting due to lack of evidence he does agree that Ed’s theory on the homunculi’s origins has merit.

“Ya, but if everybody in question is starting with more than one soul in the body,” Ed says, shaping a kind of weird swimming-squid gesture with both hands, “which the kid is, the process is proven a couple times over.”

“Which just brings us right back as to how the separation even works,” Al points out. “If we can’t figure out how to access a soul without committing human transmutation and paying a toll, the question of whether we can split one is moot.”

Ed scowls but lets his squid hands drop, blowing out a long breath of agreement. He stares out at his boots, not looking at Al. “What you did for me. Could you?”

Al settles back as well, exhaling no less heavily. He’d been half expecting this to come up ever since soul talk started, but Ed really doesn’t like bringing up any time he feels somebody sacrificed
for him. “I don’t know.”

He really doesn’t. When Hawkeye came to visit them in Resembool a few weeks after they returned from their first trip to Xing, they’d had no idea she was there for anything more than a country weekend to say hello, and Al definitely had no idea that the very next day he’d be performing soul surgery again on his big brother.

“I don’t think it’d be the same situation,” he says aloud. “With us, it wasn’t really… I wasn’t accessing your qi.”

That’s not anywhere near the whole of it, but he likes talking about this about as much as Ed does, even if for different reasons. Al taps his fingers on his cane, thinking. “What about what you did for Pride?”

Ed huffs. “What, unzip his entire corporeal existence like a fanny pack and let all his extra souls spill out? Dunno. He tried to unzip me first.” He knocks his boots together, thinking. “Pride was already an energy medium. I had to transmute myself to be able to access him on the same level. The Hairy kid’s just a kid. And I’d have to establish some kind of connection. Which would be pretty fucky given Pride established one by trying to eat me, and if I try it here and it goes wrong that kid’s kaput. He’s not even an alchemist.”

Al nods, because that’s more or less the shape of what he was thinking, too. “So we’re stuck on cardiac arrest for now.”

“Which should work fine if the array doesn’t. If he dies a little bit, and everything detaches like we want it to - the original soul is gonna try and get back into the body on its own,” Ed says.

“If it even is a piece of soul,” Al says wearily. “I keep telling you, it’s qi, and not like any kind I’ve ever seen before -”

“Okay, well, temporarily murdering him will unstick the qi too, won’t it? Don’t start a terminology argument again.”

“You being unable to spell is not a terminology argument -”

“I spell fine.” Ed lies baldly. “My point is, if we’re coming up nothing, we’re coming up nothing, and brainstorming this can wait. If we can’t shut off magic we have way bigger problems with the wizards anyway, no matter how interesting the soul thing is.”

“What do we do if that doesn’t work?” Al says.

Ed blows his bangs out of his face. “Mustang. Hawkeye.” He’s huffy as a pug, but Al can tell he’s genuinely unhappy with the idea. “And we run whatever support we can.”

Al looks down at his own knees. For all that Ed works directly with General Mustang and his team, he’s not often in the field with them: they’re too senior to be the boots on the ground and have been for a while. Ed’s rank is real enough, but he’s a specialist and a field agent - Lieutenant Colonels run teams, coordinate projects, organize offices, but Ed’s bars are for him to be able to request soldiers and supplies at local garrisons, give orders that’ll have to be followed even if people don’t know him. Al’s pretty sure General Mustang is also using it to hold the doom of an office job over Ed’s head, but it’s not much of a threat to have in reserve given he did give Ed to Colonel Hawkeye.

Which in itself was a masterstroke of a move. General Mustang knew he would never get real soldier’s obedience from Ed. So he sent Ed to someone who would.
Al hasn’t yet decided how he feels about that. He and Ed both know that you can’t always think in an emergency, can’t second-guess; they know that soldiers obey orders for a reason, that the trust that your team will obey is necessary to keep things glued together when a situation gets fudged to schnitz. And Ed does trust Mustang. To a degree that worries Al, sometimes: Ed came back to him, after all, to a dangerous career and a deadly political ambition.

But Ed also has - well, Al’s seen a lot of people mistake it for problems with authority, but it’s mostly just problems with idiots, assholes and men. Colonel Hawkeye is none of the above, and she’s been a friend to them, the truest kind. To Ed especially. Al owes her for it, no matter what she says, and there’s genuinely no one he’d rather have as his brother’s CO. But above all else, Colonel Hawkeye is loyal to General Mustang, and to have Ed’s natural defenses sidestepped so neatly - no matter how needed or even well-intentioned it may have been - means Al needs to pick up the slack.

So far it hasn’t been necessary. Even with Void. Al had still been in Amestris then, prepping for Xing and taking classes at Central U, and at the time all he’d known was Ed had been pulled to the Cretan border for an alchemical emergency, stayed gone for ten days and called once, to tell Al to try and find him an official dress uniform: for the next two weeks Ed would be attending state funerals. And then he came home, and quietly told Al he’d helped kill someone.

Al understood the situation. He listened to Ed outline what happened, what the Void Alchemist was doing, what he’d done; he agreed with the assessment they’d made on the ground. He also knew what Ed would be getting into, when he went back to the military. General Mustang had told them both point blank - if you do this, Edward, it’ll be for real. Because Ed hadn’t been a real soldier before, no matter what the papers said, and everyone knew it; their way had been paved with exceptions. And Al knows exceptions were made again, that Ed didn’t have to go through officer school or boot camp, that he only had to pass the fitness test and recertify his State Alchemist license to be installed as a full Lieutenant Colonel. He knows General Mustang is personally and professionally invested in keeping Ed’s hands out of blood.

On the whole, the past three years of military work have been good for Ed. Al doesn’t worry about leaving him alone anymore, when he has people who can back him up and talk him down, who understand him. Al doesn’t want to interfere. But he also knows that General Mustang and Colonel Hawkeye are both killers, and in the path he’s chosen it is inevitable that sometimes Ed gets shoved right up against that fact face-first.

Al doesn’t know what it says about himself that when he looks at this head on, foremost among the mitigating thoughts is at least they’re good at it.

“It probably won’t come to that,” he says aloud. “And with all of us here, even if the array doesn’t work as we need it to I don’t doubt we’ll come up with something regardless.” Then, because Ed’s started to go grim around the edges, he adds, “You and the General are two of the most creative alchemists in Amestris.”

“Him? Mister one trick mustang? Mister plots all day but can’t pivot tactics under live fire unless it’s literally to save his life -”

“He did transmute and ionize a noble gas with those letters last night,” Al says mildly. “The precision was very impressive. Did he fake a diode, do you think?”

Ed snarls incoherently and takes off on a foaming tirade of insults interspersed with transmutational analysis. Al lets the waves of invective wash over him for a bit before interjecting, “You two haven’t bit each other yet.”
“Hah! Not for lack of trying! Did you fuckin’ hear his ass? Hair this, chimney face that! I hate it when he goes all catty and won’t just fucking talk straight already.”

“Ah,” Al says, recognizing the problem. “You mean he’s stopped letting you provoke him into shouting.”

“He hasn’t stopped! He just gets pissy and forgets how to communicate sometimes. Honestly, some days he acts like he’s five.”

Al observes a moment of silence for his brother’s unparalleled self-awareness and impeccably honed sense of irony. “You’re absolutely right, brother.”

Ed squints at him because he can tell Al’s telling the truth but also that he’s laughing at him, so Al smiles and stands up, dusting off his pants. “I’m glad your communication styles work so well together,” he tells Ed sincerely. “I have to go to the bathroom, so if the wizard gentleman comes out with all his cursed things before I do, don’t you dare start without me.”

“We don’t work well together,” Ed says indignantly, puffing up into steam again, but Al really does have to use the bathroom and as funny as Ed’s General Mustang impressions are he’s seen a lot of them by now, so he leaves Ed paddling up the river of denial and heads back to the house.

Chapter End Notes

al: my brother thinks he’s the one lurking protectively behind me holding a big hammer but in fact it is i standing behind him and i am the biggest hammer of all
Ed claps to push the dirt walls back a bit and make himself a low bench to write on, giving them some space to work; it’s not real science unless you write it down, and if he takes all the notes now he can bully Al into writing up the actual paper all nicely later. Even if it doesn’t work as expected, it’s still pretty fuckin’ significant that ‘magic’ here is a kind of qi; if nothing else Al will be able to take their experimental data back to Xing and get in good with the Imperial academic alkahestrists. According to Mei they’re a bunch of stuck-up assholes - Ed and Al’s Xingese is okay these days, but apparently there’s whole boatloads of connotations like how you can actually be unspeakably rude to someone just by speaking super formal at them, so Mei still has to explain half the time whether someone was genuinely showing respect or hates their guts. Giving Al something they’ll want is a good thing.

If it doesn’t work. Well. If they can’t shut off magic, they’ll have to do everything the hard way, not just figure out how to distill Essence of Hairy from Taint of Lord Waitlist. Well, fine. Ed does not want to involve Gate fuckery, but he’s not going to flinch away from considering all the options. If what actually happened with lord warthog is he constructed a body and bound his soul to it - and if he did split his soul and hook it onto Hairy’s little brain train as an evil little tagalong caboose - then even if they turn lord waterbed into crispy fried chunks he might just start full-on possessing the kid instead.

Here’s the secret: human transmutation doesn’t always cost an arm and a leg. You can access your own soul, and fuck around with it bigtime without losing anything immediate like body parts: Ed healing his impalement proved that. And you can move things around in someone else’s soul without hitting the Gate, too: Al performing the transplant between Ed and Hawkeye proved that. It doesn’t come free - Ed tries not to think about how maybe there was a cost for Al, like Ed’s lifespan, just one they couldn’t see yet - but the risk is much lower, if you’re doing something like that. If you’re desperate enough.

He hadn’t thought he’d been desperate, about his alchemy. He hadn’t felt different, with his Gate destroyed; he didn’t feel wounded, or missing something, or broken. It was just that when he called up an array and reached for the energy, it simply wasn’t there.

It was like consistently missing a step when going down the stairs, which is not what Ed would call a disability. He’d fucking know. But apparently not everyone thought so. "Havoc and the General had their disabilities healed,” Hawkeye had told him, her face looking so different with her hair down, sitting on the Rockbell’s back porch that evening with a bottle of Granny’s awful berry moonshine between them. “Why not you?"

And Al had echoed, “Why not?”

And they’d done it. There had been a lot of shouting in the middle there, obviously, and Al fucking played dirty pool and got Winry involved, but in the end they’d sat down in an awkward triangle in front of the couch, Al in the middle, and reached for them both.

Ed didn’t really experience much of anything, during. Al clapped, pressed one hand over Hawkeye’s heart and the other over Ed’s, and alchemical discharge played lightly over Ed’s skin. It had barely lasted two seconds: the reaction had barely dissipated before Hawkeye and Al were opening their eyes, leaning back and breathing out.
“Did it work?” Ed had said at the same time as Winry, who’d been on standby with tourniquets just in case one or all of them did lose a hand or something.

“You tell me,” Al said, and Ed clapped and it had worked, the power flowing just like before, like it had never left him.

He couldn’t not hug Hawkeye then, which she’d tolerated very kindly, even though he couldn’t quite stop his face from leaking. “Use it,” she’d said into the space between them, not under her breath or anything but not talking to anyone but Ed. “Do some good.”

And, well, that hadn’t helped Ed’s leaky face situation any. “You ever need a kidney,” he’d managed, too wet to later deny tears, “a lung, a liver, a corpse disposal, you call me,” and Hawkeye laughed a little. “You name it, you call me,” Ed had repeated, and she’d squeezed him and said she handled her own corpse disposals. Ed had said “you know I can counterfeit untraceable money, right? Just saying. Also, don’t tell anyone I said that,” and then Winry had started yelling at him for being an idiot and a felon and for getting Hawkeye’s shirt wet and everything had gone back to normal.

And now Ed has alchemy again. Nobody else really knows how, not that Ed’s dying to tell anyone that hey, soul transmutation is super possible, everyone should try. Hawkeye hadn’t wanted to tell either, especially Mustang. “Isn’t he gonna be suspicious?” Ed asked. “He did tell you about Gate stuff. And you were asking around about it too.”

“If he does start to suspect,” Hawkeye said gravely, “we’ll just have to pretend that we had an affair.”

That left Ed useless for the rest of the day, hooting like a gibbon as he and Al showed Hawkeye around all the trails in Resembool, which wasn’t helped any by Hawkeye occasionally turning to him with no expression and saying something like “It’s just that I could not conceal my desperate passion for you, Edward,” and “It was enough to embrace each other, if only for a moment.” Al had finally got fed up with Ed’s honking and pushed him into a creek, where Hawkeye - “He’s denying our love, sir! He’s trying to separate us!” - had obligingly pushed Al in after him.

So yeah, he’s cool with being Hawkeye’s work wife. And Mustang’s oh no faces are always fucking hilarious. He had been suspicious, and probably still fucking is, but when Ed came back it’d been in the middle of negotiations for the Aerugan ceasefire and between two of the major earthquakes that year. Aerugo was Mustang’s problem even if the earthquakes weren’t, but he got to score major points with General Harle and the rest of Infrastructure by throwing Ed at her department and telling him not to come back until West had functional roads again. Whatever Father did to fuck with the alchemy on the Promised Day has stuck around: they’ve gotten more earthquakes in the past five years since than in the entire prior four hundred put together.

It makes sense, given alchemy draws on tectonics, and also means that Ed saw Mustang face to face like maybe four times over those next sixteen months, even if they were yelling at each other over the phone way more often than they ever did before. And now he’s bitching about Ed’s fucking looks, like he gives a single shit how Ed turns up to work. The fuck is his game there, does he want Ed to show up more fucked up looking?

Ed realizes he’s tapping the end of his braid against his mouth irritably, so he scowls and drops it just as he hears the sound of the back door opening. He leans back around one of the dirt walls to check whether it’s Al or the wizards with the cursed stuff, but it turns out to be neither: someone’s let a dog out into the yard, with the big yellow cat from earlier right behind it.

Not enough the vigilantes all brought their kids, they’re bringing their damn pets, too. The dog
trots directly to the bushes, nose to the ground, sniffing excitedly, while the cat picks its way from the door more slowly. It’s not acting like an indoor cat that got turfed out and is going to panic, though, so it’s not Ed’s problem. He turns back to his notes.

Though one eye strays to his braid again, when it slips down over his shoulder. It’s fucking fine. Yeah, he looked super fucked up this morning, and he looks super fucked up pretty regularly too, but that’s because he has a super fucked up job in a super fucked up country and it’s a huge waste of time to do more than put his hair back. And he can look nice, fuck you too, Al. It’s not like Ed hates it. When he went to drop off Al to start his study abroad, Lan Fan - who refused to speak Amestrian to Ed the second he could say more than three words in Xingese, steals dumplings out from under his chopsticks the moment he reaches for them and hazes like a battalion of drill sergeants - decided to take him to a Xingese spa type thing, and that turned out to be awesome.

Not that he knew that at the time. He thought she was taking him to her physical therapist. Of course, she didn’t fucking tell him that either - he just got led to a big courtyard house just outside the main palace district, where Lan Fan said “Doctor Rui, I brought you a leg,” and presented him before a teak-faced lady who had arms like Sig’s and also, apparently, an entire roomful of students awaiting a demonstration lecture on automail.

All the baby doctors looked really excited and hopeful and also Lan Fan was blocking the door, so Ed figured he could answer a few questions. This resolve lasted about as long as it took for them to all go to an examination room, where Lan Fan started taking her clothes off. This time thirty fresh-faced physical therapists were the ones blocking the door, and Lan Fan was giving him a deeply judgmental look as she climbed onto an examination table, and when Ed balked at removing his own clothes Dr. Rui said “What? You think you have anything we haven’t seen, boyfriend?” then slapped his ass like a horse’s rump and chased him onto a table of his own.

Since Ed did, in fact, have an entire automail leg that they hadn’t seen before, he protested this treatment as unjust, but nobody fuckin’ listens to you when you’re at the doctor’s in your underpants. He had to explain all the PT he does for his leg, and show Lan Fan what he used to do for his arm while hoping like fuck his choppy accented Xingese covers for the fact that he clearly no longer has an automail arm while still having obvious port installation scarring all over his chest and shoulder. The metal left embedded in his collarbone and ribs was mostly removed by an Imperial surgical team on his first visit to Xing - Granny took a look and told him he might as well try it with medical alkahestry given it’d be nerve damage either way - but Mei and her aunts had done all the talking there. Ed’s Xingese at the time hadn’t been anywhere near good enough to catch what the fuck they’d told the doctors about why he had fragments of automail port in his shoulder like cloves studding a ham, but whatever it was hadn’t led to any further questions.

Nobody asked him how he lost his leg, either: Dr. Rui asked if it was a clean cut or a crushed bone situation and that was all, just figuring out what kind of amputation it was before moving on to the kind of integration surgery required. Ed explained about the titanium struts and support strata screwed to the bone all up his femur - his automail wasn’t the full Ti-Al-V model at that point, but you can’t use anything but titanium for the internal osseointegration or the body rejects it - and the students all busily took notes and sketched diagrams while Ed continued to be practically naked in front of Lan Fan.

He’s pretty sure she did that on purpose. He told her to fuck off and get Winry a Xingese visa next time, because he’s not a mechanic or a surgeon and the most he ever did at Rockbell Automail was hand Winry stuff and scrub down the surgical suite. Lan Fan replied with something that Ed couldn’t translate and made the whole room bust up laughing, and then she’d taken Ed to the other side of the medical complex, where it turned out Xingese physical therapy involves a whole team of assistants and an entire bathhouse.
Ed’s never had a better bodily experience in his life. Amestrian public bathhouses don’t have attendants, you just do everything yourself, and at first Ed didn’t exactly want anyone washing him like some kind of poodle, but after he and Lan Fan got dragged onto different tables in the courtyard and repeatedly sloshed with buckets of cucumber water, four other people came out, and what they did was massage.

Automail’s common enough in Amestris that people don’t get too weird about it unless they’re assholes, but this was a whole other level of don’t give a fuck. The team of attendants were clearly familiar with Lan Fan; they didn’t even ask at Ed’s leg, just visibly slotted it in the exact same mental category as her arm and proceeded to work Ed over like a hog getting shaved for bacon. Those attendants hauled him around that table like some corpse they were aggressively embalming, and all Ed could do was try and keep the grunts to a minimum with Lan Fan right there on the other side of the flimsy bamboo screen, clearly taking the same mauling with stoic indifference.

And it hurt, yeah, but it was good hurt. Ed recognized some of what they did from the stuff Granny taught him to do himself - amputated muscles need special kinds of stretching and pressure - but the rest of it was total fucking novelty, from the kneeling on his thighs and pulling him backward by the arms to the weird flowery oil they poured all over him. And then they washed his hair, and fixed his nails, and generally made it redundant that he’d showered and shaved to what he’d thought was a pretty good standard of cleanliness that morning.

It was weirdly really freeing. There’s nothing that can make you feel normal as much as the total lack of concern in a stranger’s eyes as they chat among themselves and scrub your extremely extensive scar tissue with handfuls of cucumber mash and what actually might have been steel wool. And Ed staggered out of there feeling extremely shiny and very pink around the edges, grooping his own hair like an idiot and marveling at how soft and smooth it’d dried and generally feeling unnaturally at peace with the world.

Then Lan Fan took them back to the palace and beat the shit out of him, as per their usual afternoon routine. “Thanks,” Ed said, facedown in the dirt, feeling amazing.

“Mm,” Lan Fan said, and that was that. They’re friends now, maybe. Ed figured that the spa thing at least was her way of indicating she wouldn’t knife him in his sleep for occasionally fucking Ling.

He’s interrupted out of his stupid hair thoughts by some snuffling abruptly getting closer, and then the dog’s suddenly sticking its head under his arm, sniffing excitedly at the bench. “Yo, no,” Ed says reflexively, snagging an arm around its neck and making sure it’s nowhere near the array. The circle’s not active, but they don’t need the damn mutt smudging the chalk. “I’m working here, you can’t do that.”

The dog sits practically on his foot, wagging its tail in the dirt and staring at him like it thinks he’s got a treat. It’s one of those big shaggy working breeds, bat-eared and black-furred all over; it’s clearly friendly enough, but thank fuck wizard dogs apparently don’t subscribe to the universal Amestrian canine directive of “see Ed, jump up on him like a trampoline board”. If this thing landed on him it’d leave a dent.

“There’s no food here,” Ed tells it, giving it a scratch around the ears and turning back to his notes. “Go catch a squirrel or something.”

The dog huffs at him and starts sniffing at his boots. It doesn’t seem inclined to run around, so Ed lets it snuffle at his knife harness and poke its wet nose into his elbow. As long as it doesn’t get rowdy he figures it can stick around.
readers: chad - please - the plot -

me: [releases another swarm of flashbacks like plague rats into a sealed subway car]
It’s quiet inside, with almost everyone gone; Al hears indistinct voices from the second floor landing, sounding like Hairy and his pseudo-uncle, but otherwise there’s not even the tick of a clock. It might’ve been creepy, given the aggressively dark decor and friezes of ghastly faces and bones and skulls on a lot of the furniture, but the big paneled windows are spilling sunlight everywhere now and Ed’s been goth since before either of them even knew what goth was. Al’s used to skulls. And the little border of constellations stamped around the bathroom mirror is quite charming, even if he doesn’t recognize any of them.

His eyes drift to his own in the mirror when he’s washing his hands, slowing slightly in the familiar motions of soaping up. He’d meant it when he said he doesn’t think he can do for Hairy anything like what he’d done for Ed, but just because he doesn’t particularly want to explore that avenue doesn’t mean he shouldn’t at least think it through. Properly.

But qi is not the soul, though obviously the two are linked, as all things in the body are linked. And Al - if he looks at it head on, if he’s being honest with himself - he had committed human transmutation to do it.

He doesn’t regret it. He couldn’t not have done it. Colonel Hawkeye had come to them, all the way out to Resembool, and after dinner the three of them had sat out on the back porch, lemonade between them, Winry and Granny in the next town over on a house call. “Roy told me about the Gate,” Hawkeye had said, without preamble; Al is fairly sure that was the only time he’s ever heard her call the General Roy. “He looked into it, after. Spoke to Marcoh, and to Mrs. Curtis as well.”

“What about it,” Ed had said, wary as Al’s ever heard him.

And she told them about her father, and how he was the alchemist that developed the original arrays for flame alchemy, the ones that gave the alchemist better than thirty percent odds of controlling the reaction without killing themselves. How her father had made her the keeper of the formulas, and died when she was fifteen. How she’d been the one to make Roy Mustang the Flame Alchemist: Hero of Ishval, hundreds of deaths to his name.

“We didn’t know about the Gate, before,” she said steadily. “We didn’t know everyone has one, or that it’s what lets you access alchemy. Or that you can get rid of it.” She’d looked at Ed then, meeting his eyes. “If it can be removed, can it be transplanted into someone else?”

Al’s pretty sure his and Ed’s jaws dropped simultaneously, but where Ed started exclaiming immediately, Al felt the idea crash land in his mind and begin to grow. Ed said “Hawkeye,” and “Lieuten- I mean Col - Riza,” and “You can’t,” and Al had said, “You can.”

Then, he’d added, in the face of their expressions, “I think.”

From there things had gotten technical.

“We aren’t trying to retrieve anything,” Al had said. “We’re just moving things around. And - Tucker made human chimeras. That didn’t take him to the Gate.”

“You’re not chimerizing me, you’re taking a chunk of Hawkeye’s soul,” Ed growled.
Al hadn’t said anything about how combining two disparate parts of discrete living organisms is a definition of chimerism, because comparing the proposed procedure to making chimeras would have been the surefire way to cement Ed’s refusal to do it. But the core of the argument was the same. Chimeras like Jerso and Zampano had been made with philosopher’s stones, which was what made their animal integration so seamless and functional. But Nina - Nina hadn’t been changed with a stone. And she had recognized them. She’d spoken. It had been her soul in there, even if her mind had been - affected. And that tells Al that transmuting a soul is possible, without any philosopher’s stone or opening the Gate.

Why shouldn’t they try it?

Al loves alchemy, but not the way Ed does. And Ed’s not a better alchemist, per se: he just makes leaps that no one else can, faster than anyone else can, in situations where there’s just no time to communicate. The mudslide on their first trip to Xing, the ‘17 earthquake in East; in those three years, there were times where Ed having alchemy would’ve made a difference in the body counts. And Al had been right there with him, and he’d executed the arrays Ed shouted for him, and he had seen Ed’s face as they both knew that once upon a time they could have done more. They’d been far from helpless, especially working as a team, but with Al as the only alchemist - sometimes, there’s just no time.

Ed might not be great at thinking ahead, but in an emergency, there’s few that think faster. If it had been Ed’s body taken in their first human transmutation, Al doesn’t know that he would’ve been able to catch and bind his soul in time. To think of a solution, in moments, while actively bleeding out, leg gone and brother vaporized, at eleven - he doesn’t know how Ed did it.

But Ed never hesitates. His brain never shuts down the way Al’s does sometimes, never just refuses to answer or provide options. To be fair, it’s also probably why Ed’s brain is often indistinguishable from an angry hamster with rabies, but Al considers it equivalent tradeoff and Ed’s never given any indication he doesn’t think the same. And it had made him capable of doing things with alchemy that no one else had been able to do.

Ed’s not less, without his alchemy. But Al’s seen what he can do. He can do more.

Al knew he wanted to study medical alkahestry early on in his recovery, when pretty much all that was available were the Rockbell’s medical textbooks, Granny’s automail periodicals and anatomical charts. He had a lot of time to read in between bullying his bones into holding him again, and Granny got a lot of published research journals delivered: on surgical techniques, on experimental treatments, on pharmacological studies. Al learned about organ transplants, and graft integration, and stents no wider than a grain of rice; he learned about neurons rerouting themselves after traumatic brain injuries, about patients with paralysis learning to walk again, no philosopher’s stone involved.

Death may be absolute, but humans aren’t helpless against it. Al’s pretty sure Ed thought he was delirious the day he babbled about vaccines being the most fuck-you thing ever invented, the biggest up-yours to the uncaring causality of the natural order. Ed was probably justified given Al’s pretty sure he started talking about how injecting a dead virus into yourself is like eating the corpses of your enemies to absorb their powers, but his point stands. Vaccines! Human doctors took disease itself apart, figured out how it worked, and then armed themselves with the pieces. Polio is dying. Smallpox is gone. Medical science took an invisible killer, a death god, and exposed it and learned its ways and cut it up into baby food. Literally. Ed and Al have had the little scar-spots on their shoulders from the tuberculosis vaccine for so long they don’t remember a time without them.
If Al thinks about it, from the very first primitive surgeries and poultices to now, to how Ed can independently flex his metal toes - he looks to the future, and it makes him want to sit down. If this is what they’ve done already, then what can they achieve ten years from now? Twenty? Mom died of what Granny’s pretty sure was pneumonia arising as a complication from typhus. There’s still no vaccine, but doxycycline is available in pretty much any Amestrian pharmacy now and the number of annual typhus cases is the lowest it's ever been. Better hygiene, more resources, more mobilization, more doctors. More research. More understanding. More vaccines, against everything that wants to run humanity into the ground.

All things end. Living things die; it’s part of nature, part of the universe, part of how new things can begin. But not before their time. Not from preventable fucking complications. The best way to raise the dead is to keep them from dying in the first place.

Why shouldn’t they be able to give Ed’s Gate back?

Al knows his brother. Ed’s afraid of the Gate. Not because of his arm and leg, Al knows, but because of him. They both tried to bring Mom back but it was Al who lost his whole body, and they still don’t know why - what tipped it his way instead of Ed’s, whether it was some aspect of the human transmutation array that made his position somehow metaphysically closer to the Truth. And so Ed refuses to think about the Gate as anything other than a kind of natural law, a phenomenon like gravity or particle radiation or death. It’s not alive; it can’t be bargained with.

But Ed himself proved that wrong. He offered up his alchemy, just his alchemy and nothing else, and had it accepted. And Al was there. He saw, and he knew.

It’s not about equivalent exchange. It never was. It’s not about fairness. Whatever the thing in that blank white space is - mirror, fulcrum, guardian, catalyst - it can be negotiated with. It can think. It can choose. And it is the truth. The universe. You.

On some level, what you believe matters. And what Al believes in, more than anything else, is his brother.

If human chimeras can be made and organs can be transplanted without invoking the Gate, so can parts of a living soul. If Ed can destroy his own Gate, shouldn’t it be possible to just - move it? It might be impossible to retrieve a soul that has already passed through, but for something with as physical a connection as a personal Gate - that, Al is willing to bet on.

It’s not like he’s not scared too. But fear has never stopped Ed, so Al tries never to let it stop him either.

“I want to try,” he had said, and Ed had hissed at him like an angry teakettle.

“I can’t just take Hawkeye’s Gate!”

“You aren’t. I’m not giving up anything,” Hawkeye said calmly. “If there’s a way, I want it out of me. And I want you to have it.”

Ed had made a lot of upset cow noises about that, but Al could understand. Hawkeye doesn’t like alchemy. It didn’t sound like she’d had a very happy time growing up, either. She said Berthold Hawkeye the way Ed usually says Hohenheim. And what she and General Mustang had done with her father’s alchemy - Al can understand, why she might want even the potential for it excised out of her.

Al’s not sure Ed totally got her reasoning, implied as it was, but actually convincing him turned out
to be pretty easy, once they involved Winry.

(“OF FUCKING COURSE YOU SHOULD DO IT!”

“BUT IT’S -”

“But what? You’re gonna hang around here, making the neighbors nervous and wearing out Granny’s floors?”

“I don’t -”

“What, are you going to be a sheep shearer for the rest of your life?”

“I -”

“You’re not even good at it!”

“Hey -”

“Stop being an idiot and accept! Lieutenant Colonel Hawkeye came all this way! She wants to give you a gift and you’re telling me you’re going to be a rude little bitch and reject it -”

“I can’t just take -”

“Like fuck you can’t! Get off your ass and get your alchemy and get the fuck off my couch before I start charging you rent!”)

And so they’d done it. And now Ed has alchemy again, even if he does use it these days like it’s going to be taken away again at any minute.

It was worth it. Al would do it again, if necessary, despite the risk. Even though - well.

Al hadn’t told Ed this part, and never will. He did brush the Gate during the transplant. Or at least - he thinks he did. He’s pretty sure he came close. He has very vivid dreams now, ever since getting his body back, and incredibly realistic hallucinations, the two times he got a fever early on in the recovery; sometimes it takes him all morning, to determine whether something happened or if it was just a dream. And during the Gate transmutation, it had only been a second. That soundless, scentless, seamless place is unmistakable - but it was only for a second. Just long enough that Al still isn’t quite sure.

Not that it mattered. Real or not real - he hadn’t been about to take chances. He had felt the unsensation of the inbetween, the nerveless touch of a space that might have been nothing more than the darkness behind his eyes. It was aware as he was, a presence like a mirror, and real or not in that moment Al knew it was paying attention to him.

The Gate doesn’t care about pleas or threats, bribes or circumstances. But it can think. It can choose. And it is the truth. The universe. You.

My brother gave for me. Now we give for him, Al thought, in that endless moment, and he held his conviction like a sword. One human gives to another. We aren’t taking anything from you. Leave it be.

And either the phantom sensation of falling into Gate-space passed, or it let them go. It lasted less than a second, or no time at all. And Al reached through Ed and Hawkeye, for the presence where
Ed had an absence, and pulled across the gap.

Not bad, for Al’s second ever soul surgery. And when Ed clapped again for the first time and light blazed between his hands, the shock of joy on his face justified all the risk.

Al’s not at all sure he could do something similar for Hairy. For one thing, Al knows what a Gate feels like now, and the malignant qi isn’t it. For another, something like what he did for Ed and Hawkeye would be a very, very, very last resort. Assuming worst case scenario, he has to assume he had brushed the Gate. Just because it let them go that time doesn’t mean it will again. And any surgery is always by definition invasive, always a balance of risk: the malignant qi isn’t actually hurting Hairy, and if the supposed link is severed from the other end - if the Voldemort person is dead - then it might do much more harm than good to try and remove it instead of just leaving it be as a benign tumor: something to watch, but better to leave alone. After all, his duty as a medical professional is clear: reduce harm wherever possible.

Al frowns slightly into the mirror, deliberately pulling the corners of his mouth down. If he’s going to do anything as extensive as take over Hairy’s entire cardiopulmonary function, he wants to run some alkahestric tests here first. Like he told Ed, the only thing he’s used alkahestry for so far was the diagnostic EEG array, and that one was as static as arrays get: zero variables, no directivity required, just activate the circle and go. Those kinds of arrays regulate their own energy intake: if you inscribe it to run at 30 or 50 or 500 J/s then that’s how many it’ll use, no more no less. Any fluctuations or irregularities in qi wouldn’t affect it unless there wasn’t enough energy for the array to run at all.

Using alchemy or alkahestry without a circle, on the other hand, is almost all variables: it allows for a lot more flexibility but also makes you focus on what you’re actually doing, directing everything from how much energy you’re using to the shape of whatever it is you’re transmuting. Most alchemists operate at a midpoint, especially with proprietary arrays - enough flexibility for them to tailor some variables on the fly while still offloading the bulk of the control into the circle.

Just for curiosity’s sake, Al taps his hands together, thinking of Ed’s offload-energy-as-light idea, and pulls on the Dragon’s Pulse, laying his palms to the bathroom sink. It’s a simple array, similar to one Mei showed him that was mostly a toy, used to create light show for kids when there aren’t any fireworks: alkahestric energy here does nothing more than light up the array, chasing itself around the circle for as long as it’s active. The more you feed into it, the longer it’ll last; it won’t give him any useful numbers, but if the qi really is denser here, this will be a quick way to check.

Al deliberately leaves the variable open-ended, only guiding the flow, not feeding it, and watches the reaction.

“Ah,” he says after a long moment. “Well.”

That’s. Something.

“So… the alkahestry trials are going to be interesting,” Al calls as he steps out into the backyard again, heading for their little dirt enclosure and turning the corner. “We may want to test that first, before we -”

Al stops dead. He can see that Ed’s petting - a dog, a big black one, absently ruffling its ears as he flips through their notes with his free hand, but in qi -

“Ed, get away from that thing.”
Al: ah. I’m afraid i’ve become god

Al: and just in time, too
Chapter 69

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

One second Elric is right there, the next he’s three feet away, somersaulted backwards from a sitting start to get away from Sirius. Sirius startles badly, jerking backwards with hackles rising - and then Alphonse is coming at him, blue light crackling over something twisting in his hands, and Sirius decides this is maybe not a situation that can be resolved with a couple of friendly barks and a tail wag.

He shifts back. Things immediately get worse. Elric goes from startled to horrified, and then he snarls. “No, wait,” Sirius exclaims, “Hang on,” only Elric’s already clapped.

The ground surges under Sirius, knocking him to his knees, and then he’s suddenly sunken into it up to waist. And then Alphonse is right in front of him, blue-white light still snapping over a bloody great sword as he levels it right at Sirius’ face.

“No, wait,” Sirius exclaims, “Hang on,” only Elric’s already clapped.

The ground surges under Sirius, knocking him to his knees, and then he’s suddenly sunken into it up to waist. And then Alphonse is right in front of him, blue-white light still snapping over a bloody great sword as he levels it right at Sirius’ face.

“Bloody fucking bollocks, have you lost your minds?” Sirius blurts, goggling at the sword tip about to tickle his nose.

“What are you,” Alphonse demands.

“It’s me! Sirius!” He jerks against the dirt, but even though his arms are free he’s well and truly stuck. Where’s Harry? They came out together, but Sirius immediately went into his dog act and hasn’t smelted him since they split up at the door. “I’m a bloody Animagus!”

“You’re a shapeshifter,” Alphonse says coldly. He doesn’t look like a children’s librarian anymore; he looks like a six foot tall man holding a three foot long blade. “And you were trying to trick my brother.”

Sirius opens his mouth to deny it, but it is technically true and the sword is really very close to his face. “That was just a prank! I just wanted to see what you lot were up to out here!”

“You had me scratching your ears, you sick fuck,” Elric shouts, scrubbing his gloves on his pants like he thinks Sirius has dog leprosy or something. “Ugh!”

“It’s not like I enjoyed that either!”

“You were wagging your tail!”

“Well it’s not like I was about to break character! You’re the one who started petting me, I was just standing next to you!” Sirius struggles against the dirt again, but there’s no give. He can’t even get at his wand - it’s in his pants, pinned to him by the dirt. “How the hell did you even know I was an Animagus?”

“What the fuck is an Annie magus!” Sirius had been asking Alphonse, but by now he should’ve expected Elric’s need to fill any silence with shouting. “Is that what you call chimeras here? How the fuck did you even know I was an Animagus?”

“What the fuck is an Annie magus!” Sirius had been asking Alphonse, but by now he should’ve expected Elric’s need to fill any silence with shouting. “Is that what you call chimeras here? How the fuck did you even know I was an Animagus?”

“What’s what an Animagus is,” Sirius says, running out of patience with the way these two have daisy-planted him in dirt and started poking swords around like they think they’re Godric bloody Gryffindor. What the hell are they so worked up for? It’s not even like they’re doing anything back
here besides scratching runes into dirt.

“Oh, yet a fucking Nother thing these fucking wizards haven’t told us about,” Elric snaps. “When you’ve already had a fucking impostor problem! You were a dog ten seconds ago. Now you say you’re the real psycho and we’re just supposed to believe you?”

“What are you doing?”

It’s Moony, standing in the gap between two dirt walls, taking an abortive step forward when he sees Sirius in the ground - his wand is pointed up and to the side, a handful of objects held in a Levitating Charm above his shoulder.

With two steps Alphonse gets behind Sirius, and judging by the point of pressure on his back ribs the sword is now positioned to run him through. “Stop,” Alphonse says flatly. “Don’t come any closer.”

Moony stops, eyes flicking from Sirius to Elric to Alphonse and his sword. Elric stays crouched low to the ground, watching the wand in Moony’s hand. “Oh, for - that’s just Remus,” Sirius says, trying not to sound too exasperated - Moony’s wand is occupied, these two Unplottables might be the hex-happiest people Sirius has ever met and Harry’s who knows where at this point. “He’s brought you the cursed things you asked for, look.”

“Al?” Elric says tersely.

“He felt normal before,” Alphonse says evenly. “He feels normal now. So does this one. We know there’s a spy, unwitting or not. With everyone else gone, now would be the perfect time to come after us.”

A spy? As Sirius gapes at Moony Elric’s face hardens, and in one fluid movement he claps again and touches the ground. Blue lightning crackles as the dirt walls around them grind to life, meeting behind Moony and sealing off any retreat. “Please don’t teleport away,” Alphonse says. “We don’t want anyone getting hurt.”

The way he says it makes it pretty obvious that the person hurting would be Sirius, but that’s not even the most concerning thing they said. “A spy?” Sirius demands. “Who?” Then, as it occurs to him, “Snape’s a spy for us. I don’t like him as much as the next bloke but Dumbledore’s got him on some kind of leash, you don’t have to worry about him.” He doesn’t add so let’s all calm down and stop threatening people with swords now, but hopefully they’ll get the point.

Moony, though, has started to look very tired, in that way that means there’s something going on that’s been going on for a long time and he doesn’t like it but there’s nothing he can do about it. “What?” Sirius asks him, because if there is something wrong that Moony and the Unplottables have picked up on - “Dumbledore has got something on him - hasn’t he?”

“It’s not Snape,” Moony says. But then he doesn’t say anything else, and that tells Sirius -

“You know,” he says, staring at Moony. “There is a spy. And you know who it is.”

“Sirius,” Remus says heavily.

“Don’t Sirius me! There’s a spy in the Order?”

“Step into the circle,” Alphonse says, apropos of absolutely nothing.

Elric looks sharply at his brother. Only for a second, but it’s enough for alarm bells to start ringing
in Sirius’ head, briefly drowning out even the fact that *there’s a spy in the Order* and *Moony hasn’t told him*. “What?” he demands. *Have* they been doing something dangerous back here with their chalk and dirt - is *this* why they’re doing it outside the house? “Why the circle? What’s it got to do with anything?”

“Prove you’re not a spy,” Alphonse says, tipping his head at the chalked runes. “Step inside.”

Well *that* doesn’t answer *anything*. “Why?” Sirius says more sharply. “What’s it going to do?”

“It’s safe,” Alphonse says, which is *not an answer*. He hasn’t taken his eyes off Moony, either, but Sirius feels he’s talking to his brother more than either of them. “We tested it. If he’s who he says he is, then there won’t be any problems.”

*“Problems?”* Sirius demands, not liking that one bit. “Like what, you cutting my head off?”

“That would be a problem,” Alphonse says in a disturbingly agreeable tone of voice. Elric’s face has tightened; Sirius is expecting some more of his raspy shouting, but he doesn’t say anything, just reaches out and presses one palm to the outermost line of chalk.

Light races across the symbols, the whole thing igniting with a hum. It’s a hard, blue-white glow - the same color as a Patronus, almost, only where Patronus light is gauzy and comforting this light is sharp, edged. It hurts to look at for too long.

“What exactly… is that,” Moony says carefully, eyeing the glowing symbols.

“A tool to help us determine whether you’re who you say you are,” Alphonse says, in an easy tone that Sirius finds a *bit* jarring given he can very much still feel the swordpoint touching the back of his ribs. “Under the circumstances, I’m afraid I’m going to have to insist.”

The circle hums faintly, the occasional arc of blued lightning snapping lazily around the edges. “Why’s he got to get in there? How’s that going to prove anything?” Sirius demands. “Listen, I can prove I’m no impostor right now - ask me something only Sirius Black would know.”

“How would we know what only you would know?” Alphonse says in a disturbingly reasonable tone. “For all we know you’ve been an imposter since the moment we met you.”

“It’s alright, Sirius,” Moony says. “I’m happy to prove I’m who I say I am. I doubt it’s going to hurt me.”

Sirius swallows back a protest. It’s true that it generally takes a Killing Curse to kill werewolves. Silver hurts Moony, and he gets injured like any wizard, but part of the werewolf curse is resilience as well as inhuman strength. He can shake off most hexes and survive otherwise deadly spells. While Sirius had been rotting in prison Moony had taken work where he could get it - dealing with dark creatures, disposing of minor curses. His credentials to teach DADA at Hogwarts were real. Whatever this mess of runes is, Moony can handle it.

And when Moony *does* prove he’s no imposter they can give these two brats a little hexing for their trouble. “I’m going to lower these,” Moony says in the measured way he talks to show-me-your-werewolf-registration-card Aurors, indicating the handful of objects he’s hovering. “Then I’ll put my wand down, and enter the circle. Is there anything else you need me to do?”

“No,” Alphonse says. “Just stand in the open space between the lines.”

“Alright,” Moony says, and lowers the hovering objects and then lays his wand on the ground.
“If you’re disguising yourself, it’ll get stripped off,” Elric says directly to Moony. It looks for a second like he’s going to say more, but then he just shuts his mouth into an unhappy line.

“That won’t be a problem,” Moony says, hypnotically calm. It’s a good thing he’s got so much practice dealing with crazed bastards, Sirius thinks bitterly. “Is there anything else I should know?”

Elric doesn’t answer, just flattens his mouth further. “Very well then,” Moony says, and walks into the circle.

He immediately gags and drops to his knees, the entire thing flaring suddenly with blinding white light. “Moony!”

“Oh, shit,” Elric swears, eyes wide but making no move to help Moony or to stop the circle or anything. “He really is a spy? Fuck, Al -”

“He’s not a spy, you fucking idiots! Let me go!” Sirius throws himself at the dirt again but all that gets him is bruised hips. “What are you doing?”

Moony retches so hard his whole back bows. “He’s fine,” Alphonse says.

“You call that bloody fine? Shut it off!” Sirius takes back every good thought he ever had about these two vicious blond bastards; when he gets himself out of this fucking dirt he’s going to tear their throats out. “Moony - get out of there, come on -”

Moony’s shaking all over, doesn’t seem to hear him. And then his whole body arches, and he howls.

Sirius knows that howl. He’s never heard it coming from Remus’ human face before - but there’s a haze coming off him, thickening fast, ropy grey tendrils smoking off his skin and writhing as they’re sucked down into the circle’s light. The circle gets brighter and brighter, the hum doesn’t get louder but becomes somehow more, Sirius’ back teeth are shaking -

- and then the howl cuts off, and it’s just Moony, on all fours, panting.

The light dies down. For a moment, the only sound is the circle’s eerie hum. “Moony!”

“He’s fine,” Alphonse repeats from behind Sirius, sounding utterly bloody unconcerned.

“He’s not fine! What did you do to him?”


“You’re not alright!” Sirius bursts out. “You - what was that?”

But Moony’s just staring at his hands, now, turning them over slowly, still panting, and when he suddenly looks up at Sirius his eyes are wild. “My wand,” he says urgently. “I’m - I think -” His gaze snaps to the Unplottables, and he scrambles to his feet. “I think - I need to check -”

“What’s he saying?” Elric says sharply, as Moony makes to get out of the circle and stops short at Elric’s voice.

“Ah,” Alphonse says. “I don’t think the translation stone works within the circle.”

“He’s saying let him out, you bloody great twats,” Sirius snarls. “He’s not a spy, clearly, and if whatever you’ve done to him hurts him -”
“No,” Moony says, face oddly feverish, eyes darting from Elric to Sirius to his wand lying on the ground. “No, no, I’m fine, just - I just need to check -“

“Let him out. We need to understand him,” Alphonse says, coincidentally moving his sword just enough to remind Sirius and probably everyone else that there’s a fucking great spike of metal still poised under Sirius’s shoulderblades.

Elric steps aside, scowling, and Moony walks out of the circle, obviously restraining himself from moving too quickly. “I just need to check something,” he tells Elric, his voice trembling just the slightest bit - but he’s standing upright and moving easily enough, even if he’s got a strange, most un-Remuslike light in his eyes. “I need to pick up my wand - I’m just going to cast a spell on myself, that’s all. I just need to check,” and when Elric makes no move to stop him and Alphonse doesn’t try to behead Sirius, he goes to his wand.

He seems to hesitate when he picks it up, staring down at it, but then he swallows and presses it to his forearm in a gesture Sirius has only seen a few times before. “Homolupi Revelio.”

The tip of his wand lights up gold.


Moony looks up in total disbelief, meeting Sirius’s eyes. Sirius doesn’t know what the hell happened in that circle, but the detection spell has been used for centuries, infallible - he’s seen Moony demonstrate on himself before, the wand tip lighting every time a sickly green. But now - that grey smog, torn from his very skin and sucked into the light -

“You’re cured,” Sirius says, hushed. “You’re - Merlin’s tits, Moony, you’re not a werewolf.”

Chapter End Notes

i love piling up snowflakes one by one until eventually

the avalanche
Mustache and Psycho gawp at each other all wall-eyed for a bit, and then Mustache staggers over and sort of collapses on Psycho. They hug like a couple of near-drowned sailors. “Werewolf,” Ed repeats. “Werewolf?”

“Not anymore,” Mustache says unsteadily, but he doesn’t sound, like, unhappy about it. What the fuck had Psycho said about ‘cured’?

“It’s an illness?” Al says critically, clearly thinking the same thing. He hasn’t lowered his sword, but he has stepped back slightly now that Psycho and Mustache are both right there in front of him. Ed’s gotta admit that if these wizards are spies then this would be one hell of an unscripted performance, but he’d let his guard down once already and that got him scratching behind some freak’s ears while he panted in Ed’s face all hee hee I’m not an adult human man at all!

“How do we even know that was werewolf...ism?” Ed demands, because sure, Mustache might’ve been down on all fours howling like a wolf but given shit around here makes less and less sense every five fucking minutes that may as well have been total fucking coincidence. “He just shows up right as we find out this fucking dog guy is fucking spying on us - what if he was also possessed by evil ghost soul magic?”

“He wasn’t,” Al says, watching the two wizards, and okay, yeah, he’d copped that Hairy had something wrong right away, while this whole woo-woo bullshit came out of the blue. “But there wasn’t any indication of... werewolfism either.”

“I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about,” Psycho says somewhat distractedly; he and Mustache have pulled apart a bit but kept staring at each other like they’re the first two prehistoric fish to try walking on land. “But moonie was definitely a wear wolf.”

“Oh yeah? And you knew that, all this time, and y’all still thought I was a werewolf?” Ed says acidly. “Try a-fucking-gain, asshole.”

“Dedalus Diggle thought you were a wear wolf,” Mustache says, visibly pulling himself together as he further extracts himself from Psycho. “And Dedalus Diggle is an upstanding member of the order who couldn’t tell a Basilisk from a bacon sandwich. I highly doubt anyone else ever considered you to be a wear wolf.” He straightens his shirt a bit, glancing down at himself like he’d be self conscious if he had any room in between all the bogglement, and then looks at Al. “Is this - is this permanent?”

“How the fuck should we know? We don’t have werewolves,” Ed stresses. He hadn’t been expecting any of that, and while, yeah, he tested the circle himself, he hadn’t expected Al to just strongarm the guy in there. Ed can understand why it would’ve been a bad idea to inform Mustache of all the risks before sticking him inside, especially given their opsec appears to be dropping points every other minute while starting from an already negative number, but it’s not exactly okie-fuckin’-dandy that they just backed some wizard into the array with barely a wink in the direction of informed consent.

Not that they had a choice. If Psycho really has been a shapeshifter this whole time and all these vigilantes know about it, how come nobody’s told them? What the fuck else haven’t they been
“I’m assuming you weren’t born a werewolf,” Al says, still watching the wizards like they’re a petri dish he’s not sure he wants to open.

“No,” Mustache says. “No, no, I - you get bitten. It’s not heritable. I was bitten as a child, and, well - it’s a curse.” He straightens his shirt again, kind of awkwardly, apparently not noticing or caring much that he’s still in the dirt on his knees; he’s looking at his hands again, turning his left over to stare at his wrist.

“It’s gone now,” Psycho says all reassuring. “And if it comes back, you can just hop right back in this thing again.”

“Yes, I…” Mustache trails off, looking back at the circle, and then his eyes flick to Ed and Al like it’s just occurred that maybe they aren’t chalking daisies and hopscotch grids back here. “This is a curse breaking tool,” he says in realization. “That’s what you wanted cursed objects for.” And then, “This is for Hairy.”

“What’s for Hairy?” Psycho says, staring at Mustache. “What - this? You - has he been cursed?”

“Dumbell door suspects that there may be a… problem,” Mustache starts.

“Uh, how about you hold the fuck up, sunshine,” Ed says, jerking his chin at Psycho as he leans down and smacks the array active again. “This freak hasn’t had his turn in the circle yet and who the fuck knows what he is.”

“I told you, I’m an Annie magus!”

Ed ignores him, because dog impostors doing their best involuntary potted ficus impression don’t have rights. “Ah,” Mustache says, blinking. “He really is serious black. I can vouch for that. It wouldn’t be possible for either of us to be here in any case, if dumbell door hadn’t personally told us the secret of the Fidelius charm.”

“Oh sure! But if he told the wrong fucking idiot, we’re all fucked, and some hoot already pretended to be fuckin’ Peg Leg Pirate under y’all’s noses for a year,” Ed snaps. “I’m not feelin’ real fuckin’ trusting about your personal assurances, o-kay? And if he is the real meal deal convict,” Ed stabs a finger at Psycho, “why the fuck was he out here pretending to be a dog.”

“Oh, like you weren’t doing whatever you pleased to the house and yanking portraits off walls,” Psycho says testily.

“That was for research,” Ed snarls.

“Well so’s bloody this! We have a right to know what you’re doing out here, planning to do to - to Hairy!”

“No, you don’t,” Al says, so conversationally casual it leaves Psycho blinking for a second. “You’re lucky it was us you tried to trick and not any of the others. This is a medical tool for Hairy, yes,” he goes on, which makes Ed stare at him for a second until he catches on - Al’s not lying, but if Psycho is a spy, then he’s already seen the array in action. And if they can convince him it’s a super specialized medical curse breaky thing and not a global off switch - shit, that’s what they want these wizards to believe anyway, even if they aren’t spies. If the cat’s out of the bag, better make it a wrong one.

“Calling it a curse breaker is in some ways accurate, though we did not expect it to affect…”
werewolves,” Al continues. “But it does deal with malicious magic.”

Not a word of a lie, not at all the truth, and the wizards fully fixated on the decoy. Al’s a genius. “Malicious magic?” Psycho repeats. “What kind of malicious magic is on Hairy? Wouldn’t someone have noticed? And don’t think I’ve forgotten about there being a spy in the order, moonie…”

“Hairy is the spy,” Mustache says.

Psycho’s jaw drops. “What?”

“Dumbell door suspects you know who cursed him,” Mustache says heavily. “As a baby, or maybe later on… but he thinks you know who connected himself to Hairy’s mind somehow, and that he’s capable of seeing and hearing through Hairy’s eyes and ears.”

Psycho gapes at Mustache some more. “And dumbell door hasn’t done anything?”

“There’s no way to check if it’s actually there,” Mustache says tiredly. “Dumbell door says he’s tried, but it’s not detectable.”

“Then how does he even know there’s anything there at all?” Psycho demands. “If he can’t find anything -”

“The pain in Hairy’s scar, and his true dreams. He wouldn’t be having them if they weren’t connected somehow.”

That snaps Psycho’s mouth shut, writing his face into grim lines. “So Hairy might have had Voldemort in his mind somehow, possibly for years, and - dumbell door said not to tell me. Didn’t he,” Psycho says sharply. “He told you, and probably the rest of the order, but not me -”

“We’ve confirmed it,” Al says before Psycho can go fully into histrionics. “There is something there.”

“There is?” Mustache says swiftly. “Can you remove it?”

“We’re still trying to determine what it is,” Al says, doctor voice in full effect. “Calling it a curse might not be entirely accurate, but thanks to the unexpected results in your case -” he nods at Mustache - “it’s very possible our methods will work regardless.”

“It’s not a curse?” Psycho demands. “Then what the hell is it then?”

Al glances at him. “Medically speaking?”

“Yes bloody medically speaking! What’s wrong with him?”

“You’re not going to like it.”

“What? Who bloody cares if I like it! He’s my god son. I have a right to know!”

Al inclines his head slightly in a well, you asked for it way. “There’s… hm, well. Analogy is really the only descriptor available, but I’d say it’s the most accurate way to explain regardless. Hairy appears to be hosting an… outside entity, which seems to be connected in some ways to his soul, and appears to be supported by his physical and nonphysical systems the way placentas support fetuses.”

“Holy fuck, his soul is pregnant?” Ed exclaims.
“His what is WHAT?” Psycho yelps.

“Not his soul,” Al says, making some calm-down-it’s-just-syphilis gestures. “Well, not exactly -”

Psycho goggles at him. “You said he was healthy! You didn’t mention anything like that!”

“He is healthy,” Al says, soothing. “Physically.”

“Except for his pregnant brain?” Psycho shouts.

“Is it going to give birth?” Ed demands, higher pitched than he’d like.

“Well… I can’t definitively say there’s no chance of the foreign presence metastasizing -”

“Al, I swear to fuck, if his fucking forehead is going to crap out an evil qi baby -”

Movement flickers in the corner of Ed’s eye, and he whirls in place in time to see Hairy unfurl himself out of thin air, face grim with determination, and jump into the still-active circle.
It had started off simple: getting around under the Cloak is practically second nature by now, and he doesn’t even have to dodge Peeves or Mrs. Norris or Filch here to get around. He’s not even doing anything against the rules, either - the Unplottables are just out in the backyard, and nobody said anything about staying away from them. And even if they had - Harry needs to know. Even Hermione had said *keep an eye out*, just before they’d all left, and her eyes had darted downstairs, to where the Unplottables were.

Harry had just planned to maybe try and corner Elric when he was alone, because despite being an utter pillock he’d still managed to let the most information slip - mentioning a prophecy, talking about Mundungus disappearing, *telepathy with Voldemort* - but then Sirius had suggested the Cloak. They aren’t going to have an excuse if they do get caught, but Harry doesn’t care. If no one is going to tell him anything, he’s not just going to sit shut up in some room and wait to see what Voldemort’s going to send next. Better to get bawled out than die because everybody thought him too unstable to trust with any information whatsoever.

So he opens the door for Sirius - and Crookshanks, who darts up at the last moment and slips outside just ahead of him. Harry has to skip sideways to avoid accidentally punting the cat across the yard, but luckily this maneuver is ingrained beyond reflex due to all those hours he used to spend at Mrs. Figg’s. He has to flail to get the door shutting naturally behind them, too, but they all make it into the yard, and no angry bronzed faces come popping up out of their dirt enclosure so Harry considers it a success.

When he approaches he sees the short Elric is alone in there, sitting crosslegged on the ground and writing in his notebook, braced on yet another of those geometric blocks of dirt he’s so fond of making. A moment later Padfoot rounds the walls, nose to the ground, and goes right for Elric: Harry tenses, wand in hand, but Sirius was right - Elric reacts like he’s just a dog, wrapping an arm around his neck, ruffling Padfoot’s ears, even.

Harry turns to the chalk circle in the dirt, since Padfoot’s close enough to see what Elric is writing. It looks like a lot of runes. Hadn’t Hermione taken Runes in third year? What are runes even used for? He’ll have to ask her.

Maybe if he gets a better look he can copy some down.

He makes to take a step forward, only to find Crookshanks right in front of him: staring right at him as if he were visible, tail swishing slowly from side to side.

Harry quickly glances up at Elric, but he’s buried in his papers, wholly ignoring even Padfoot who’s practically got his snout on his shoulder. When Harry looks back down he finds Crookshanks now at his feet, sniffing delicately at the Cloak around his ankles.
Then Crookshanks bumps his head into Harry’s invisible shins, and in a fit of wholly unprecedented behavior starts rubbing against them, like Harry’s somehow in the past ten seconds become his favorite human in the world.

This is going to get him noticed, on top of being deeply bloody weird. Up until yesterday Harry would have said Crookshanks loves no one save Hermione, and after yesterday he could only say he now loves Hermione and one Elric. Harry tries shifting back, but Crookshanks just follows him: he’s a big cat, and when he throws his weight against Harry’s legs it’s enough to make him wobble. “Get off,” Harry mouths.

Crookshanks begins to purr.

Harry looks around frantically, but Elric doesn't seem to have noticed that a cat ten feet away is twining against thin air and rumbling like a rusty lawnmower. Padfoot hasn’t either, though maybe he’s just trying not to get Harry noticed. Just because Elric isn’t looking up now doesn’t mean he won’t any second, so Harry backs away as quickly as he dares, careful not to let the Cloak slip.


Harry’s not mad enough to try jinxing Hermione’s cat, but he’s got to cast a Muffliato or something before this furball gets him caught. He backs away further, towards where Elric’s dirt walls meet the tangled shrubbery abutting the fence around Grimmauld Place, and Crookshanks follows him again. Did Hermione put some kind of spell on him, to make him keep track of Harry? He keeps backing up until he’s practically standing in the bushes, where if he whispers silencio Elric won’t hear it. Probably.

Crookshanks has stopped a few feet away, tail swishing. Harry glares at the cat for a minute, but it doesn’t appear to be interested in going further now. Crookshanks continues to just stands there, inscrutably feline and somehow looking even more judgmental than usual, so after a few moments Harry turns his attention to the dirt wall less than a foot away.

They aren’t exactly joined together - it’s a handful of slabs with maybe an inch of gap at the corners, like when Elric conjured them he hadn’t cared much if the end result was perfectly aligned or not. Harry’s not going to be able to squeeze through, but he can definitely see inside: the chalked runes are much closer to him here. Are there spells for memorization? Well, probably not, otherwise Hermione would have made them learn them all first year. Harry definitely can’t memorize all of this without magical help, especially given he has no clue what he’s looking at. A lot of it looks like numbers.

The Unplottables talked about testing all kinds of things, and at breakfast they’d seemed very excited to start on things that had nothing to do with Voldemort at all. Elric definitely had a bee up his bum about magic in general, and he’d had all those radios and meters and things, running his little tests on Grimmauld Place; Harry doesn’t see any of that equipment here now, but Elric is writing very busily into his papers.

Harry has an urge to go over there and shove that ballpoint up his nose. They’re fighting a war, and the Unplottables who came here to help the Order are out wandering Diagon Alley or sitting in a backyard, probably writing about worm topography or math holes or whatever it was they were so excited about over breakfast.

Harry’d felt a stir of something darker than hope when he’d seen Elric smack Snape across the face.
so hard his body twisted: the Order needed fighters against the Death Eaters, people who could duel and win, and here they were. The rest of that evening, however, where they’d revealed most of the Unplottables were muggles - Elric might claim he’s not a wizard, but what he does bloody well looks like magic to Harry, even if he’s calling it something different. And apparently only three of them can do it. Wandless magic isn’t nothing - what’s Expelliarmus going to do if there’s nothing to disarm? - but it’s not like Voldemort’s going to bother with an Expelliarmus. Harry’s not sure bullets will be able to get through to him, either. He’s only ever seen guns in glimpses of Dudley’s video games, but judging by how Moody dismissed them to Elric they aren’t exactly a major concern to the average wizard.

Harry gets a brief flash of that night at the World Cup, the muggles levitated by cloaked figures in masks, the woman with her nightdress hanging over her face like a ragdoll held upside down. The Dark Mark, hanging over the forest like a sick joke of a moon. Elric might’ve trounced Snape, but like Madam Bones said - the rest are muggles. He’s seen what Death Eaters do to muggles. He saw what Voldemort did to Cedric, too. And himself. He’s the only one who has. If the Unplottables want to take on Voldemort, they’re going to have to do better than three alchemists, no matter how good they can backflip and punch.

Something wraps around Harry’s ankle.

He kicks on reflex, but the thing - a vine, he sees, glancing down in alarm, it’s a vine coming from the bushes - doesn’t come loose. The Cloak’s slipped enough without him noticing for his whole foot to be visible from the calf on down, and Harry has to yank it back in place as he kicks more urgently at the thick green tendril. Is this Devil’s Snare? Can he set fire to it? If it’s not Devil’s Snare is it one of those plants Professor Sprout had put on the list titled don’t try fire that makes it angry? Harry finds himself ardently wishing he’d paid as much attention as Hermione’d wanted him to in fourth year Herbology, because whatever it is in these Grimmauld bushes is trying to strangle his ankle with great enthusiasm and it’s not letting go despite his best football striker impression.

He’s got to try fire. He fumbles the Cloak up to stick his wand out and try an Incendio - only to hear the door to the house open, prompting him to immediately fumble it all back again. It’s the tall Elric, Alphonse, and he’s saying something in an absentminded sort of tone as he crosses the yard, only the vines took Harry’s moment of distraction to summon reinforcements so he doesn’t exactly catch that. Alphonse doesn’t seem to have noticed the violently shaking shrubbery on the far side of the dirt walls, at least, which is small favors given Harry’s situation but he’ll take it -

Only then he hears Alphonse snap for his brother to move, and then Sirius’s exclamation, and he gives up on both stealth and getting the Cloak out of the way and starts stomping.

And then the ground starts shaking, which means nobody hears him thump at the plants but also means he nearly loses his balance, teeters wildly into the shrubs and just barely snatches his wrist away from getting vined as well. Whatever this thing is, it’s definitely angry now: more vines are rising out of the bushes, snaking towards his legs, and the first one around his ankle is starting to squeeze.

Harry whips up the Cloak, jabs his wand outward and hisses “Incendio!”, directing the small jet of flames directly at the vines. The plant immediately begins to thrash, making him windmill one arm to stay upright, and he hears the house door opening again but since he’s a bit occupied with dancing a mad jig to keep his trainers out of the plant’s clutches he can’t tell who it is. The plant recoils from his dying flames but not without a fight - Harry has to kick furiously in concert with another incendio to get free, charring his jeans slightly in the process.
He hears Lupin’s voice as he gets the hell away from the shrubs - that must have been who came outside. He sounds calm, even if Sirius doesn’t, which reassures Harry a bit -

But then the ground shakes again. The dirt blocks grind together, trapping Sirius and Lupin inside.

Harry skids up to the walls too late, panting, to find every single gap closed. He darts around to the front and finds there’s not even a seam to show where the entrance had been, just sheer packed earth on all sides. He can hear Sirius, at least - and Lupin - they’re talking about - a spy?

Harry stares unseeing at the dirt in front of his face. A spy. Lupin says it’s not Snape. Is it Snape? Is there someone else, too? Another Pettigrew, selling out to Voldemort while pretending to be part of the Order? And the Unplottables are talking too - they think Lupin and Sirius are spies, and they want them to prove they aren’t, and they have a way to do it.

The runes, Harry realizes, as Alphonse tells Lupin to step into the circle. Those runes in the dirt - they are for something against Voldemort - for weeding out spies? Is it like Veritaserum, only you don’t have to bother with getting people to drink it? And Harry hears Lupin agree, and presumably walk into whatever it is that the chalk circle is doing.

And then there’s choking, and Sirius starts shouting. Shouting for Lupin to get out of there.

Harry swings his wand up at the wall without any spell lined up, then just as convulsively drops it down again. Sirius is shouting, Lupin is retching, not answering - Harry has to get inside. He doesn’t know any spells that’ll let him get through the wall besides Reducto, and that’s going to give away that he’s here for sure. With how Elric thrashed Snape so effortlessly - if Sirius needs help, Harry will have to surprise them. He has to get inside now. How?

He doesn’t need magic to climb. The walls aren’t that high. He saw the Unplottable with dreadlocks do this just yesterday. Harry backs up, jams his wand in his pocket, grabs a fold of Cloak between his teeth and takes a running leap.

He hits the wall hard, scrabbling, but his fingers catch the top. It’s not quite like trying to swing yourself back onto a broomstick - nothing at all like it, actually, there’s generally nothing to dig your toes into in midair - but it uses a lot of the same arm muscles, and Harry gets a knee over the top.

Something howls, right beneath him, and it startles him so badly he falls right off the wall. It sounds like a wolf howl, like that night on the Hogwarts grounds in third year, and Harry scrambles madly to climb up again, nearly tripping headlong in his haste. The howl cuts off just as quick as it began, just as dirt slips under Harry’s toehold and sends him crashing back down again.

Then he hears Lupin say he’s alright. This doesn’t stop Harry from trying to climb the wall, but it does release some of the haste, letting him take the time and see if he can find a foothold. He completely misses the top and bodyslams into the wall full frontal, though, when he hears Lupin’s not a werewolf anymore.

They have… some kind of cursebreaker tool? The circle. All the chalk and runes on the ground - that’s for breaking curses. Aright, Harry thinks, panting through his nose as he runs up and catches the top of the wall with his fingertips once more. He is never doing anything like this in the Cloak again. The Unplottables have cured Lupin. That’s good. But they still trapped Sirius and Lupin in there, and are treating them like they’re going to snap and go berserk any minute. Harry has to get in there. It’s - the cursebreaking is for him?

“Harry is the spy,” Lupin says.
This time when Harry startles and falls, he lands on the right side of the wall. He hits the dirt hard, just as Sirius barks “What?”

Harry’s too winded to make a sound, which is probably for the best given no one seems to have heard him land under Sirius’s incredulity. Sirius, who is waist deep in dirt. Harry spits out his mouthful of Cloak and tries not to wheeze audibly as he slowly gets to his feet, inches away from the stadium-light brightness of the glowing runes. He’s made it this far, and Sirius doesn’t look like he’s buried in the ground because he wants to be, so Harry might have to take the Unplottables by surprise after all, if they go all violent again. But he also needs to hear, because they’re still talking - talking about him, about what Dumbledore suspected - knew -

Harry goes cold, all over. He is possessed, then. Lupin knows it. Has known about it. Sounds like damn near everyone besides Sirius has known about it. And even the Unplottables have been lying to Harry: Alphonse Elric said they’d confirmed it, after telling him to his face that they didn’t know anything and there was nothing to be worried about. And then they keep talking, and Alphonse tells them that it’s not a curse - that it’s - something worse -

The thought of Voldemort in him - growing, multiplying - Harry’s stomach heaves. There’s only one thing to do. He throws off the cloak and steps into the light.

Pain sears. Harry feels impact roll through him and dimly realizes he’s fallen to his knees, clutching at his forehead. Someone is yelling, shouting, Harry can’t - it might be him, he can’t think, the ground is shaking and the hum keeps rising and rising in pitch. His eyes are streaming, blurring, he tries to cover his face with his hands but he can still see the light - going sharper and harder, brighter and brighter, until there’s nothing else, an empty blank white world.

He’s weightless within it, stretched on the horrible endless ringing of that high-pitched hum. He’s not sure he’s in his body anymore. He thinks maybe the hum is his own scream.

And then - some great invisible dam cracks, and the pressure slices - outwards, all at once.

Harry’s back arches as his lungs heave, inhaling like he’s shot up out of deep water. He’s on the ground. His glasses are askew, the blurred shapes across from him strangely doubled; Sirius, in the dirt, and Lupin, grabbed by Elric. It’s like sound comes back the moment he notices their mouths are moving - and they’re shouting, their eyes wide -

Something grey and indistinct is boiling up from Harry’s skin, a thick, thrashing fog, emitting a whistling scream as it’s dragged away from him and directly into the light. The symbols crackle hungrily, glowing brighter and brighter as the fog is pulled in, spinning like water swirling down a drain - and it’s over as fast as it begun, the last tendrils scrabbling frantically at Harry’s skin as the smog dissolves with a final tinny shriek.

Harry can only lay there and beg for breath for the next couple of moments. His eyes don’t seem to want to unwiden. He feels like a hippogriff sat on him and then wiggled around and got comfortable to boot. The light is still bright all around him, throbbing, almost as if it has a pulse. The circle sounds like it’s singing.

“Harry,” Sirius says raggedly. Harry’s eyes refocus. Elric has Lupin with one arm twisted behind his back, holding him by the nape of his sweater, but Lupin and Sirius were both staring at Harry, eyes as wide as his own feel.

Harry opens his mouth, coughs, tries again. “That was,” he wheezes extensively, trying to get his lungs under control, then gives up and wheezes some more. “Voldemort?”
“Don’t see what else it could have been,” Sirius says, slightly shaky. “You - Merlin, Harry, you alright?”

“Fine,” Harry says, wheezily. His hand’s trembling enough that he nearly pokes himself in the eye fixing his glasses, but he manages, righting the world.

“That was very dangerous, Harry,” Lupin says, but he sounds relieved, apparently hardly noticing how Elric has his elbow halfway up his shoulderblades. “Well done.”

Elric drops his grip on Lupin and steps away, wearing an expression Harry last saw on Snape when Neville managed to blow up not just his own cauldron but the four closest workbenches as well. “Разъебались все в этом грёбаном сарае,” he snarls. “Ну? Че с ним?”

“Чи поправилась,” Alphonse says, eyes on Harry. “Режь.”

And Elric draws a knife. Harry feels his body try and send some signals to the panic station, but the adrenaline train has already left and is going as fast as it can go. He tries to at least sit up, but his limbs feel like wet flannel; he’s barely raised his head by the time Elric neatly sidesteps Lupin, crouches down and stabs the knife into the dirt, cutting the outermost edge of the circle.

The light and hum dies. Harry’s gasping is left that much louder in the ringing silence. “What the fuck,” Elric snarls, “do you think you’re doing.”

“Wha,” Harry manages, then coughs again. He doesn’t feel different, now that his soul’s been… de-possessed, or whatever… but he definitely feels like he fell off his Firebolt and into a vat of tapioca and gravel. His whole body feels squashed and bruisable. “What.”

Not that a coherent answer would have satisfied Elric. “You just pop up and decide to jump in just the fuck anywhere -”

“Well, what can you expect,” Sirius says, sounding relieved and approving now that it seems like Harry’s brains won’t be dribbling out of his ears on a gush of Voldemort-ectoplasm. “He’s a Gryffindor.”

“What the fuck does THAT mean? No, shut up, I don’t care! Next time you hop on the giant idiot pogo stick you call your brain and go bouncing off into the baddest idea you can think of, I will make you regret!”

Alphonse sighs even as he doesn’t take his eyes off Harry. “You don’t have a leg to stand on, brother.”

“Oh yes I fuck in do! It’s this one here, the one that got ripped the fuck off by doing exactly this kinda stupid ass jump in don’t think shit -”

“You stepped into this array this morning,” Alphonse says, now touched with incredulity.

“And I knew the consequences, the margin of error, I had a spotter, I didn’t just pirouette in thinking everything would be fine -”

“I didn’t think everything would be fine,” Harry snaps, pushing up on his elbows. “I thought I’d better get Voldemort out of my head before his soul gives birth in it!”

“That was an analogy,” Elric yells.

“Мм, well,” Alphonse says, making an alarming maybe-maybe gesture with one hand. He still
hasn’t taken his eyes off Harry, and while the look isn’t hostile his eyes are very yellow and very, very focused. “More importantly - where did you come from?”

Harry pushes himself to sit upright, ignoring the way his arms wobble. “What?”

“You didn’t teleport,” Alphonse continues. “You just… appeared.”

They don’t know about the invisibility cloak, Harry realizes, and immediately resolves to do everything possible to keep it that way. “I apparated.”

“Try again,” Alphonse says, his tone much milder than the coolly incisive look in his eyes.

“Looked like Apparating to me,” Sirius says immediately, briefly locking eyes with Harry then twisting to Alphonse. “Look - we wanted to keep it quiet, because Harry’s not of age and it’s against the law to practice without supervision, but with everything going on -”

Not for the first time Harry’s grateful beyond words that his godfather is a Marauder. “If dementors come after me again, I’d better be able to get away, haven’t I,” Harry says, and it’s easy to sound annoyed. “I’ve been practicing with Fred and George.”

Alphonse hasn’t even glanced at Sirius. “I see.”

He doesn’t look like he believes them. Harry doesn’t know how he’s going to retrieve the Cloak, what with Alphonse staring at him like that, but he’ll find a way somehow, and Alphonse isn’t saying anything else. Elric’s gaze is flicking suspiciously between his brother and Harry, but his brother deciding not to pursue the issue is apparently enough for him to stick to just narrowing his eyes and starting to watch Harry too.

“We need to tell Dumbledore,” Lupin says, glancing between them. “This is… he needs to know. Better sooner than later. If You-Know-Who’s connection has been severed…”

“We should contact the general as well,” Alphonse allows. “And take down some observations.”

“Great,” Sirius says. “Can I be let out now?”

Alphonse eyes Harry for a moment longer, then smiles and steps back, which prompts Elric to step forward with a disgusted expression and slap his hands together, thumping the ground. The dirt walls around them drop as Sirius gets pushed up out of the ground, popping up fast enough that he flails for balance and grabs for Lupin’s arm.

And Alphonse keeps watching Harry, and Harry watches Alphonse right back. The sword in his hand looks oddly strange now, like someone else passed by and asked him to hold it for a minute, instead of just a moment ago where it had been an extension of his arm. A doctor. Elric had said he handcuffs patients who don’t cooperate. When Alphonse had first shown up Harry hadn’t believed it. He believes it now. Alphonse knows he’s lying, and he’s smiling at Harry like it doesn’t upset him at all. Like it doesn’t matter whether Harry lies or not, because he’s going to get what he wants regardless of anything Harry can do.

The short Elric may be a bastard, but this one is creepy.

All the more reason not to let them know about the Cloak. Harry slowly starts pushing himself to his feet, faltering enough that Sirius catches his eye, leaves off snipping at Elric for shooting him out of the ground like a champagne cork and immediately trots over, bending down to help him up.

“All right, Harry?”
“Fine,” Harry says, panting a bit for effect, using Sirius’s body to hide that he’s pulling his wand. Maybe he can Accio the Cloak to him, if he does it quietly enough and maybe holds his hand behind his back; he can tuck it in the back of his jeans and have no one the wiser.

He stumbles some more, prompting Sirius to grab him. “Bit of a rough ride, eh?” he says loudly, which lets Harry say “Accio Cloak,” under his breath, pointing his wand backwards with one hand and sticking the other behind himself to get ready to catch it.

Nothing happens.

“Accio Cloak,” Harry tries again, even as he realizes - there’s no magic. No rush inside him. It’s not just the spell not taking - there’s no spell there at all.

“Let’s get you a cuppa,” Sirius continues, patting theatrically at Harry’s jumper like he’s brushing the dirt off. Harry barely feels it. He stares down at his wand. The wood - usually warm in his hand, familiar in more than feel, comforting - is cold for the first time he can remember.

“Harry?” Sirius says, genuine concern in the words now; Harry looks up into his worried eyes. “Let’s get you inside, yeah?”

“Sirius,” he says, the words feeling thick and slow in his mouth, unwilling. “I think I’m a muggle.”

Chapter End Notes

**me:** what’s the dumbest possible reason i can have to explain why harry’s not in the circle immediately

**me:** let’s have him fistfight a tree
Psycho stares at Hairy like the kid just told them all he has two weeks to live. “What?” he says. “What?”

“My wand,” Hairy says unsteadily. “It won’t work. I can’t do any magic.”

“Hang on,” Mustache says.

Psycho rounds on Ed. “You turned him into a muggle?”

“We? He popped up out of nowhere,” Ed snaps, which is a way bigger deal than the kid’s magic stick getting busted. Al isn’t trained to sense qi in combat the way Lan Fan or Ling are, but his awareness isn’t anything to sneeze at and he definitely would have noticed an invisible person ten feet away, so if the wizards have some way to block qi -

“I don’t think,” Mustache starts.

“It was your circle,” Psycho cuts over him, glaring at Ed. “Turn him back!”

“Back into what? A possessed person?” Ed demands. “He jumped in his whole ass self after sneaking around just like you were, and he’s lucky he’s not missing any limbs -”

“I don’t think he’s - merlin’s pants,” Mustache says suddenly, and rushes past Ed with his stick out. Towards - they all spin around - the bushes, which are on fire.

“Aguamenti!” Mustache shouts, which gets water shooting directly out of his stick like it’s connected to a tiny invisible firehose. The bushes aren’t just crackling because they’re on fire, Ed realizes - they’re actively thrashing like some kind of animal, and that’s upsetting enough on its own without any of this other bullshit thrown in.

Like the fact that a wooden stick can contain or at least teleport enough water to put out a highly suspect wizard fire and blast it like a rogue car wash nozzle. “As I was saying,” Mustache says, breathing a little heavily, the waterworks dying off, “I don’t think Hairy’s a muggle.”

Ed jabs a finger at the charred bushes, now quivering hard enough to be sprinkling droplets sideways. “What the fuck was that?”

“I’m not sure,” Mustache says. “Serious…?”

“I don’t bloody know, my mum could’ve planted anything back there,” Psycho says distractedly. “Hairy -”

“I had to set them on fire,” Hairy says, still sounding dazed and staring down at his stick. “To get them to let me go.”

“Oh,” Psycho says, like this is somehow fine. “Look - try your wand again, yeah? Maybe you just weren’t concentrating right, after all that -”

“Actually,” Mustache says. “I suspect his wand - it had a connection to Voldemort too, didn’t it?”
“What,” Ed says.

“- so that may be the problem - here, Hairy - try this.”

Mustache then hands the kid his own stick, who stares at it open mouthed for a second before snatching it up. “His stick was possessed too?” Ed demands, but the wizards all ignore him in favor of watching the kid like he’s about to perform brain surgery with a bendy straw.

Ed turns to Al and says, “Al, what the fuck is happening,” just as Hairy’s face twists up like he’s about to take the biggest dump of his life and some sparks fall out of the borrowed stick like the dying spurts of some sad little firework.

“There you are,” Psycho says, sounding massively relieved. “There you are. Just a broken wand, see? Go on, give it a wave -”

“He just set fire to half the backyard and you want him to do more?” Ed demands, but they’re all busy clapping Hairy on the back and congratulating him like the surgery was a roaring success and the patient with half his brains on the floor is definitely going to live.

“Relax, he’s just throwing sparks,” Psycho says, all geniality, like the charred mass of bushes by the fence isn’t twitching like a severed gecko tail and making disturbing rattling noises.

“And I bet he was just throwing sparks back there too, huh?” Ed snaps, waving an arm at the dripping greenery that now probably only qualifies as blackery. “Just a little light wizard fun! What the fuck else was he doing?”

Hairy glares at Ed, now looking pissed instead of confused and disbelieving, which at least is some variety given hostility and trauma seem to be his only two settings. “I didn’t do it on purpose!”

“You weren’t sneaking around on purpose?” Ed says incredulously.

“Oh, as if you have room to talk,” Psycho retorts. “You did the exact same thing - we told you Grimmauld place isn’t safe, but you went around touching everything anyway and set buck beak loose -”

“How is that the same thing? I didn’t try to trick anyone and I sure as shit wasn’t setting fires -”

“He has a point,” Al says.

“Wh - hey!”

“Just because you didn’t burn anything doesn’t mean you didn’t act without fully evaluating the situation,” Al says, touching his hands together and running one down the length of his sword, transmuting it back into a cane. That, at least, shuts Psycho’s mouth with a near-audible click, even though Ed’s a little more preoccupied with how Al just called him a wizard, even if it is just to make them think he’s the reasonable safe nice one again next to Ed.

Al meets his eyes as Ed opens his mouth, though, and his face is serious. “Let’s get inside. We really do need to communicate with the General and the others as quickly as possible.”

Because, Ed realizes, even if Hairy the amateur arsonist over here isn’t broadcasting to Terrorist HQ anymore, it’s highly possible he was right up until he jumped into the circle. The circle, which he might have seen work on Mustache, and probably did, given how happy he was to pop in. He absolutely heard the spy conversation. And if Hairy didn’t teleport into the yard, then either he got in some other even freakier wizard way, or he was already out there with them. Just hidden. In a
way Al can’t sense.

One of them turns into a dog and the other one can make everything down to the qi invisible. _Wasn’t about to break character_, Psycho said. That does not sound like this is the first time they’ve done this. Where _else_ have they snuck around, undetected? What the hell else have they overheard?

“Oh, we have _big_ problems,” Ed says grimly, turning back to the wizards. “One of you dial up your ghost zoo and tell Bones and everybody else to get back to base now. We’re so fucked we don’t even know how fucked we are.”

“What?” Psycho says confusedly, but Mustache seems to get it, taking his stick back from Hairy and saying “Expect o Patronum!”

His ghost phone is also a wolf, though not as big and fluffy as Bones’ had been. Ed briefly wonders if you just pull up a random animal every time or what, because Mustache looks dismayed for a second when it blooms out of the end of his stick, like he wanted to get a butterfly or a llama instead. “Tell Madam Bones she is needed urgently, and then tell Molly Weasley to return with everyone as soon as she can,” he says, and it wheels around and winks out.

Ed moves to the array and Hairy twitches - almost like he wanted to step into Ed’s way - so Ed shows some teeth as he moves past, pulling the knife out of the circle’s border. He steps in and scuffs out three of the anchors with his boot, too, because the way today is going they’re about to find out that the wizards don’t even need to be alchemists to activate the array or something. Al’s looking hard at the rattling bushes like he’s not sure whether he’ll have to bust out the topiary shears, so better safe than sorry. “Inside,” Ed orders Psycho and Hairy, pointing for them to go, and after an exchange of deeply suspect glances they obey.

Ed doesn’t know _what_ the fuck that’s about, but he’s going to find out. “You too, Mustache,” Ed says flatly, because the guy’s giving the array a lingering look. “Al?”

“Uh huh,” Al says, apparently deciding the bushes don’t need any pruning because he joins Ed in herding the damn wizards back into the house.

Luckily Mustang, Hawkeye and Bones all _crack_ into existence in the kitchen before Al can even close the door, which causes a brief pileup as Ed jerks Psycho back by his shirt to stop him walking into Hawkeye and the giant rifle strapped to her back. “Whoa,” Psycho says, staring up at the barrel and making no move to get out of her way; “Watch it,” Ed snaps, just as there’s a _whoosh_, some thumps and coughing from one of the sitting rooms.

“Petition to never do this ever again, sir,” Havoc’s voice groans from down the hall, so it’s probably not horrible demon nightmares come to kill them all, and means every Amestrisan and everybody who was just out wandering in public is safely back on base. Good. For all that teleportation is a total fight nightmare the instantaneous travel is real damn convenient.

Al’s got his checked out, feeling-the-qi lack of expression on, which is a good idea given it’s apparently _not_ a foolproof lifesign detector around here and some of these freaks randomly turn into _dogs_. Not like, big human-mix chimeras like Darius or Heinkel, but full on fucking _dogs_ like _Envy_. “Yo, Mustang, you’re gonna love this,” Ed says, just as Hughes pops out of the hall, spots Mustang and says, “Roy! We need to talk.”

“You _bet_ we do,” Ed agrees. “We’re not, like, turbofucked, but it’s close -”

“- and I’d love for you to be in the right frame of mind for this only that’ll be never,” Hughes
finishes, brittle with brightness.

Mustang looks from Hughes to Ed and back, expression setting. “What is it.”

“They have a shapeshifter,” Ed and Hughes say simultaneously, then “What?”, then “Who?”

They both raise their hands to point, then abort halfway through with a reflexive glance at Mustang.

Mustang stares back at them as the wizards and their kids filter into the kitchen as well, bookended by Jones and Arget and Havoc. “Really?” he says, drippingly unimpressed.

Ed glances at Hughes again to find him glancing back, which mostly just confirms that they’re wearing the same deeply mistrusting expression. Mustang narrows his eyes. “I’m going to find out eventually,” he says evenly.

Hughes swivels to Mustang again. “Sex work is illegal here.”

Ed’s pretty sure he’s never seen Mustang look that particular combination of wrongfooted and disbelieving, even if it barely lasts a split second and manifests only as the slightest widening of the eyes. “Also, we’re dealing with two governments, not one,” Hughes continues before Mustang can open his mouth. “Because their entire financial system is owned by a completely different species, with their own sovereign state and laws, and their relationship with humans is, in a word, shitty.”

*That* is a whole all you can eat spread of *what the fuck*, but Ed’s not to be outdone, so he adds, “Also the array works, the kid deleted his forehead soul baby and we cured werewolfism. Not in that order.”

Ed will say this for Mustang: the guy doesn’t waste time saying shit like ‘what?’ or ‘that’s crazy! That’s not possible!’. He just looks increasingly like he wishes he’d developed a glue sniffing habit early enough to give him brain damage severe enough to keep him out of the military. “Congratulations,” he says, hip-deep in irony. “I’d like to share with you as well. In the last conflict, fourteen years ago, the ministry’s dementer corps defected en masse to the terrorists and followed the orders of their lord Voldemort. They are expected to do so again. They currently number nearly a thousand.”


“Which part?” Ed asks sarcastically, hands on his hips. “Also *you* what the fuck, what do you mean, *different species*? What, is it more fuckin’ elves?”

“Goblins.”

Ed stares a bit. “Thanks. I hate that.”

“Me too!” Hughes says. “What was that you said about werewolves and soul babies?”

“Well, turns out werewolfness is just a kind of magic herpes or something, and the kid’s possession problem was stuck onto him as like, a magic fetus type thing,” Ed says sourly. “So he gave himself an express abortion by fucking with our shit, because apparently now we’re the god damn Elric Clinic for stupid magic problems.”

“He jumped into the array,” Al says, refocusing on the conversation.
“It’s not a stupid magic problem, it was my soul,” Hairy says belligerently, which makes them all remember the wizards are there too.

“Yeah, well, turns out your soul can have stupid magic problems. Feel special,” Ed growls. “It’s like a two-for-one deal on pure undiluted bullshit -”

“Wow!” Hughes returns his wide grin to Mustang. “A thousand?”

Mustang gestures all and more! to Hughes but he’s looking at Ed, eyes sharp. “The array works?”

“Full throttle,” Ed confirms, because at least there’s that. “But the terrorists might know all about it already, because turns out Haunted Teen Radio over there has got a way to sneak around undetected -”

“Completely undetected,” Al says grimly.

“- and he’s been hiding around us for fuck knows how long, broadcasting it all to lord vegetables along the way.”

“What?” exclaims one of the redheads.

“I didn’t want to be,” Hairy says hotly. “It’s not as though I was doing it on purpose -”

“You were possessed?” Miss Redhead says disbelievingly.

Hairy throws up his hands. “I don’t know! How should I know, when nobody bloody tells me anything? Oh, it’s all for your own good, hairy, we’ll tell you later, hairy, even though you’re being chased by dementers and people have already died -”

“You should have told him,” Psycho joins in, though he’s talking mostly at Mustache. “You should have told us - who else knew?”

He looks at Ponytail and Breakfast Lady, who are looking almost as bewildered and stressy as the kids and not at all like Mustache, who looks like he’s trying not to wince. “Hairy was possessed?” Breakfast Lady says.

“But they got rid of it?” Smartypants says urgently, staring at Mustache. “How?

“By breaking my wand,” Hairy says, glaring at Ed.

“They broke your wand?” Not A Twin demands, Breakfast Lady all taken aback beside him.

“And what did I say would happen if you pulled any more shit with your little sticks again?” Ed demands. That’s not even remotely what happened, but if that’s what Hairy thinks it is that’s just fine by Ed. How does the telepathy with lord wiffleball work anyway? Does he automatically know what the kid knows? Does he always just see what Hairy sees? That can’t be it, otherwise he’d constantly be walking into walls and things - can he just jump in and out at will, like tuning into a radio station? This shit is such a fucking mess.

Bones, who’s been watching this with a look pretty similar to Mustang’s glue wishes, says, “You called us back and said it was urgent, Remus.”

“Ah, yes,” Mustache says, and looks at Ed and Al.

Ed can’t say well, if lord watercolor saw the array work through Hairy, he now knows we have a TKO, because if he has philosopher’s stones he has alchemists and those alchemists will be able to
ID the base array pretty quickly. Even if they don’t guess magic nullifier, they’ll know the Amestrisans are at the very least capable of making philosopher’s stones of their own. And what do you do if you know the opponent is bringing a gun to your knife fight? You do whatever it takes to keep them from using it.

And if you can fucking teleport, it does not take time to get agents in place to take hostages or just start killing people. It’s an easy peasy double bingo score if all your opponents’ kids are wandering around defenceless downtown.

So Ed just looks at Mustang, whose expression is cold and calculating and totally stupid-collie free. His eyes tick over Ed’s face, then move to Hairy. “He’s clean now?”

Al nods and so does Ed, though half-grimacing.

“But you don’t know what he saw.”

Ed’s grimace upgrades. “He didn’t -” Psycho starts, but Mustang gives him such a blankly hostile look that he cuts off, surprised.

“Who are the shapeshifters.”

“Him,” Ed says, pointing at Psycho.

“Her,” Hughes says, indicating the pink-haired woman next to the kids.

Psycho and the pink lady look at each other confusedly - what the fuck does she turn into, a dog too?- but Mustang’s looked them up and down and is already turning back to Bones. “We need to determine what leaked and update security. It may be a good idea to inform Albus and bring in all the other order members as soon as possible.”

“Yes,” Bones says, eyes on Hairy. “Your wand is broken?”

Hairy glares at her, too. Ed will say this for the kid, his hostility is pretty indiscriminate. “Yeah.”

“Then the trace on it is gone. Depending on how that’s interpreted by the ministry trackers, they might decide that means he’s dead,” Bones says to Mustang, already drawing her own magic stick. “Albus needs to know that as well, if he’s going around telling people he hasn’t a clue where Hairy is.”

Bones expecty-os her ghost phone out - wolf again - as the wizard kids start hissing to each other, Pinky staring between Mustang and Hughes, Breakfast Lady descending on Hairy and starting to fuss. “I’m sorry, hold on,” Ponytail says towards Ed and Al, like a man groping for a life preserver in a sea of angry jello: bewildered, adrift, unsure it’s even possible to get a grip. “You - what did you do with werewolves?”

Ed gives him a deadeyed look. “We fixed them,” he says. “The one you had, anyway. You’re welcome.”

Breakfast Lady, Pinky and the wizard kids all turn wall-eyed looks at Mustache, who takes his stick out, presses the tip to his forearm again and says “Homo loopy Revelio.” It glows gold again.

That makes them all start exclaiming and crowding and making confused wizard noises. Mustang turns to Hughes. “Goblins?”

“Goblin country,” Hughes corrects. “Banking country. If you’re wondering what kind of sense it
makes to have foreign nationals control your currency, don’t ask me, but the good news is there are avenues to negotiate -“

Al leans in to Ed. “We should go back outside,” he says quietly. Bones has been looking very hard at both of them since her ghost wolf dispersed and Mustache did his not-a-wolf stick trick, like she lifted a rock expecting grubs and instead found a cobra nest underneath. “I don’t want anyone near the array. And how he appeared -“

“Yeah,” Ed says grimly, meeting Bones stare for stare. If a kid like Hairy can fuck around outside of qi-sense then who the fuck knows what an adult can do. “Yo, Mustang! We’re out back. Come on out when you’re ready to unfuck the rest of them.”

Chapter End Notes

Al: i just want to remind you whose idea it was to burn our house down that one time

Ed: THAT’S DIFFERENT

alternatively

crookshanks, sitting in a tree on the other side of the yard, washing his paw: all according to keikaku
“Okay, what the fuck was that?” Ed demands, the second they’re far away enough from the house that the rattling of the burned bushes is louder than the voices from inside. “That kid came out of fucking nowhere?”

“Wait,” Al says, taking Ed’s elbow, hustling them into the null circle and grabbing some chalk to start reinstating the array again. Ed gets it a second later; he crouches down and connects the aspects as Al presses a hand down and activates the circle. “Now we can talk.”

“Yeah, so once more with feeling: what the fuck,” Ed says impatiently. “You couldn’t feel him at all?”

“There wasn’t any qi where he was standing,” Al confirms, equal parts grim and weirded the fuck out. “It wasn’t anything like the inversions that happen when they teleport, it was just - like a light flipping on.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” Ed drags his hands down his face. “Is it another kind of teleporting? Teleporting two? Teleporting but worse?”

“Probably not teleporting, given how hard they were trying to convince us it was,” Al says, arms crossing and foot starting an irritable one-two tap. On a less fucked day Ed will ask him whether he’s aware he picked that up from Mei. “This, plus the fact that their shielding disrupts transmutation - can we test this, properly, without letting on that the array strips the whole magical spectra? Or that I can sense qi?”

“That is what happened to the kid’s wand, right? What the fuck did they say about it being connected to lord wader boots?” Ed demands.

“We should test the objects,” Al says, nodding to the pile of random crap Mustache had floated on out here - the cursed shit, presumably. From here it looks like a music box, some pens and some weird tacky jewelry; when Ed squints he can see the shimmer over it all, almost hidden in the grass. “If it strips them too, then it probably was just the intended effect working on a magical object.”

“Yeah, because if the stick also had freaky qi you would’ve noticed,” Ed agrees.

“Not unless there’s been a way to mask qi all along,” Al says unhappily.

That is. A point. O...kay. Their ace in the hole might not be infallible, but it’s not like they were counting on it from the start - the nullification array works, which is the critical thing, and while qi-sense is an incredible asset they don’t need it to kick ass: Ed and Al managed without it just fine on their last apocalypse. Though Ling and Fu and Lan Fan and Mei were all there then, working only slightly at cross-purposes to whatever the hell Ed and Al and the rest were trying to do.

Then an idea strikes. “Was it like. An absence? Qi is everywhere, right? In everything? Astronomers track stuff they can’t see sometimes by the behavior of the stuff around it -”

“- so if there’s nothing where there should be something,” Al says, catching on instantly. “I don’t know, I wasn’t paying enough attention then - maybe?”
The light of the null array dies down and then fades out entirely around them, because they haven’t incorporated the self-sustaining feedback loop yet. “I haven’t noticed anything like that,” Al finishes, frowning as he steps out.

Ed follows, saying, “Okay, so, you stay on the lookout for holes, and I’ll - so about that barbecue,” he swerves, hearing the door to the house open. “The question is, open grill or closed oven? What are we cooking?” Now that he’s saying it, though, it occurs that he is hungry and only liable to get hungrier. “Shit, we don’t even have a marinade started.”

“How don’t you start making a firepit,” Al says, eyes over Ed’s shoulder, which means it’s definitely a wizard that came out.

When Ed glances over, he sees it’s Bones - by herself. “They don’t need you inside?” Ed says to her, which as polite as his why the hell are you heres get even if they don’t want to make her think they’re hiding anything out here.

“They’re talking about goblins,” she says, coming to a stop a few feet away from them. “Bill Weasley has far more insight there than I do.”

Ed scowls. Goblins or no goblins, if she left Mustang to get up to speed on the local money politics without supervision then either she’s a lot dumber than she looks or Mustang snowed her so hard in the last couple of hours that she now believes he’s both utterly harmless and completely trustworthy. “Is there something we can help you with?” Al asks, managing to make get lost anyway sound all helpful and polite.

Bones’ gaze travels over their workspace, lingering on the array. “So there was something in the boy,” she says. “And it connected him to Voldemort?”

Al cocks his head slightly. “You didn’t think there was?”

Bones shrugs slightly. “Albus suggested as much, but it’s not as though there was evidence.” Her eyes pass over the circle again. “He also has a background in alchemy. It makes me wonder what you found that he couldn’t. Though, of course,” she adds, in a slightly different tone, “he’s not a specialist.”

Oh, Mustang got to her good, and she’s telling them so. “Beardy’s an alchemist?” Ed says sharply.

“She studied it when he was younger,” Bones says. “Though I can’t say if what we have has much overlap with yours. I know he was involved enough to make original discoveries in the field.”

Ed and Al stare at her. That is not just some casual youthful hobby time. “He said he’d never heard of it being used in combat,” Ed says sharply, flicking over what Beardy had said about alchemy; they seriously need to get their hands on some of their books. “That true?”

“I certainly haven’t,” Bones says frankly. “Our alchemists work with potion makers. Those who aren’t researchers mostly brew medicines. Albus was a researcher as well - he discovered the twelve uses of dragon’s blood.”

Ed decides then and there that dragon’s blood is just a stupid wizard name for calcium carbonate or something and that he’s not fucking changing his mind without dear fucking necessity. “But you got rid of it,” Bones says like she’s confirming, saving Ed from skidding any further down that mental waterslide. “Breaking his wand broke the connection?”

“It may have helped,” Al says diplomatically. “While we are familiar with some of the principals
at work here, magic and how it behaves is still very new to us.”

“Why didn’t anybody say there was something wrong with the wand?” Ed demands. “Everybody going back and forth on whether he was possessed or not and nobody thought to mention that?”

Bones frowns. “I hadn’t known there was anything wrong with it. Not until Potter mentioned you breaking it to destroy the link. I’d assumed the interference during his duel with Voldemort was simply instability caused by their wands having identical cores - though it makes sense, if Voldemort had used that to bind himself to the boy’s mind. If anyone could figure out how, he could,” she finishes darkly.

“Instability caused by identical cores?” Ed repeats. “What the fuck’s… never fucking mind. Where is it? Does the kid still have it?” He glances around; no stick. “The kid still has it. Okay, we’re gonna need that for observation. If it re-ups itself like the wizards did we’re gonna need to zap it again.”

“Get rid of it completely,” Al corrects. “We shouldn’t risk it reactivating again. We can test whether objects reinstate themselves using these.”

He gestures to the cursed junk just as the back door opens again: this time it’s Mustache and Ponytail pushing through, both looking kind of wild around the eyes. “Eric,” Ponytail says, zeroing in on them.

“Elric,” Mustache corrects, but he’s hustling over too.

“What fucking now?” Ed demands.

“How did you do it?” Ponytail demands.

“A good gym routine and a lifelong passion for science,” Ed says sarcastically, because that’s pretty much always the answer whether it’s what people are looking for or not. “What the fuck’s gone up your nose about me now?”

“I’m a cursebreaker,” Ponytail says intently, looking from him to Al. “You cured a werewolf. It’s one of the most complex curses there is, it embeds itself in the body so comprehensively that nothing can get it out - it’s in the blood. Loop in said you’d made a tool -“

“The circle,” Mustache says, indicating the array. “They activated it, and I stepped in, and it was - removed. Just like that.”

He looks struck all over again by this whole brouhaha, and abruptly goes for Al. Ed tenses enough to shift one leg back into stance, but the guy stops short and kind of makes an aborted hand-out gesture before putting it over his heart instead. “Thank you,” he tells Al, eyes dangerously shiny-looking. “Sincerely, thank you. I - I don’t know that this is what you set out to do, but you - you’ve cured - you’ve done something revolutionary. So many people -” he breaks off, clearing his throat.

Ed loosens a bit when it becomes obvious what’s going on, and Al smiles like he didn’t threaten the guy with group discount decapitation twenty minutes ago. Doctors. “I’m glad,” he says, sticking his hand out like he’s gonna let the wizard handshake him. “We did come here to help, in whatever way we can.”

Mustache takes it, pumping vigorously up and down. “Even if it is temporary - the fact that it can be done at all is - tremendous. Simply tremendous.” He turns to Ed too, looking alarmingly open to body contact. “You have my thanks.”
“Do not hug me,” Ed warns. This isn’t the first patient interaction like this he’s seen - plenty of people thank Winry and Granny after they do something painful and gross to them, and clearly the same goes for Al too - but Ed’s not a medical professional for a reason. “It was all Dr. Elric here.”

Al shoots him a mild-mannered dumpling of a look with pissy filling. “It was a joint effort.”

“He’s right,” Ponytail puts in. “A cure for werewolves - no one has managed it, ever. And it turns out it is possible, with alchemy - well, unplottable alchemy, I suppose - yours isn’t remotely like potion making, I think.” He eyeballs their chalk. “If you don’t mind - how does it work?”

Ed’s about to open his mouth and feed them a nice long line of jargon-heavy horseshit when the house door opens again - and it’s Hawkeye this time, thank fuck. And she’s carrying the Kerchatka. “Oh fuck yeah - hey, here,” Ed says, casting around for the pack full of cartridges Al had made and going to her, glad to have an excuse to get out of the patient postmortem; Al’s the medical miracle man, he can bullshit with the best of them. “We made like… what, fifty?”

“Seventy-five,” Al calls.

“And bastard said he’d do the charges, but he can add that after we check the fit,” Ed finishes. “Can I see?”

Hawkeye trades him the pack for the rifle. Ed takes it in both hands, frowning as he weighs it and feels out the composition. “I can take… maybe half a K out of this,” he says aloud, refocusing on her face. “I don’t wanna fuck with it too much, but -”

“Not the barrel,” Hawkeye says, hooking her elbow through the pack strap to take the rifle again. “No, just stock. I can do a…” Ed trails off as he claps, pressing his hands to the gun. Discharge crackles over the metal, arcing between his and Hawkeye’s hands as he reshapes the interior, visualizing both the lithograph of four different railway bridge designs from Bridge & Dam: Design in Civil Engineering and that cross-section of bird bones he saw in one of the Grand Anatomy volumes. “… strut matrix,” he finishes, the extracted chromoly falling into his hand as it detaches, shaped like a pair of knuckledusters. He offers them to Hawkeye. “Also, do you want this to be like. Black?”

“Nonreflective,” Hawkeye agrees, hefting the rifle, then places it down butt-first at her side to take the brass knuckles. She inspects them, checks the fit, then pockets one set and hands the other back to Ed. “Black or dark gray.”

“You got it,” Ed says, grinning a little to himself as he also stows his set. Matchy. He’s absolutely the work wife. “It’s gonna take me some extra stuff but I can do that today. How’s the cartridge fit?”

They get to checking the bullets; Bones, Ed notes, is splitting her attention between them and Al with the ex-werewolf interest group. “When you say the curse is in the blood,” Al is saying to the wizards, “what do you mean, exactly? Do curses attach themselves to specific parts of the body…?”

“Did Bones tell you guys Beardy’s an alchemist?” Ed says to Hawkeye, keeping his voice low under the crackle of resizing their test cartridge. Her eyes flick up; Ed nods a bit. “She says she’s never heard of combat alchemy either. But she also says he was a researcher and made original discoveries.” Hawkeye tilts her head slightly, watching the rifle’s bolt as she clears the chamber, so Ed continues, “He hasn’t lied to us, exactly? Not in anything he’s said so far. I think. And he’s not like, good at covering up that there’s some fucky fuckin’ shit going on in his kennel, so -“
The back door busts open again, and this time it’s Beardy himself who comes sweeping out, even more intense than Ponytail and Mustache combined. He goes straight for them, his senile grandpa expression gone grimly forbidding, though the effect is a little bit ruined by how his dress - dark purple today - is the wrong fabric weight to flare dramatically instead of just kinda flapping around his ankles. “What have you done?” he says sharply as Mustang and Hughes and some more wizards all exit behind him, everybody just coming out back into the yard like some kind of reverse clown car. “You say you’ve severed -“

Beardy stops short halfway to them, eyes snapping to the array. “His soul,” he breathes. “What have you done?”

Beardy is an alchemist. And he recognizes, at least on surface, the array for philosopher’s stones.

Al straightens up. Hawkeye lays the Kerchatka on the ground and stands, hands out by her sides. Behind Beardy, Mustang’s gaze bores into the back of his head, and Hughes takes one big prudent step backwards.

“We abso-fuckin’-lutely did not touch his soul,” Ed says slowly, also turning to fully face Beardy, hands opening but still by his sides. “You can tell, by the way there’s no blood and dismembered bodies and screaming. Read the intake notation, alchemist. That look like human transmutation to you?”

Beardy’s eyes rise to Ed’s and stay there. “The alchemies of our worlds are not the same.”

“But not different enough,” Ed says flatly. “What have you been doing, to know what the fuck you’re looking at?”

Beardy’s silent a long moment, just holding Ed’s stare. “I know you have questions.”

“They aren’t the only ones,” Bones says. She’s standing off to the side, closer to Ponytail and Mustache than anyone else, but where they’re looking like kids who just walked in on their parents fighting the look she’s giving Beardy is pretty stony.

“I will answer,” Beardy says, still watching Ed. “But I have a question as well, and mine may mean time works against us. You say you’ve removed the piece of Voldemort’s soul from Hairy - is this true? You are certain?”

There’s a couple of low gasps from the wizards by the house as he says piece of soul, like they didn’t think it was true until Beardy said it. “Yes,” Al says unsmilingly. “We’re certain.”

Beardy’s gaze transfers to him. “When was this? Exactly?”

What the fuck does that have to do with anything? “Why?” Ed says suspiciously.

“Sever us was summoned by Voldemort,” Beardy says, grim. “Just this morning. If the timing coincides on your ridding hairy of the connection and sever us’s summons, then we have all but proof that he has seen what Hairy saw.”

Chapter End Notes

ed, al and dumbledore all standing around in 3 way spiderman point meme
End Notes

Running list of art for this fic:

Ed & Al

Ed and Al and CROOKSHANKS!!!!

Therapy

THE CLAPASS ALCHEMIST

Hazza, Ron & Hermione

ROYALD THEY'RE LESBIANS

Ed & Al & CROOKSHANKS SOME MORE

BLINGED OUT POWER THOT

PROSTITUTES?

SO WE GOT TWO SOULS -

this entire fic summed up in 3 panels

ARE YOU CONFUSED ABOUT ED'S NICKNAMES? CLICK HERE

Chinese translation of this fic!

there's a discord server for this fic now, god help us

Works inspired by this one:

Not With A Whimper But A Bang by NaoNazo, [Podfic] snipers solve 99% of all problems by cabloom, quietnight, Five Times Voldemort Saw His Soulmate (Through Another's Eyes) by marleygoat, NaoNazo, Alchemic Sketches and Illustrations - A Compendium of Doodles by Lilituism

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