"Best friend pitted against pseudo-son. It was all very dramatic," Envy told her. "It seems Hughes and the Fullmetal brat will be too busy blaming each other to worry about asking too many questions. They’re both too wrecked to threaten our plans separately, and they certainly won’t be working together. You should’ve been there to hear it.”

Lust beamed. “You can’t be serious.”

“Dead. More so than Mustang,” Envy said, with another laugh, then paused. “How is our prisoner, anyhow?”

Or the one where Roy Mustang is not, in fact, dead. It's just that no one else knows that. But Roy's not too enthused about his present situation, either.
HAPPY HALLOWEEN! This work was originally supposed to be one part that was much longer, but I've written about half and I really wanted to get this part out today, so you can just read what I have finished right now! I figure I'm going to have to do multiple chapters eventually, because stuff like the Promised day should be one work but it'll take MUCH more than the usual ~15k words to accomplish. This first part is around 10k words, and the other half should be about as much, maybe a little less, so I figured I'd just chop it in half so I could get this to you now.

We start with essentially just plot shenanigans for my AU (I want to stick to the show, but it had to be done), and the next half will be the Maria Ross storyline. You could honestly treat them as two separate parts of this series, but I want them to come together, hence me taking this route. I don't want this part to be the shortest because I think it's arguably one of the most important plot-wise, and I also want to get my ass in gear to finish it.

Thank you so much for reading and keeping up with this series!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Envy skipped down the stairs leading deep down underneath central headquarters, feeling absolutely overjoyed. Father would be pleased, too—they were sure of it. Every little detail of the plan was falling perfectly into place, and they’d just overheard two of their supposed biggest threats go at each other’s throats. Neither Lieutenant Colonel Hughes nor Edward Elric would be paying attention to anything besides who killed Mustang for a long while in the future, it seemed.

“What’s got you looking so chipper?” Lust asked, emerging from the shadows with her bright red lips twisted in a pensive frown. “Who have you gone and killed now?”

Envy laughed. “Why do you always assume I’ve killed someone?”

Lust just narrowed her eyes at them. “It’s you. Last time I saw you visibly jumping for joy was when you got to shoot the Flame Colonel, after me skewering him didn’t get the job done.”

“I did try to tell you that wouldn’t be enough,” Envy reminded her. “But Father decided to send you in first, and you got burned so badly that your whole body had to regenerate. He didn’t so much as touch me, since I looked like his precious Lieutenant.”

The corners of Lust’s mouth twitched upwards. “I never did like her. Far to competent to ever be charming. Father had you go to Central today, didn’t he? How’s his Lieutenant faring now?”

“She seems to be taking it perfectly well,” Envy said, waving a dismissive hand in the air. “I don’t know. That one’s never really interested me, she’s much too stoic. I just knew seeing her would get the best response from him. Although, now I’m considering some… other possibilities.”

Lust glared, but didn’t address Envy’s last statement. “If you weren’t keeping an eye on the Lieutenant, what were you doing? I thought Father wanted you to make sure no one was close to figuring out what we’ve done.”

“Oh, believe me, they aren’t,” Envy told her, practically radiating confidence. “If you must always stick your nose in others’ business, I was checking in on the Lieutenant Colonel Hughes.”

Lust’s aforementioned nose wrinkled in distaste. “The father that never shuts up about his wife and kid? What’s he got to do with anything?”

“He’s the head of investigations, and he’s pretty determined to get revenge on Mustang’s killer,” Envy explained. “Father sent me to make sure he was as dense as he seemed, and not only did letting him see Mustang’s body being wheeled away stop him from questioning the fact that he was dead, but he’ll have his hands full with this Maria Ross business, who I assume will be executed for the crime once we see her properly framed.”

“I still don’t see what excuse that is to be so thrilled,” Lust muttered, and Envy shook their head gleefully.

“No, no, not that. It’s only that I had the most fantastic stroke of luck,” they said. “You’ll never guess who found out about Mustang today.”

A sadistic sort of light came into Lust’s eyes, one that Envy was sure already existed in theirs. “Who?”

“The Fullmetal Shrimp.”
Just like that, Lust smirked. “Did he? Ah, I would’ve liked to hear that. I suppose he didn’t react very well?”

“No, I suppose he didn’t,” Envy replied, their own smile growing wider. “Seeing as he and Hughes had a screaming match over it. Best friend pitted against pseudo-son. It was all very dramatic. It seems they’ll be too busy blaming each other to worry about asking too many questions. They’re both too wrecked to threaten our plans separately, and they certainly won’t be working together. You should’ve been there to hear it.”

Lust beamed. “You can’t be serious.”

“Dead. More so than Mustang,” Envy said, with another laugh, then paused. “How is our prisoner, anyhow?”

“He still hasn’t woken up, thanks to you,” Lust said. “Do I have to remind you again that we still need him for a sacrifice? You were supposed to make it look like he’d died, not actually kill him.”

“I didn’t kill him, I just came very close,” Envy pointed out. “And nobody would’ve believed that body was a corpse if not for all the blood. We’ve got Marcoh, and Father’s letting him use a stone to heal Mustang. He’ll wake up soon, and when he does… let’s just say I’ve got a few ideas.”

Lust crossed her arms over her chest. “I hope you know what you’re doing. He’s strong; he’s going to try and escape. Father may have said we could do with him what we pleased as long as we didn’t kill him until he’d been used, but… you’re playing with fire.”

“How many times do I have to tell you Lust? I know exactly what I’m doing, but Mustang wouldn’t burn me. He wouldn’t dare. Not if I’m wearing the face of one of his precious friends,” Envy said, then hummed. “Which one do you think I should wake him with? The friend or the child? I just can’t decide.”

Lust sighed a long-suffering sigh, but clapped them on the shoulder anyway. “You’ll have plenty of time to try them all.”

Maes Hughes was still not quite used to dinner being a silent affair in his household, but he knew it was most definitely his fault. He’d eaten quietly, helped Gracia wash the dishes quietly, then quietly told his daughter to get ready to go to sleep. He watched as she nodded, and hugged the teddy bear that seemed to have earned a permanent place in their living room on her way there.

Gracia broke the silence, finally.

“You got home from work even later today,” she told him, her voice soft and forgiving, as if she thought he didn’t know that already.

“I’m not officially assigned to Roy’s case,” he explained, for what felt like the millionth time. “If I want to find out who killed him, I have to do it on my own time. You know that.”

“I know,” she said. But she had hesitated first. “I… I just wish you’d think about Elicia and I. We need you here, too. I need you.”

“Roy needed me,” Maes said, fully aware that it was a low blow. “I was with you two then. Now
he’s gone, and the least I can do is find out who’s responsible, and make them pay for it.”

“You don’t have to do it, though,” Gracia insisted, turning away from the sink to face him. “You just said it yourself. He’s gone, Maes. Maybe… maybe it’s time to move on. I mean, won’t you be putting yourself in danger if you continue to—”

“Gracia,” Maes interrupted, his voice just as soft. “I don’t care about the danger. I have to do this. You know that.”

“I know,” she conceded, leaning her head into his chest. “I also know that nothing I say will stop you. But… but just be careful, all right? We can’t afford to lose you, too.”

“You won’t lose me,” Maes assured her, resting his forehead on the top of her own and pressing a kiss there. “I promise. I’ll be careful.”

Gracia looked up, her eyes searching his, and opened her mouth as if to say something else. But Elicia called before she could.

“Daddy! Come tuck me in!”

Maes sighed fondly, offered his wife one last small smile and kiss on the cheek, and headed into their daughter’s room.

“At your service,” he said with a small bow once he’d entered. Elicia giggled.

“Read me a story?” she asked, and even though she really should be going to bed, Maes couldn’t possibly say no.

“Oh, all right,” he agreed. “One story. And then right to sleep, no complaints. Okay?”

Elicia nodded, agreeing eagerly, although Maes knew she would protest once he finished, and demand he read another picture book to her. As it was, however, he had yet to incur his daughter’s wrath, and she handed him the book she’d— of course —already picked out with an innocent smile on her face.

So, he did the only thing he could do. He read it to her.

It was the story of two brother bunny rabbits, who were away from home when it started to storm. They got separated from each other, and the protagonist bunny spent the majority of the book looking for the other and worrying about him. But in the end, they were reunited and went back home together for some warm soup.

“They finished up their dinner and went to bed, like all good little bunnies do, and they knew that in the morning everything would be all right,’” Maes read. “‘Because… because they still had each other. The end.’” He closed the book. For some reason, a lump had formed in his throat.

“I like that story,” Elicia said sleepily, her eyes already slipping shut. “Read it again?”

“No, Elicia,” Maes told her, voice tight. “You have to go to sleep, remember? You promised.”

Elicia whined, but they both knew she wouldn’t make it through another story. She buried her face further into her pillow. “Fine,” she grumbled. “Goodnight, Daddy.”

Maes smiled, though it was strained this time. “Goodnight, sweetheart.”

He kissed her temple, tucked her in, and was halfway out the door when she spoke again.
"Daddy?" Elicia asked, her voice impossibly small. Just as small as her. He turned to look back at his daughter—her face was half hidden by her fluffy pillow still, but her eyes were wide open.

“What is it, princess?”

“Was Uncle Roy dying my fault?”

Jesus. Every time Maes felt even remotely okay, something happened to tear the world out from under him, leaving him only with two fundamental thoughts he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt.

*Roy’s dead.*

And…

*It’s my fault.*

“Of course it’s not your fault, sweetie,” Maes said, aghast. Why on Earth would Elicia think that? *It’s not your fault, it’s mine, it’s mine, it’s MINE—* “Why would you say that?”

Elicia sat up, her lower lip wobbling. “Don’t birthday wishes not come true if you tell anyone? I think Mommy told me that, once.”

Maes frowned. “Well, supposedly, but I don’t see what that has to do with—”

Fat tears rolled down his daughter’s cheeks. “I wished for Uncle Roy to get b-better,” she wailed. “I couldn’t think of anything else I wanted, but then I t-t-told him, and now he’ll n-never… he’ll never get better again!”

Maes’ heart broke.

“Oh, no, Elicia,” he said softly, and rushed over to hold her close. “That doesn’t make it your fault. Like I said before, it’s not your fault at all.”

Elicia cried herself to sleep, that night. And so did her father, *it’s mine it’s mine it’s mine* echoing in his head even after he finally drifted off.

---

*Maes sat at a small table almost identical to own, with the exception that it had two chairs instead of three, and it was much longer. He stared at the empty chair several feet across from him in confusion, then looked down.*

*A delicious looking plate of Gracia’s quiche sat in front of him. Just for him, though; whoever the other chair was for, no one had bothered to give them a slice. Maybe they wouldn’t show.*

*Maes lifted a forkful of the quiche to his mouth as he looked intently around. There was nothing else, no one else, save for Maes, his table, and his quiche. Everything else was just white space.*

*Gracia’s usually delicious food tasted like ash in Maes’ mouth. He wondered why.*

*Maes didn’t have to wonder for long.*

*A phone materialized on the other side of the table and rang once, the sound vibrating through*
Maes’ skull in the otherwise completely silent space.

“It’s for you,” Gracia said from somewhere, though Maes couldn’t see her. “Come get the phone, dear.”

Maes nodded reluctantly, and pushed his chair back in order to stand and make his way over to the still incessantly ringing phone.

Or at least… he tried to.

Upon attempting to stand, Maes found himself glued to the seat. When he opened his mouth to call for Gracia, no words came out. Not that it would’ve mattered anyway—Gracia wasn’t there. No one was. Maes sat alone with the horrible, ceaseless ringing.

Except he kept hearing voices. People he knew, insisting, demanding, even pleading that he just get up and pick up the phone. But his body wouldn’t move, no matter how hard he tried. Maes was completely stuck.

“It’s for you,” Gracia said again, voice a little more stern. “You should really answer it this time.”

“Sir, you have to answer the phone.” Hawkeye. Less forgiving than his wife, but full of sympathy all the same. “I would have done it by now, if I were there, but I can’t. It’s for you.”

“It’s for you, you bastard,” Edward said, his voice much colder than the others. “He called you. Pick up the fucking phone. Don’t make the same mistake twice.”

Maes couldn’t imagine what they were talking about. His memories felt fuzzy. Had he missed some important phone call? Why couldn’t he see any of the people talking to him? Why was everything white?

“Daddy, why don’t you pick up the phone?” Elicia asked. “It’s for you. And it’s so loud, please make it stop.”

And just like that, it did. Maes still hadn’t moved, so whoever was on the other line must’ve given up. Or they’d just run out of time. A shame. Maes’ legs still wouldn’t budge, so he tried another bite of quiche. It tasted wonderful.

“Why didn’t you answer?” a new voice asked. Maes looked up again. Roy was standing behind the chair across from him at the table, with a hand on the back. The phone had disappeared. “I called you. I trusted you. You were supposed to always be there to pick up. But you lied.”

Maes remembered everything that had happened that he’d yearned to forget all at once, the reality that he so desperately wanted to escape from and that always haunted his days and nights alike. He knew exactly what this was. A nightmare. He’d had plenty already, and he knew every time he woke up that he’d have more.

Knowing it was all in his head didn’t make it hurt any less when a small splotch of blood began spreading across the front of the uniform Roy wore, right where his heart would be. The walls turned red all at once, as Roy did slowly.

Maes tried to stand up, to go to him, to help him, to do something, but he remained frozen. He still couldn’t even speak.

“Why weren’t you there, Maes?” Roy asked, tears welling up in his dark eyes. It broke Maes to see them, unusual as they were. He’d only ever seen Roy cry a few times, when… when he was alive.
“Why?”

Maes could only shake his head. In truth, he didn’t know the answer himself. He… he just hadn’t thought about it. He hadn’t spared a second to think about his best friend in the whole world, to consider that maybe it could be Roy on that phone. And so he’d let it ring. No matter how much he wished he could go back and change it, he’d always stand by and let the line go dead. He’d let Roy die, over and over again in nightmare after nightmare. He would never escape the loop he’d created in his dreams with that one mistake, and Roy would never come back to life.

“Why?” Roy asked again. “Wh—” He choked on his own blood, and when he coughed it splattered onto the table. He stood for just a moment longer, unsteady on his feet, before collapsing to the ground. Maes couldn’t see him anymore; the table blocked his vision.

“ROY!” Maes screamed, his voice finally working. His legs would move now, too, and he kicked them out wildly, desperate to stand up, to run to Roy, to find purchase on a ground that was for some reason… soft? “ROY, HANG ON, I’M—”

Maes woke up to Gracia shaking his shoulder, a look of concern written plainly on her face. “Honey?” she asked, her voice quiet and just the tiniest bit scared. “Maes, are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” he lied quickly, sitting up beside her and running a hand through his hair. He was far from it. The vision of Roy coughing up puddles of blood still haunted him. “I’m… I’m fine. Why did you wake me up?”

Gracia bit her lip. “You… you were shouting for Roy in your sleep, again.”


She shook her head. “You don’t have to apologize, sweetie, it’s fine,” she assured him. “Really. Never apologize for these things. He was your best friend, and you’re devastated. The nightmares are to be expected, and I’m sure they’ll pass in time, as you start to think about it less and less.”

Maes knew she was just trying to be helpful, but it irritated him slightly that she thought all their problems would be instantly solved once Maes stopped thinking about Roy. He couldn’t simply go from speaking to someone nearly every day for eleven years to having them dead and buried. He wasn’t sure if he would ever stop holding Roy in his mind and heart, and consequently he didn’t know if the nightmares would ever end. But he loved his wife, and he knew she meant well, so he nodded anyway.

“You’re right,” he said, reluctantly, which made her smile softly at him. Gracia really, really wanted him to move on, he could tell. It almost hurt, but Maes understood the reasoning behind it. The mystery of Roy’s death and the revenge that needed dishing out consumed his every waking and sleeping thought. Maes knew he’d changed a lot as a person, as a result. It couldn’t be easy for her. Gracia didn’t exactly sign up for this. He stood up from bed. “Go back to sleep,” he told her, and kissed their joined hands before releasing hers. “I’m going to go make sure I didn’t wake up Elicia.”

Gracia called after him softly, but Maes ignored her in order to walk the few paces down the hall to Elicia’s room and poke his head inside. Sure enough, his daughter was still sound asleep.
He sighed, equal parts relieved and weary, and turned to go back to his own bedroom. But then he stopped.

Maybe Maes didn’t want to go back to sleep only to have another nightmare. Maybe he was worried that he’d wake up his wife again. He had already caused Gracia so much trouble, with this…

But the thing that had really frozen him in his tracks was the teddy bear Roy had bought for his daughter’s birthday, what now seemed like ages ago. They’d kept it in the living room, since Elicia hadn’t moved it no matter how many times her mother asked her to put it in her room after the party. She’d liked its place next to the couch. And then… Roy had died, and Gracia stopped insisting.

Maes, without thinking, walked over and dropped onto the end of the couch. He rested a hand on the stuffed animal’s fuzzy head.

He sort of hated having to see the teddy bear. He couldn’t help but picture his best friend arriving at his daughter’s third birthday party, fashionably late and grinning from ear to ear—even still being on crutches—as he gestured to the oversized gift that his Lieutenant had been forced to carry in. Roy had been so, so happy that day. It had barely been a month, and it felt like so long ago. Maes’ world had turned upside down since then, changed irrevocably. Maes had been permanently changed, too. God, I miss Roy, he thought, far from the first time. He knew well enough by now that he’d never stop missing him. Roy had been so important to Maes for more than ten years… that kind of emptiness didn’t fill up easily. Maes found himself wondering if it ever would, if he even wanted it to. I don’t know what I want. I don’t know what I should do now.

Well, maybe that was a lie, or at least partly one. Maes indeed wasn’t sure what he should do, and he didn’t have Roy to ask, to follow. But he knew what he was going to do. Track down whoever had put that bullet in his best friend’s heart, and—

In the dead of night, the soft crinkling of paper sounded as deafening as thunder, and Maes’ ears picked it up easily.

Without his realizing, the hand he’d placed on the bear’s head had clenched into a fist, and so it had shifted to lean slightly forward. On its back, which had been against the wall since the bear was first put down at the party, there was taped a small envelope.

Maes could’ve sworn, in that moment, that nothing mattered aside from that envelope, and the potential of its contents.

Sky blue, and stuck neatly to the teddy bear’s fur with a single transparent strip of tape. Clearly placed there so it wouldn’t be immediately noticed. And written on the envelope, in handwriting that Maes knew as well as his own, was simply… ‘Hughes.’

No ‘to,’ no ‘from,’ though Maes could tell who had written the letter the moment he laid eyes on it. Just his name. And that one word was enough to send Maes’ heart racing.

For a moment, he just sat there staring at it. Afraid that if he looked away, it would disappear. Afraid that if he reached for it, it would be torn to shreds the second his fingertips brushed the paper. Afraid that if he opened it and read it, it wouldn’t be anything special. Just a card for his daughter, nothing specifically for him.

He was even more afraid that the reverse would be true. Roy’s last words to him could be sitting in that envelope. If he read it now… then that’d be it.
On the other hand, *Roy’s last words to him could be sitting in that envelope.* It would be the first time he’d heard from Roy in over a month, and though he knew it wouldn’t be the same… he missed him *so* much.

So in the very next moment, Maes dove forward and grabbed the envelope so quickly that he fell off of the couch and wound up on his living room floor. He didn’t care. All he cared about was the precious cargo in his hands.

He opened it gingerly, careful not to so much as tear the paper. He worried that he would also rip the card inside.

But when Maes slid the contents of the envelope carefully out and into his hand, it wasn’t a card. It was a simple piece of lined paper, folded perfectly into quarters. He could see that there was a lot of writing on it before he even opened it; whatever pen Roy had used bled through to the other side at multiple points.

Maes hesitated for a split second, and then unfolded it slowly, still afraid it would disintegrate in his hands and he would be alone again. He smoothed out the creases with a hand, and—before he could stop himself —began to read.

---

_Dear Maes;_

Roy crossed out the phrase immediately after writing it. It was too formal for them, too stiff. It didn’t feel right.

_Dear Hughes;_

_Hughes,_

Better. Roy always referred to him as Hughes, anyway. Why should he put something else just because he was writing it down? Furthermore, _why_ was he writing anything down in the first place? They were already running late to Elicia’s birthday party, but when Riza had arrived to take him and found out that he hadn’t bought a card, she’d insisted he make one. Just a short ‘Happy Birthday!’ message for Elicia that he could send with the bear, even though Roy knew for a fact his goddaughter wouldn’t care about any _card_ as soon as she saw the bear, and besides, he’d even gotten flowers for Gracia.

So he’d decided to write the letter to his best friend, instead. Every time the two of them spoke, Roy could hardly get a word in edgewise. Maybe if he wrote Hughes a letter he’d shut up for once to read it, and give Roy a moment of peace.

_Hughes, _
I know that cards are a formality, and that I’m probably supposed to give one to the birthday girl. But seeing as your daughter can’t read, and that cards are stupid, I’m addressing this letter to you instead. I got flowers for your wife, this teddy bear for Elicia, and knowing you you’ll complain if you don’t get any gifts, so here we are.

And I know letters aren’t actually gifts, either, but the bear was very expensive and it’s not actually your birthday. That’s not for several months. I’ll buy you a real gift then, because for my birthdays you always bring me some baked good or another, and I’m tired of being outdone as your friend.

Roy hesitated. But… screw it. Chances were that Maes wouldn’t read this until far after the party had ended, or never read it at all, so he might as well be open. Maes meant a lot to him, and after everything that had happened recently, he wanted to make sure that he knew it.

Although I suppose anyone who tries to be friends with you will always be outdone. You are the best friend I’ve ever had.

Maybe I should write you letters more often, instead of just answering your incessant phone calls. It’s easier to write what I’m really thinking than to say it out loud, I think.

It really was. Roy was good with words to the extent of being charming enough to get the information he wanted, or to give orders and lead a mission. But when it came to telling the people he cared about how he felt… he pushed his emotions down as deep as he could. He always was afraid of hurting them, of dragging them into the disaster that was his life, of them hating him. Not like Hughes.

Maes Hughes had been wearing his heart on his sleeve since the very first day they met. Roy could never understand how he’d done it. He hated him for it, because Hughes trusted so easily, and because Roy never wanted to see him get hurt. Because he never wanted to be the reason for Maes getting hurt, and though Roy had given Hughes countless reasons to despise him… he just kept coming back. No matter what, Hughes never let Roy push him away.

Roy loved him for it, too. Maes was a much braver man than him, for doing that, and he didn’t even know it.

Don’t mistake this for me preferring letters to talking to you in person, because your company can cheer me up even at the worst of times. You’ve always been able to get me to laugh, regardless of our situation, and I’m extremely thankful for that. I don’t know how you do it.

But I can’t wear my heart on my sleeve like you do. I’d be afraid to admit these things to you in person. For instance, at the hospital, when you called me your brother. You said you loved me. I love you too, you—

Roy stared at the page. He thought about crossing it out. He didn’t.
—insufferable idiot, but I just couldn’t say it. So I’m saying it now, in the hopes that you won’t mention this letter at all the next time you see me. Maybe I won’t even end up giving this to you. Who knows.

Roy stopped writing for a moment, once again deliberating. Should he give this to Hughes? He didn’t want to bring him down at all, especially at his daughter’s birthday party, but… he had to say it. And it would be so easy to just write it all down, give it to him, and then leave. Once Hughes had the letter it would be out of Roy’s control. He had no idea whether he’d ever work up the courage to say any of this in person but… he thought it was important that Hughes know it, all the same.

Even though he was pretty sure Hughes knew already.

I don’t know why I feel the need to get into all of this for Elicia’s birthday. But I suppose it just meant a lot to me that you extended the invitation. I know you asked me to be her godfather, but I haven’t really acted like one, have I? I don’t know if you’ll read this during or after the party, and I do plan to talk to you about this in person, but I am going to make a genuine effort to change that. Now that I’ll be working in Central, I’m hoping you won’t mind if I visit more frequently. Not just for Elicia, either.

You’ve done so much for me. After what happened with Scar, I’ve had a lot of things to think about. My goals haven’t changed, but if I keep focusing on work so much, I’ll look back with regrets that I didn’t spend more time with the people I cared about in my life. I’ve found that no amount of time with any of you will ever be enough. The Elrics, Hawkeye and my team, Aunt Chris, and you. I want to return the favor. I want to be there for all of you, since you’re always there for me when I need you. And even when I think I don’t.

Quite honestly, I trust you with my own life more than myself. Maybe even more than Hawkeye, but you’re a terrible shot compared to her, so I’m not sure about that one. I suppose the two of you are about equal.

I’d say not to let that go to your head, but it probably already has.

Regardless, this letter is getting too long, and at this rate we’ll be very late for Elicia’s party, though I wasn’t planning on showing up on time anyways. I do want to have some of that cake, though, so we’d better get going. I guess I should bring this letter and actually give it to you, since I spent ages on it, but I think I’ll just leave it with the bear so you don’t find it until I’ve had time to get myself very, very far away. I’m still not entirely sure whether your hugs are friendly embraces or attempts to suffocate me. The current theory? Both.

But thank you again for inviting me, and the no doubt delicious cake I am going to eat too much of. It means a lot.

I really am looking forward to working in the same place again. I’ve missed you a lot.

Sincerely, Roy

Roy sat back to look at what he’d written, and nodded appreciatively. That would do just fine.
Riza handed him a light blue envelope to put it in, and Roy folded it into quarters, creasing the edges. He slid it into the envelope, sealed it, and stuck it to the back of the teddy bear, which Riza then picked up with no small amount of irritation at his ridiculous choice of a birthday present.

“Come on, Colonel,” she told him, impatiently. “If you don’t hurry up, we won’t even make it to the party, and you’ll have to answer to the Lieutenant Colonel. Even I won’t be able to stop him from destroying you if you hurt his daughter’s feelings.”

Roy rolled his eyes at her, even as he smirked and followed on his crutches. “Hughes would never hurt me, and you know it. Gracia is the one I have to appease, hence the flowers.”

Riza sighed, clearly exasperated. “Even so, Maes Hughes’ affection for his family beats even his affection for you, if only by a little. You better have put something really nice in that letter you spent so long writing.”


Maes clapped a hand over his mouth to muffle his sobs. Everything about this letter was so… so Roy, he could practically hear his best friend reading it out loud. And now that he’d read it… that was it. Roy was gone. There was nothing left.

“I’ve missed you too,” he said, his voice choked with tears. “So, so much. More than you’ll ever know.”

Maes thought about that day a lot; Elicia’s birthday. He’d wondered many times whether Roy would’ve found out about the Elrics if he hadn’t been there. Whether he’d have died, if he hadn’t been there. Reading Roy’s letter did make him feel a bit better about that… he’d clearly wanted to come to the party. If Maes hadn’t thought to invite him, he could’ve been really hurt. Though Maes would take Roy being upset with him over this any day.

He couldn’t blame himself for Roy’s death because of the party, not when it had made Roy so happy. Not when that party was the source of so many good memories that Maes held onto. But he could certainly blame himself for not answering the phone. He’d never forgive himself, not for that.

Roy would, though. He knew Roy would have, and that just made it a thousand times worse.

…Would he, though? This letter was addressed to someone who had always been there, someone that had never let Roy down. Someone that Roy trusted with his life, and for good reason. Someone he loved like a brother.

Maes wasn’t that person, not anymore. He’d done exactly what he promised he never would, and he was undeserving of that love.

Roy had always been a better person than him, deep down. Roy would always say the reverse, but… Maes was selfish. He didn’t stop eating dinner with his wife and daughter to answer a phone call from work. He invited Roy to Elicia’s party for his own benefit, because he missed his best friend. And he knew he’d do it again, even after everything that had happened. Roy had been so happy that day.
Maes stared down at the letter in his hands, and wiped his tears before they could fall on the paper and blot the ink. If he couldn’t protect Roy, he could at least keep these final words from him safe. He could at least keep them with him, and read them over and over again to remind himself of everything he’d lost, of how horribly he’d failed.

Of how wonderfully lucky he had been to have Roy Mustang for a best friend.

And he thought of his daughter, how she’d said that she wished Roy to get better for her birthday. How it hadn’t come true.

“You’re an alchemist,” Maes said to no one, since Roy wasn’t there to hear him. “You can do magic, or the closest thing to it. So… do one last trick, for me. Make her wish come true. Come back?”

But of course, Maes knew he wouldn’t. Roy was lost forever. The letter was all he had left.

Somewhere far underground, Roy Mustang woke up and— for the first time in the past month — didn’t fade back into unconsciousness.

As he came to and tried to sit up, he immediately became aware of the sharp pain both in his shoulder and abdomen. Feeling the respective areas, he discovered a lump of gauze covering the wound in his shoulder where that woman in black had speared him with what had seemed to be her finger, and bandages wrapped around his stomach where he’d been… shot.

Hm. Interesting.

He didn’t remember much, after that, but he did distinctly remember that he’d thought he was going to die, for sure. His life had quite literally flashed before his eyes, and yet here he was. Wherever here happened to be.

So… not dead, then.

Once again, interesting.

If he hadn’t bled out in that phone booth like he’d thought he was going to, then what had happened to him? His first thought was the hospital—it certainly wouldn’t be the first time that he woke up in the hospital after blacking out sure of his own demise—but after a brief glance at his surroundings, he knew that wasn’t the case. If the rough surface of whatever he was sitting on weren’t enough, the dark, bare stone walls and dim lighting made him sure of that.

Wherever he was, it was decidedly not a hospital. That… that couldn’t mean anything good.

Well, his team would find him eventually, but he wasn’t going to learn anything else by sticking around. Roy swung his legs over the side of the bed with a wince, and was about to attempt to stand, crutches or no, when a door to the small room he had woken up in opened.

A man in a white coat entered, and Roy heard the sound of a bolt sliding into place the second the door shut completely. Also not good.

Then the man turned, and Roy was so surprised that he forgot to be afraid. The confusion of
waking up after a brush with death in a location both unknown and clearly unsafe ebbed away, and Roy was left with the confusion of coming face to face with a man he’d presumed dead for a long time. The entire military had, when he’d faded into obscurity, though there was some speculation that he’d simply gone into hiding.

Roy figured that must’ve been the case, and that had been confirmed when Ed told him about the notes on the philosopher’s stone he got, but… if Marcoh had gone into hiding, then he’d clearly been found. By the same people that had found Roy.

The fear came rushing back. Nothing about this situation was proving to be good. Roy would dare to call it the exact opposite.

“Doctor Marcoh?” he asked anyway, because the man didn’t seem to have noticed him.

Marcoh jumped nearly a foot in the air, and the tray he was holding crashed to the ground, along with the glass of water, small amount of food, a few generic-looking medical tools, and a… a small, red stone. Roy stared at it, not comprehending. Was that… it couldn’t be… but what if—?

“You’re awake,” Marcoh finally answered, sounding just as surprised as he looked. He followed Roy’s gaze and quickly scooped the stone up, putting it in his pocket. After doing so he proceeded to pick up the medical tools and put them back on his tray, though he left the broken glass and ruined food where they were. “They told me you were going to wake up, but… I wasn’t sure if it would be enough, after what Envy did to you.”

“Envy?” Roy echoed, his brows furrowed. “Is that what you call the thing that shot me?”

Marcoh’s eyes went wide. “I wouldn’t be disrespectful, if I were you,” he advised, voice soft. “They don’t really like it when humans run their mouths around here.”

The idea of being perfectly civil to the people who had shot and then kidnapped him was laughable to Roy. He would’ve scoffed at it, said something witty or tried to find the camera they’d no doubt placed in here so he could give this ‘Envy’ a piece of his mind, if his brain weren’t reeling by the way Marcoh had said ‘humans.’ He’d thought of the thing that’d used Riza’s appearance to trick him as a monster, sure, but monsters weren’t real.

Roy should know. He figured he was probably the closest someone could get.

From the expression on Marcoh’s face, however, he was about to be proven wrong.

Roy shook his head to clear it. He needed answers. “That doesn’t matter, right now. What does matter is how we got here, and how we get out.”

Marcoh glanced nervously at the door. “I don’t know how much they want me to explain to you. I was just supposed to check on your condition. They’ll want to know that you’re awake—”

Roy slammed his hand down on the table he was sitting on, pleased by the loud boom of his hand on the metal. It made Marcoh jump again. “Can you at least tell me what you’re doing here? Nobody’s seen or heard from you in years, not since Ishval. Nobody apart from the Elrics, anyway. Why did you decide to give them your notes? Aren’t you supposed to be dead?”

Marcoh glanced at the door again, then sighed. “So are you.”

Roy blinked, utterly uncomprehending. “...What?”
Maes stood up from the couch, legs heavy and eyes finally dry. He’d kept Gracia waiting long enough. He folded the letter once more, delicately and using the same creases so as not to wrinkle it, and entered their bedroom.

Gracia was sitting up in bed, concern written all over her face. “What took you so long? Did she wake up?”

Maes shook his head, but didn’t say anything. He couldn’t bring himself to.

Gracia frowned. “Then what was the problem? I thought I heard—”

“Roy wrote me a letter,” Maes told her. “A letter he sent, with Elicia’s teddy bear. I just found and read it now.”

Inexplicably, Gracia’s face brightened. “Oh, sweetheart, that’s wonderful,” she said, voice soft and full of a joy Maes couldn’t begin to fathom the reason for.

“Wonderful?” he echoed, turning away and facing his military uniform where it hung on his closet door. He tucked the folded up letter into the left breast pocket. “How is reading a letter from my dead best friend wonderful?”

“Don’t be that way,” she said, and he could hear her frowning again even if he refused to look. “You know I hate it when you say things like that.”

“Like what? The truth?”

“It may be the truth, but you just get so… angry,” Gracia continued, and Maes caved. He turned around, and immediately regretted it when he saw the expression on her face. He’d expected it, but it still hurt. “And you’re allowed to be angry, because you’re right! He’s gone. But can’t you see this letter as a good thing? Now you have more words Roy said to you, right there on paper, something you never thought you’d have again. You have something physical to hold onto, and to remember him by.”

“I don’t want the damned letter,” Maes lied. He did want the letter, and he’d cherish it forever, he knew that, but… but more than anything… “I want Roy back.”

“I know you do,” Gracia said, sadly. “You’re not alone in that. But this is the closest you’re going to get. I’m sorry.”

Maes sank onto the bed beside her, and let out a sigh. “I’m sorry, too. It’s not your fault,” he told her. “It’s mine, it’s mine, it’s— “I shouldn’t lash out.”

“I don’t blame you,” she said. “It must be difficult. You’ve known Roy even longer than you’ve known me.”

Maes’ eyes snapped up to meet hers. “I would rather die than lose you too, you know that, right? I can’t… I can’t do this, not ever again. I’m not strong enough to go through this pain twice.”

“I think you’re plenty strong,” Gracia murmured. “But you don’t have to worry about losing me. I’m not in the military, and I don’t face death every day. You’re the one I’m worried about.”

She paused.
“You… you are being careful, right?” she asked, voice all but a whisper. “I know you said you would, I just… these people that killed Roy, what if they come after you, too? What if they kill you, what if they—”

“Even if they do come after me, I’ll find them first,” Maes swore. “I’m going to hunt them down, and make them pay. Whoever they are, wherever they’re hiding, they won’t stand a chance once I’m through with them. They killed Roy, and he’s not here to burn them to a crisp, so I’ll make sure they rot in the fires of hell.”

Gracia stared at him with wide eyes, and bit her lip. “I don’t like this side of you,” she said. “I don’t think I like it at all.”

“I’m sorry,” Maes said again. “You don’t want to hear about all that. I’ll—”

“No!” Gracia interrupted. “I… it’s hardly pleasant, but I do still want to know. I want to know what’s going on in your life. Ever since Roy passed, you’ve been so distant. If the only way to get you to let me in is to listen to your plans for revenge, then so be it, I suppose. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want whoever killed Roy to suffer, too.”

For the first time in a while, Maes smiled. It was a small thing, but still there. “Maybe you do like this side of me.”

She rolled her eyes, but allowed him to give her a small peck on the lips. “I just want to know what’s happening with the case, I guess. No horrific details necessary, if you’re even allowed to talk about them at all. But I… well, I read something in the paper today about it.”

Just like that, Maes deflated again. “You saw that?”

“It was the front page,” Gracia said. “A woman named Maria Ross, Second Lieutenant to Major Armstrong… they’re saying she did it, Maes. That she shot Roy. They publicly brought her in for questioning. Apparently she was missing a bullet in her gun and no one can explain when—”

“She didn’t do it.”

Gracia huffed. “I didn’t think she did,” she said, affronted. “How do you know for sure, though? Did you speak with her?”

“I wasn’t allowed in the room to question her, no,” he replied. “Officially, I’m not allowed to investigate this case. I’m too close to the situation, too personally involved.”

“But you are anyway.”

“But I am anyway,” Maes said, with a nod. “I spoke with Ross on multiple occasions before all this, and I was almost certain that she wouldn’t have shot Roy when she was brought up to me as a suspect. I’ve since become completely certain. I can’t say much, but I can say that I know when she shot her gun, and it wasn’t at Roy. I also suspect that there’s most likely some higher-ups involved with what happened to Roy, and they’re probably trying to pin his murder on Ross to avoid suspicion. Otherwise he wouldn’t have called from the phone booth.”

“Hang on.” Gracia held up her hands to stop him. “The military may have had something to do with this? But Roy is… Roy was one of their most skilled alchemists! Why would they kill him?”

“I don’t know,” Maes said, and stared down at the blanket. “But I’m going to find out. I think he figured something out that they didn’t want anyone else to know, and so to silence him they—”
“If you’re meddling in this, then that means they might silence you, too!” Gracia’s voice had reached a near shout. “I know you say you’ll be careful, but Roy said he’d be careful, too! You told him to be careful when he left Elicia’s party, and now you’re not taking the advice that he ignored.”

“Roy was careful,” Maes said through gritted teeth. “All the more reason I have to put a stop to whoever got the best of him!”

“All the more reason you should stop, before you get yourself killed, too! Is that what Roy would want?”

“Don’t you dare talk about what Roy would want,” Maes snapped, before he could check himself. “You barely knew him. He would’ve done the same for me in a heartbeat.”

“And you wouldn’t have wanted him to,” Gracia said, plain and simple. She pulled the blanket up to her chin and laid back down, turning so she faced the wall instead of him.

Maes had no idea what to say. She was right, and they both knew it. But all the same, he wouldn’t stop until he had found Roy’s killer. He couldn’t. The fact that they were still out there, that they’d gotten away with it and Maes didn’t even have any good leads… it made him sick.

“If you really don’t believe that Ross girl did this?” Gracia asked in the quiet, and didn’t wait for him to answer. “Then you have to get her out.”

Maes lifted his glasses off of his face and placed them on the bedside table. “I know.” He wouldn’t fall asleep again for a long while.

“What do you mean, I’m supposed to be dead?” Roy demanded, when it became clear that Marcoh had decided against elaborating. “Did they intend to kill me? Then why have you bandage me up just to finish the job later?”

Marcoh shook his head, a small apologetic smile coming across his face that Roy found in no way comforting. “No, no, I don’t mean that you’re supposed to be actually dead,” he said, as if that cleared anything up. “Just that… well, on record, you are. As far as anyone on the outside knows, you’re dead.”

Roy’s blood ran cold. For some reason, the first part of that last sentence was what his still fuzzy mind latched onto. “On the outside?” he echoed, voice quieter than he’d meant it to be. “The outside of what?”

“Who’s they?”

Marcoh’s smile dropped. “You’re certainly asking a lot of hard questions, aren’t you?”

Roy’s hands clenched into fists at his sides, though he knew swinging at Marcoh would do him
more harm than good. If he’d been captive for a longer period of time, he’d have valuable information. “I think my questions are perfectly understandable,” he said, careful to keep his voice even. “Even if it’s not a lot, I need you to tell me everything you know.”

Marcoh hesitated. “Like I said, I don’t know if they want me to clue you in on anything more than what you’ve already figured out. Whatever that may be.”

“All I know,” Roy began, through gritted teeth. “Is that I was shot by some… some thing called Envy, who said they were going to kill me because I knew too much. I figured out that a transmutation circle the size of the whole country is being created, massacre by massacre, which means that someone in the military is involved. Most likely multiple someones, and most likely higher-ups. I thought I was gone for sure, and then I wake up here to you healing my wounds.” He thought for a moment. “I know the same people that attacked me were involved in secret research on the philosopher’s stone in the supposedly never used Fifth Laboratory, and they attacked Fullmetal when he went inside. I know Fullmetal got the idea to go there on the basis of your research notes, which makes me think that you were involved, which would explain how you wound up here. What I don’t understand is why I’m here, instead of dead and buried, like that Envy promised?”

Marcoh appeared taken aback, but seemed to recover quickly. “If you found out all that, it’s no wonder they had to get rid of the threat you posed somehow. And you’re correct in assuming that I knew too much as well; that’s why we’re both here. I was in hiding for a good while, but they finally tracked me down. All the other researches involved are long gone—once the people at the head of this figured out how to do it themselves, there was no reason not to make the scientists into stones, too.”

Roy still didn’t understand. “But then why are they keeping us alive? Why wouldn’t they kill us instead of putting in the effort to imprison us? I can’t wrap my brain around any reason…” He trailed off, brain turning over the information rapidly.

“You do have an impressive wit, though I suppose the same could be said for all alchemists,” Marcoh said. “You seem to be putting it together; that’s the very reason they’re holding onto us. For some reason, they need alchemists, and Scar taking out half a dozen in the area wasn’t exactly planned. Killing us would be a waste when they can force us to use our power for their sake.”

While that theory made sense for Marcoh, Roy couldn’t understand it for his own circumstances. The enemy should know that he’d undergo endless torture before burning another city to contribute to their schemes, unless they were hopelessly naive. But they wouldn’t have been able to capture him in the first place if they weren’t smart about it. So… what, then? It seemed plausible that they needed alchemists, but if not for their power, then what else?

“They said something about me being a… a sacrifice,” Edward had said. His voice sounded so much more like the child he was then, the child Roy too easily forgot that he’d brought into this mess. The military he now knew was beyond corrupt. If something happened to the Elrics while he was stuck down here… Roy would never forgive himself.

“You were an excellent candidate for sacrifice,” Envy had said, a glint in their eye that let Roy know they knew something he didn’t. “We can’t have you running your mouth.”

“Sacrifice,” Roy whispered, and Marcoh’s head shot up.

“Where did you hear that?” he asked, immediately.

Roy shook his head slowly. “They used it to refer to Fullmetal when they fought, and let him live. I
didn’t remember until now, but… Envy used the same word, before they shot me.”

Marcoh’s eyes were wide with fear. “They’ve called me that before.”

“Well, then there’s our answer,” Roy replied, his voice much more cheerful than he felt. “They’re not keeping us alive to use our power, Doctor, or at least that’s only part of it. They’re keeping us alive so that they can kill us later. Whenever the time is right.” He cursed. Ran a hand through his hair. Started muttering to himself. “Dammit. If I could just get another look at their array, I could figure out what they’ll be using the alchemists to do… power it? Is that possible? But the map no doubt burned up, or else was destroyed by one of them…”

Marcoh began shaking his head vigorously as Roy spoke. “You can’t seriously be thinking of continuing to investigate them? We’re completely at their mercy, there’s no telling what they might —”

“Well, they won’t kill us, clearly,” Roy interrupted. “Not as long as they need us for their ‘sacrifices.’” Which means Fullmetal should be safe for a while, too, thank God. “And if we know that they’re going to do so eventually, then we stand only to gain from an escape attempt. What’s the worst that can happen?”

“You have no idea what they’re capable of,” Marcoh said. He had visibly paled, which Roy hadn’t even thought was possible. How long had the man been down here? Days, weeks? Months?

How… how long had Roy been down here, in and out of consciousness as he regained his health?

Roy dismissed those thoughts. That didn’t matter now. “I’d like to think I have a pretty good idea.” He recalled Riza’s face as she’d shot him, the unnatural twist of her lips, the way her grin had widened when his blood splattered the back of the phone booth. He’d never seen her smile when she shot someone before. His Lieutenant was never happy with taking a life; she simply understood that it had to be done. “I can handle torture. I was a soldier, I’ve dealt with it before. As an alchemist who also took part in the Ishvalan War, I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

“I… I was doing research,” Marcoh stammered. “I don’t—”

“Anyway,” Roy cut him off once again. He didn’t have the patience for discussions about something as unimportant as their fate. “Do you have any way of knowing what’s been happening since I was brought here, or how much time has passed?”

“You were kept sedated for around a month while I healed you,” Marcoh said, and the ground seemed to drop out from under Roy all over again. A month. “And after we stopped giving you the injections, it’s still been a few days with you in and out of consciousness. The philosopher’s stone has been doing its work, but you will continue to be fatigued for some time, as I imagine it will be hard to regain your strength with both limited food and space.”

Roy took a moment to let this sink in, and for some reason his first thought was, “You couldn’t have used the philosopher’s stone to heal my leg, too?”

This got a laugh out of Marcoh in spite of everything, and this time Roy found himself smiling, too. A month. That was far, far too long. Riza and his team would be on a warpath… and Christ, Hughes would be absolutely beside himself with worry, Roy just knew it. He figured the Elrics would be some mixture of the two. And he hated to think about all the people he loved out there, tearing themselves to pieces to search for him, but… but they would be searching for him by now, Roy knew that for a fact. They would’ve started searching the very day he vanished without a trace, whether the military allowed it or not, and so if a month had gone by… then his team would
be breaking down that heavy metal door any minute, guns blazing.

“Your leg will heal on its own with a little more time,” Marcoh said. “You being able to walk wasn’t a top priority.”

Roy didn’t doubt that. Much harder to escape with a broken leg. “No matter,” he said, with a shrug. “My team will be here soon enough to get us both out of here, so I won’t need to worry about that anymore. As much as I hate being in proper hospitals, I’m sure I won’t be complaining about one after being brought back from the brink of death in this basement. Are you sure all your tools are sterilized?”

Marcoh didn’t rise to the jab, his face just fell once more. “But I told you… didn’t you hear what I said? You’re supposed to be dead, Colonel. Everyone thinks you are.”

Roy narrowed his eyes. “I’m aware that I came very close to dying, and that the military no doubt took advantage of the blood left at the scene to make a very convincing case for my murder. But if I know my fami— my team, they won’t stop until they’ve gotten proof. Even if I’m presumed dead, they’re not going to give up searching until they’re sure.”

Marcoh shook his head again. “You don’t understand. You were right about multiple higher-ups being involved, and… I’ve overheard Envy speaking about it. A lot of people were involved in the cover-up. From what I understand they allowed the head of investigations… Hughes, I believe his name is, to see your body before they brought you in to save you. Envy disguised themselves as a nurse at the scene, and… apparently, it all looked pretty convincing. They don’t know what you know, and have no reason to suspect a cover-up that big. Envy also attended your… well, your funeral, and it’s clear from their gloating that everyone took it pretty hard. When I say that everyone on the outside thinks you’re dead, I mean everyone, Colonel.” He paused, hesitation clear on his face. “I… I don’t think anyone’s coming to save us, from your team or otherwise. How could they? They can’t find you when they don’t even know that they should look.”

Roy let that sink in for a moment. He took a deep breath in and let it out, trying to hear himself think over the blood rushing in his ears. He wanted to believe that Hughes would track him down no matter what, he wanted to have faith in his best friend, but… but…

If they really believed that he was dead, then they would be absolutely devastated. Would it be worse if they mourned him or if they didn’t? It sounded horrible, but… he sort of hoped that they would just move on with their lives. If they truly believed him dead then… a small part of Roy hoped it would stay that way. Meddling in this would only put them in danger, too. He could withstand anything, as long as he knew they were all right. And if they thought he was dead, it meant they could keep themselves safe.

But it also meant that— not for the first time, but for the first time in a long while —Roy was on his own. He knew that without a doubt.

Roy would have to get himself out of this one. Marcoh obviously wouldn’t be much help.

...So be it.
drifting off

Chapter Summary

The one where Maria Ross escapes, and Roy does not.

Chapter Notes

Sorry again for the delay! I've been SUPER busy, but I hope you guys enjoy the second half of what I think is the most important part of this series so far! It's even longer than the first half... oops. I bring you the Maria Ross debacle, in my AU. The canon of the show is a loose outline, at this point. It's a snowball effect! Once you change one thing, you gotta change a thousand other things. But I'm so excited to keep working on this series, it's so fun to write.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ed still couldn’t believe it. He didn’t want to believe it, and yet it there it was in black and white, written across the front page. Maria Ross convicted for murder of Flame Alchemist Roy Mustang. He was sitting on his bed with his arms crossed, staring angrily at the paper as if the headline would change after enough glaring.

It wouldn’t. He knew it wouldn’t. But... but it didn’t seem like it could possibly be true. Why would Second Lieutenant Ross have killed Mustang? What motive did she have?

Her name wouldn’t be in the damn paper if there weren’t legitimate proof, though, would it? She’d been arrested, she wasn’t just being brought in for questioning. And yet Ed still couldn’t find it in himself to blame her. She… she wouldn’t.

He pushed himself up from his bed, resolving to go down to Ross’ cell and speak to her himself. That was precisely the moment his brother burst through the door.

When Al spoke, he sounded short of breath, however impossible it was. “Brother!” he cried, voice panicked, and Ed’s heart jumped into his throat as he found himself wondering oh god, who died? “Maria Ross broke out of her cell! She’s escaped!”

That… that had not been what Ed was expecting. “She… she ran?” he asked, voice soft. The Maria Ross he knew wouldn’t have killed Mustang. But she wouldn’t have went on the run rather than stand trial, either. Not unless she were guilty.

“Yes!” Al said, still sounding desperate. “I heard someone saying so in the hall! They’re saying… brother, the military’s given orders to shoot her on sight! To kill her!”

Oh. So Al was worried about her. A sentiment he was surprised to find he didn’t feel himself. He still wanted to talk to Ross, to figure out what exactly had happened, but… if she had nothing to
hide, then she wouldn’t have broken out. The Colonel had told him, years ago.

“Only the guilty run, Fullmetal. Remember that. If an innocent man runs, then he’s an idiot, and worth the fate that befalls him anyway.”

Ed knew Maria Ross wasn’t an idiot. So then…

“Do they know where she is now?” Ed grabbed his red coat and shrugged it on. He’d just have to track Ross down to ask his questions, then. No matter. He’d find her. He’d make her pay.

Because if she felt the need to run, then maybe the higher-ups were right. They didn’t just bring her in for questioning: they’d arrested her, told the press. Clearly they’d found some form of proof that Ed hadn’t been made aware of. Maria Ross had killed Roy Mustang, he was almost certain of it now. He’d have to hear it from her to be sure, but…

He’d never forgive her. If she was killed on sight, then good riddance. She deserved exactly what she got, for taking the Colonel from them.

Al seemed confused by his urgency. “No, but she probably hasn’t gone far,” he said slowly. “But brother, we can’t join the search. They didn’t notify us formally for a reason, and I don’t think we’d be able to help her even if we could somehow find her first—”

“Why would we help her?” Ed asked, his voice cold.

“Because… because we…” Al faltered. “Brother, she’s innocent! We can’t let them—”

“I’m not so sure about that, anymore,” Ed said, turning away from him. “You can do whatever you want. But I’m going after Ross. I want answers.” He started out, but Al speaking up again made him stop in the doorway.

“You want revenge,” Al told him. “But I’m telling you, brother, she’s not the right person to get it from. She didn’t kill Colonel Mustang! I know she didn’t! She wouldn’t!”

His words were so similar to the thoughts Ed had just moments before. But everything had changed, now. The idea, the possibility that she might have done it had consumed Ed’s brain, and he couldn’t unsee it, now. He pictured it in his head— Maria Ross, smiling that small smile of hers as she shot his Colonel down in cold blood.

“Then she can tell me that herself,” Ed said, without turning around. He continued out through the door. “When I find her.”

When Maes saw officers running past his door, yelling something about a prison break and in a general panic, he knew everything was going to plan. But he feigned ignorance, because of course no one thought to notify him of what was happening, even if he did already know.

He walked into the hall with what he hoped was a convincing expression of confusion and alarm, and stopped the first person passing by. Maes couldn’t hold back from wincing when he saw who it was— Second Lieutenant Watts, who’d notified him of Roy’s death with that second fateful phone call, the only one he’d bothered to answer. He’d been avoiding the man lately, since he couldn’t hear Watts’ voice without remembering those words, but it had to be done.
“What’s the meaning of this?” Maes demanded, voice as authoritative as he could make it. “What’s going on here?”

Watts flinched when he saw Maes—no doubt remembering exactly what he had just seconds prior—and then hesitated. “It’s… it’s Maria Ross, sir,” he said, not seeming too thrilled about being the bearer of even more bad news. “She’s escaped from prison. No one knows how, or where she is, but she can’t have gone far. Orders are to shoot on sight.”

Shoot on sight? Maes hadn’t thought they’d go that far. Now it was even more important that he find Ross first, but if Barry was doing his job, then there was no doubt that she would be safe. It wasn’t hard to appear angry at this news, however. The idea of Maria Ross being shot for a crime she didn’t commit made his blood boil.

“I see,” he said, voice tight. He turned back into his office, grabbed his coat, and put it on. He made a show of holstering his gun, and stashing throwing knives in his belt, too.

“Sir,” Watts began, clearly still hesitant. “I really don’t think… I mean, someone would have notified you, if you were supposed to join the chase. The higher-ups must need you here. Do you really think it’s wise to—?”

“With all due respect, Watts,” Maes cut him off. “Ross killed my best friend. So I’ll be heading out now.” He strolled past Watts briskly, and the Second Lieutenant didn’t stop him. Good. Maes knew he looked ready to kill someone. And he was. It just wouldn’t be Maria Ross.

Once he was out of headquarters he proceeded to the location he and Barry had discussed at a full run, though he didn’t take the most direct route he could have, wary of being followed there. He slowed to a walk as he started down the alley, and when Maria Ross turned the corner he stopped in his tracks, gun already pointed at her and safety off.

Her eyes widened, and she raised her hands in the air. She wore the drab prison garb, and she was out of breath from running for her life. He could tell the minute she recognized him, because her expression turned from fear to sheer panic.

“I didn’t do it, sir!” she exclaimed immediately. Tears were already welling up in her eyes. “Please, you have to believe me, I… I wouldn’t!”

If Maes hadn’t already been certain of her innocence, this would have proved it. He could usually tell when people were lying to him, and Ross wasn’t.

He lowered the gun, and offered his best reassuring smile. “I know you didn’t. I’m going to find out who did, but first we need to get you somewhere safe. If you followed Barry out of prison, then I assume you know you’ll have to leave everything behind?”

She shook her head in disbelief. “Wait,” she said. “Then that means breaking me out… Lieutenant Colonel, you were responsible?”

Maes nodded. “Are you or are you not ready to abandon your old life? They mean to execute you for the murder of Colonel Mustang, of which I know for a fact you are innocent. I can help you, I can get you out until all of this is over, but you have to let me. Do you trust me?”

Ross didn’t hesitate this time. She nodded back, a determination in her eyes that reminded Maes all too much of Roy. Maes nodded back.

“You’re going to have to get in that dumpster,” Maes told her, and gestured at it. She turned to see it, bewildered, then looked back at him. “Lieutenant Havoc is waiting inside. He’ll take you
somewhere safe. I’m afraid that’s all I can tell you.” He watched Maria Ross take half a step back
at the dark look that passed over his face. “There are ears everywhere.”

Ross continued to stare for a moment, then her lips parted in a silent display of understanding. Her
determination came back, and her expression hardened, too. “When you do catch whoever actually
killed him, sir, please give them hell from me.”

She turned to go, but Maes rushed forward and stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. “Wait, I
almost forgot. Take this,” he said, and handed her his gun. She took it gratefully, and started to
thank him. Maes continued before she should could. “Now shoot me.”

Maria Ross dropped the gun to the pavement with a clatter. “Sir,” she gasped, taking several
unsteady steps toward the dumpster and away from the weapon. “I… I couldn’t possibly—”

“Relax, you won’t shoot to kill me,” Maes said, waving a hand. “At least I hope you won’t. But we
can’t have the military believing I just let you get away. If I say you wrestled with me for my gun,
stole it, and shot me with it to slow me down, I wouldn’t be subject to suspicion. Not much, anyway. Here, this might help, too.” He unsheathed a small throwing knife from his belt and
carefully made a small cut on her forearm. Then he dropped it to the ground. “It’ll look like there
was a struggle. They can test that, to verify that you were here.”

Ross hissed in pain, but she seemed to realize what Maes was getting at. She let the blood run
down her arm and drip onto the ground for a few seconds, before pressing her other hand to the
cut. “Wouldn’t want to leave a trail, and ruin your perfect plan.”

Maes returned her hesitant smile. This plan was far from perfect. He had no doubt Roy would’ve
been able to think up something better— he’d always had a knack for scheming. But Maes thought
this just might work, all the same.

Ross picked up the gun again, but still hesitated. “You’re sure about this?”

“I’m sure,” he said. “I’m sorry it had to come to this, but we’re both going to have to do far worse
things, if we stand even the slightest chance of getting to the bottom of this. Shoot me, Lieutenant.
That’s an order.”

And she did.

The loud bang of the gunshot was followed by a shout of pain that Maes had been unable to stifle,
and then a momentary silence. After that, everything seemed to erupt into chaos. Shouting of
soldiers in neighboring streets, the pounding of their feet, sirens lighting up the alleyway as cars
sped towards it. To her credit, Ross didn’t stop to check on Maes even as he collapsed into the wall
with his good side, leaning heavily. She held onto the gun and clambered right into the dumpster,
and per his own instructions, she and Havoc would be off immediately through the passage they’d
created.

Maes was glad. He’d done as Gracia had said he had to, he’d gotten Ross out. But Christ did being
shot hurt more than Maes remembered. It had been far too long since he’d been in actual combat,
and he’d never envy his past self any of the injuries he’d received back then.

It dawned on Maes, then— this could be another war that he was getting himself into. Ross hadn’t
even been aiming for anything vital, and if higher-ups were involved then he was sure to face some
more worthy opponents by the end of this, whenever that may be. Whatever that may be. He’d only
just begun, and already he was throwing himself in the line of fire. Literally. Not for the first time
since he’d started down this dark path, he felt like Roy. It scared him. He scared himself, no
wonder he was scaring Gracia.

It was worth it, though. This would all be worth it, if it meant he could take those responsible for Roy’s death down. Even if he had to drag them to the grave himself to do it.

Edward was running when he heard the gunshot.

It was a miracle he was close enough to hear it at all— he’d been tearing through the streets in search of Ross, Al not far behind him. Soldiers were shouting, sirens blaring, feet pounding against the pavement, and a gunshot exploded into Ed’s ears like a firework followed by an all too familiar scream of pain.

His feet stumbled and caught on the stones as the noise brought both him and his beating heart to a stop. He knew that voice. Knew it because some of the words it said to him are still seared into his memory.

“I know how much you cared about him, but you certainly had a funny way of showing it.”

Hughes had been shot.

And the fury Ed had been harboring towards the man for so long now faded for a moment, and he took off sprinting again, left only with fear, and faster, faster, and please, no, I can’t lose him, too.

He rounded the corner into the alley, and was met with a sight that he didn’t at first understand.

Lieutenant Colonel Hughes was leaning heavily against the wall, clutching his left shoulder with his opposite hand. Blood seeped through his fingers. His eyes were squeezed shut, brow furrowed in pain, breath coming out in gasps.

Ed didn’t think. He ran to him. “Are you okay?” he demanded, in one breath. When Hughes didn’t answer right away, he nearly shook him by the good shoulder, then decided against it. His voice raised in volume, and his hands shook as they hovered over the man, afraid to touch. “Hughes! Are you hurt anywhere else?”

The Lieutenant Colonel took in another heavy breath. “No, Roy, I’m...” He trailed off, eyes snapping open as he realized what he’d said. He stared at Ed in surprise. Edward stepped back as if he’d been burned. Hughes cleared his throat. “I’m fine,” he continued, sounding anything but. “I’ll... I’ll be fine, at any rate. She just got me in the shoulder.”

She? Edward seethed. “Ross shot you?” he asked, though he knew the answer. “Where is she? Did you see what way she went? I’ll—”

He stopped short, as he looked around the alley. He and Hughes were the only two people there.

“Where is she?” Ed repeated, wary now.

Hughes shook his head. “Don’t know,” he said, between gasps of air. “I didn’t see what way she went. I... I hesitated to take a fatal shot. We wound up in scuffle, and I got one of my knives in her arm, but... she managed to get my gun.”

Ed took a second to process this. “You let her get away?”
Hughes blinked. “She shot me, Edward. I’m in no condition to give chase. I’m sure she’ll be found in no time.”

Edward shook his head. “You hesitated.” His voice was practically a growl. “If you’d just shot her, then she wouldn’t have escaped. You let her get away.”

Hughes’ eyes widened behind his glasses. “Edward,” he breathed, shocked. “It’s Second Lieutenant Ross. I know her, you know her. I didn’t want to believe that she’d… that she’d done it. I couldn’t just shoot her, and when she went for my gun… I didn’t expect it.”

Ed’s relief at seeing Hughes okay dissolved into disgust. “Unsurprising,” he muttered.

Hughes frowned, appearing even more confused. “That I gave someone the benefit of the doubt?”

“That you failed,” Ed spat. “You couldn’t save Roy, and yet you weren’t able to avenge him, either. You’ve let him down all over again.” You let me down.

Hughes’ face hardened. He stood up straight, still clutching his wounded shoulder. “We don’t know for sure that she killed him, Edward,” he said. “I wasn’t about to shoot an innocent person.”

“Innocent people don’t run!” Ed was yelling now, and he didn’t care. “And now we know for sure she’s guilty, don’t we? I mean, would an innocent person have shot you down?”

Hughes winced, though whether it was due to Ed’s words or the pain, he couldn’t be sure. “I didn’t think that she—”

“No, you didn’t think!” Ed continued, not to be deterred. “That’s your whole problem! You didn’t think Ross was guilty, and you didn’t think Roy would die. But she is, and he did, and we’re still here without him.” He shook his head and turned away, suddenly unable to look at Hughes. “It could’ve been you instead, do you realize that? If we hadn’t let him look into that research… it could’ve been you. God, I wish it had been.”

Something unreadable passed over Hughes’ face. “I don’t blame you,” he said, voice bitter. “When Roy was attacked by Scar, I almost wished that he’d found you first.”

Ed sucked in a breath. He’d never even thought about it that way, but Hughes was right. It could just as easily have been him. He couldn’t think of anything to say.

“He didn’t ever tell you about the deal he made, did he?” Hughes pressed on. “With Scar?”

“Deal?” Ed echoed, already dreading what he was about to hear.

Hughes nodded. “The reason he dropped the gun. Scar promised Roy that if he surrendered himself, you would be left unharmed. Roy was going to let himself be killed in order to spare you.”

Ed’s blood ran cold. No. He hadn’t thought…

He’d called Roy selfish so many times, and yet this seemed exactly like something the Colonel would do. Reckless, self-sacrificing bastard.

“I felt horrible for wishing he had never made the offer,” Hughes admitted. “But I can’t exactly blame you for wanting me to take his place. Roy always did mean more to both of us than we did to each other, I suppose.”

Ed knew he was right. “And now he’s gone,” he said, numb. “And we’re still here.”
Hughes’ eyes softened. “We can find out what happened. We can make his death mean something.” Ed wanted to break something. He was pretty sure they already knew what happened. Maria Ross happened. And Mustang’s death did mean something— it meant that the world was even more of a living hell than he’d learned as a kid. Ed hated it, and he hated Hughes, and so he continued.

“I would’ve taken the shot,” he said, and realized with a jolt that it was true. He may not have shot fatally, but if Ross had attacked him… if he’d been sure beyond a shadow of a doubt that she’d killed Mustang, as he now was… he wouldn’t have hesitated to pull the trigger on her. Not for a moment.

Hughes blanched. “Edward, you’ve never shot anyone before,” he said, sounding scandalized. That just pissed Edward off more. “I’ve fought in a war, had to take countless lives… and it was still too much for me. You would’ve hesitated, too.”

“No,” Edward insisted, because how could Hughes not understand? “I wouldn’t have! Not for Roy! Not when I was facing the person who murdered him!”

Everything was different, now. He was different. How could Hughes not see that? Edward knew the other man had been changed by Mustang’s death, too. He’d shoot one person, hell, he’d shoot a hundred people if they all played a part in Roy’s death.

Hughes’ face was a mask. Unreadable. Unfazed. “You’re just a kid,” he said, cold as ice. “You have no idea what you’re talking about. Stand down, now, Fullmetal. That’s an order.”

Edward would look back on this moment with shame far down the line, but for now and for a considerable amount of time, he felt nothing but rage towards Maes Hughes.

He didn’t know what it was that pushed him over the edge completely. Maybe he wanted Hughes to take him seriously, because he was serious. Maybe he was still pissed about their last argument, and the fact that he’d let Ross get away was just the icing on the cake. Maybe he just needed to release at least a few of the complicated emotions that had been building up ever since he lost the closest thing he ever had to a father.

Maybe what Hughes said sounded far too much like Roy. Calling him kid. Calling him Fullmetal. “Stand down. That’s an order.”

Edward punched Hughes in the face as hard as he possibly could. The man fell backwards, hitting his bad shoulder on the wall and crying out yet again.

Which was precisely when Al turned the corner. He took in the Lieutenant Colonel on the ground and Edward over him, looking positively murderous. “...Brother?”

Ed didn’t look at him. He didn’t feel guilty, or regret what he’d done. He just stared down at Hughes. His glasses had fallen to the ground. Blood was dripping faster from his injury. And Edward didn’t care. “You’re not my superior officer,” he said, though it wasn’t true. Hughes could certainly still give them orders, but... “My superior officer is dead, and I have you to thank for that.” Hughes flinched. Good. “I’ll avenge Mustang myself. I don’t need your help. You’d only hold me back, just like you did with him.”

Hughes made a strangled noise on the ground as Edward walked past him, something between a sentence and a sob, and he thought he heard Al mutter his name. He didn’t look back, lest they see the tears shining in his eyes.
Maes stared at the white blanket draped over him in the hospital, unable to stop himself from thinking of the sheet that had covered Roy’s body, just the same color until it had been covered in red. This would be the first time he received an injury that didn’t bring Roy Mustang tearing through the halls and bursting into his room with all the grace of a hurricane, demanding to know if his friend was all right. Maes complained about being fussed over then—they both always did, though it never stopped either of them —and now he missed it.

He remembered that once, too soon after the war, he was shot in the leg during a case. Absolutely no danger whatsoever. Yet Roy was still there within the hour. Maes had teased him so much, and then when weeks later a bullet merely grazed Roy’s side, Maes was there. It became an unspoken rule, after that.

They’d survived through so much together, too much, and even if the injury was small, neither of them wanted to take any chances. Not with each other.

Maes had grown complacent, he knew that. He got caught up in the peacetimes and distracted by domesticity. Roy never would have just let his phone ring, not when he was always acutely aware that it could be Hawkeye, or Havoc, or Maes himself on the other end. He never dropped his guard. Maes felt like a fool.

A knock at the door, and his head snapped up, inexplicably expecting the impossible. For just a moment he thought, That’ll be Roy, come to lecture me for my stupidity yet again.

It wasn’t, of course. Riza Hawkeye edged open the door after knocking, the corners of her pressed-together lips turned down. “May I come in, Lieutenant Colonel?” she asked, voice too soft. Roy would have started yelling the second he walked in. Maes smiled sadly at the thought.

“How are you feeling?” Hawkeye continued, expression still primarily unreadable. Maes could never understand her, at least not as well as Roy could. His best friend’s Lieutenant had been his closest confident, an ally ever present at his sides. To Maes, Hawkeye was a closed book that had graced him with a few loose pages, more than most people would ever earn.

“How are you feeling?” Hawkeye continued, expression still primarily unreadable. Maes could never understand her, at least not as well as Roy could. His best friend’s Lieutenant had been his closest confident, an ally ever present at his sides. To Maes, Hawkeye was a closed book that had graced him with a few loose pages, more than most people would ever earn.

“Not so bad,” he said with a shrug, followed by a wince as the movement caused him pain. “But not so good, either. I’m making do. I’ve looked far worse.”

“I know,” she replied, frown deepening. “You’ve also looked far better.”

Maes chuckled weakly, but added nothing.

After a lengthy pause, Hawkeye spoke again. “I know you planned all this, I just don’t know how,” she said, finally. “People are saying you slipped up and let her get away. They’re calling you
incompetent, sir. A joke. A blunder.”

The words stung, but Maes still was satisfied. This was exactly what he’d wanted. “Good,” he told her. “If people think me a laughing-stock, then they won’t look too closely into what I’m doing. And they certainly won’t see me as a threat.”

Hawkeye considered this. “Even so, I don’t like what they’re saying about you. Even if you had let Maria Ross get away without meaning to...” She trailed off, and eyed his injury. “Did you make her shoot you?”

Maes hesitated, but he wouldn’t benefit anyone by lying. Besides, she’d just see right through it anyway. “…Yes.”

Hawkeye’s frown deepened. “I wish you’d told me that was part of your plan. You could’ve just let her go, you know. You didn’t have to tell her to shoot you.”

“I didn’t have to,” Maes conceded. “But it certainly made my story much more convincing. It stopped them from asking too many questions.”

“You’re acting like you made a smart decision,” Hawkeye crossed her arms. “What you did was stupid. Ross could’ve missed. She could’ve really hurt you without meaning to. What if—?”

“She didn’t,” Maes interrupted. “I know it wasn’t the safest decision, but it was all I could think of. It’s as I said before. If whoever actually killed Roy thinks that I’m fixated on finding Ross, if they think that for some reason she shot me and now I’m completely convinced of her guilt, then they won’t bother to keep a close eye on me. At least… I hope they won’t.”

“There were other ways to accomplish that besides telling her to shoot you,” Hawkeye said. “I wish you’d taken the time to think of something else.”

“I had no idea when they would execute her,” Maes reminded her. “I had to get her out as soon as possible. You know that.”

“Maybe so,” Hawkeye said, with a hum. “The Colonel never would’ve pulled a stunt like that.”

It was a low blow, and she clearly knew it, but she didn’t take the statement back. Maes didn’t blame her. Except… “You and I both know he would.”

Hawkeye sighed. “Yes, all right, he would,” she admitted. “But just because we lost him doesn’t mean that you’re allowed to act recklessly now. You wouldn’t have done something like this… before.” She paused. “We need you, sir.”

“No kidding.” Maes turned at the new voice to see that Havoc had entered the hospital room. He shut the door behind him. “Hey, Hughes. How you holding up?”

“Fine.” Maes hesitated. They’d been talking about what had happened to Ross in no uncertain terms just moments ago, but he considered for the first time that someone from the military could be listening. He’d have to be much more careful. “How… How is—?”

“Also fine,” Havoc said quickly. “We’ll discuss it later. Everything going according to plan. Well on the way, that is.” He winked, and Maes sagged in relief. Havoc wouldn’t be accompanying her to Xerxes of course—far too suspicious if one of Roy’s men disappeared without explanation at the same time as Maria Ross, and thankfully Breda was already supposed to be out of Central for a bit, so he’d take her—but for some reason when the man came in by himself Maes wondered if something had gone wrong. Then a conflicted expression passed over Havoc’s face.
“What is it?” Maes asked, immediately.

“It’s nothing,” Havoc said. “Just… I heard that the chief was the first one to encounter you, but he’s not in the waiting room. In fact, I hear he’s working with the troops still looking for Ross.”

“The chief?” Maes echoed in confusion, before realizing that it was Havoc’s nickname for Edward. “Oh. They’re still out there?”

Havoc nodded. “I’m a little concerned about it, honestly. Haven’t had the chance to speak with either Ed or his brother, but… according to some of the other people on the job, Edward in particular seems hellbent on finding her himself.”

Something in Maes’ stomach dropped. Edward’s words replayed in his head. “I would have taken the shot.” He knew it was unlikely, but if Ed somehow managed to find her… what would he do?

“You should tell them, sir.”

Maes glanced at Hawkeye, her face stony. “I don’t think Edward is particularly interested in speaking to me, at the moment. And I can’t blame him.” I don’t want to speak to him, either.

“Be that as it may, he’s going to run himself into the ground looking for revenge where there is none to be had, if you don’t stop him,” Hawkeye said, and honestly, she could’ve phrased it in a way that didn’t make Maes think she was also talking about him. “Just explain the situation. If he knows that the military is involved and that Ross was a scapegoat, he’ll understand your actions. And he’ll turn his attention to investigating the real culprit.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Maes muttered. “If he’s focusing on Ross, then he’s not in danger. But once he learns that she was used, he’s at risk of the higher-ups noticing and taking him out. I don’t like lying to them any more than you do, but it’s better for them if they’re in the dark.”

“This is the exact kind of logic that led to you telling them Roy was just back in East City,” Hawkeye said. “I told you then, too—the Elric brothers are smart kids. They’ll find out the truth eventually, and lying will just hurt them more.”

“I don’t care if they’re hurt that I lied to them,” Maes burst out. “I just don’t want them to die! I can’t lose anyone else!”

Havoc averted his eyes, rubbing the back of his neck with a hand.

Hawkeye just frowned. “They’re going to be in danger regardless, sir. We all are, if you’re right about this. The least you could do is make sure they see it coming.”

Maes sighed. “I don’t know if they’d even believe me. Edward’s lost all trust for me, and Al won’t go against his brother’s wishes.”

“Then I suggest you try to win that trust back,” Hawkeye deadpanned. “You can’t protect them by keeping them ignorant, and you certainly can’t keep them safe if they won’t let you. They’re young, but they can take care of themselves fairly well. Did you ever consider that maybe the best way to figure out the truth is working together?”

Of course I have. But Maes knew this work could very well get him killed. Bad though he knew his mindset was, he didn’t care if he lost his own life trying to avenge Roy’s. He just didn’t want to drag anyone else down with him if he could help it.

But it seemed Edward was already turning down the same dark path himself. Maes had only added
fuel to the fire.

“They deserve to know,” Hawkeye said simply. “If you won’t tell them, then I will.”

“Then I suppose you will,” Maes replied flatly, before he thought better of it.

Wordlessly, Riza Hawkeye stood up and left his hospital room, slamming the door behind her. Havoc flinched at the loud noise, but turned back to Maes instead of following her.

“Well,” he said, voice forcibly light. “What’s our next move, boss?”

Marcoh took great care in warning Roy against antagonizing their mysterious captors with every other breath during the day or two in which he stayed with Roy, monitoring his condition. So, naturally, the first thing Roy did when the man left him alone was search for an escape.

He slid off the metal table that Marcoh had left him on, and winced when his feet hit the floor. His left leg wasn’t completely healed, so putting weight on it still hurt, and the movement tugged painfully at the injury in his abdomen. Roy realized, with no small amount of resentment, that with a philosopher’s stone Marcoh certainly could have healed him more completely. Not just his leg, but the bullet wound he’d suffered was still covered by a wad of bandages, and though he no longer felt as if he’d die from the pain, it hurt whenever he moved. Evidently, they hadn’t wanted Roy to be in perfect condition. He’d be much less of a threat if he was left in constant pain.

But Roy didn’t have time to dwell on his injuries. He didn’t know when Marcoh would be back, or when one of them would come in to check on him. He needed to find a way out, now.

Roy paced the sides of the room, looking for any sort of weakness in the stone walls, any small hole he could chip away at. He didn’t care if he had to play the long game here—he wasn’t about to just sit around waiting for an opportunity to run. He certainly would run if such a chance presented itself, but doing nothing in the meantime would make him go mad.

The door was a lost cause. Heavy, metal, at least one lock and probably more. It locked from the outside as well, so trying to pick it wasn’t an option, even if he could have found something with which to do so. His best bet there would be to try and catch someone off guard as they came in and make a break for it, or wedge the door open when someone left. Someone as in Marcoh, because no one else had visited him yet and the longer he remained awake the more Roy was beginning to doubt that anyone else would. And he didn’t think it’d be too hard to subdue Marcoh, even if Roy was fighting with his bare hands. It was what came after, what and who was in the next room that had Roy worried.

Getting more information from Marcoh was the best move, however he could manage it. If Roy could learn when those… those things weren’t down here—for he knew they had to venture into the outside world at some point—he’d be golden.

The wall, though. Not one of the huge stones making it up would budge even slightly or shift in place. Roy suspected this was a result of the mortar; thick, and not worn in any one location. He checked, and double checked, and nothing. It was maddening. His captors had thought of everything short of chaining him up, and that was only because they clearly didn’t think they had to. Where would he go? What if there wasn’t anything beyond the wall, just more layers of rock? Even if he managed to take out one loose stone, which he didn’t even know if he could lift out
physically in his current state, who was to say that there weren’t more? He’d have to ask Marcoh about that, too.

“Dammit,” Roy cursed to himself, running a hand through his tangled hair to push it away from his eyes. They’d taken his gloves, of course. Those had been long gone when he woke up, and the only pair he’d had on him were drenched in blood anyways, useless. But if he just had his gloves, this whole situation would’ve been a snap, quite literally. He could burn away at the mortar slowly to weaken the walls, or… hell, just blow the stone apart, however many layers it took until he saw a means of escape. He wouldn’t have to worry about subtlety when he could just reduce anyone he encountered to ash. That was how he’d survived in Ishval, after all.

Hang on. Ishval. Roy had always been careful to carry multiple pairs of gloves on him then, but when worst came to worst and Roy didn’t have his gloves on him… well, he knew his own transmutation circle by heart. He’d just write it directly on his hands.

He’d never go so far as Kimblee, to tattoo the circles on himself… it reminded him too much of Riza, and she hadn’t been given a choice, but. The temporary ink got the job done just fine. Most soldiers carried a pen, and quite a few also had lighters.

He doubted Marcoh wouldn’t see through that in a second, though. Maybe a candle he could request for light, but a pen? What use would he have for a pen?

Then again… he didn’t have to draw it on. He’d never done it before himself, but he’d seen others do so in the war. Desperate times called for desperate measures, and carving a transmutation circle into one’s own skin was about as desperate as you could get.

Roy was feeling pretty desperate, right about now. And Marcoh had brought in plenty of sharp tools on that tray of his. If Roy could steal one… confound carving the circle, he’d have a weapon.

The gears in his alchemist’s brain were still turning, as he continued to pace the room, when the door opened.

“Marcoh,” he began, with a sigh. “What is it now? I just—” He cut himself off. It wasn’t Marcoh, but instead that woman again, with the dark hair, dark dress, and dark eyes. Her pale, smooth, skin stood out against it. The red of her lips matched the tattoo on her chest. Roy took several steps back, hand itching to cover his shoulder, where she’d stabbed clean through him during their last encounter with her… fingernails? Roy still wasn’t entirely sure of what had happened. So much about that night felt fuzzy in his head.

“Not Marcoh,” the woman said, with a small smile, though it was completely unnecessary.

“Clearly,” Roy deadpanned, frowning. “I still don’t know who you are. All I seem to recall is you impaling me, and then…. hm. Didn’t I burn you up?”

She laughed, a lilting sound that sent chills down Roy’s spine. “Oh, it’ll take more than that to kill me. We homunculi are very resilient.”

Roy blanched. “Homunculus?” He’d come across the word a few times in his research, even when he was combing through texts on the subject of the philosopher’s stone for the Elrics, but it was purely theoretical. “As in, a man-made person? A person who possesses eternal life?” The meaning behind that tattoo was starting to make a lot more sense. “But… they aren’t real,” he finished lamely, aware immediately after the words left his mouth how stupid he sounded.

The woman laughed again. “You might want to find a way to look past that particular sentiment,
otherwise your stay here is going to be much more difficult for you,” she advised. “Though I do like a stubborn man. However, since you will be with us for quite a while, I suppose there’s no harm in giving you my name. You may call me Lust.”

“Lust,” Roy echoed. He definitely did not like the sound of that. He didn’t really like any of what she was saying, actually, particularly the bit about him staying there for ‘quite a while.’ “Well. What do you want from me?”

“Nothing,” she said, with a roll of her eyes. “For now. Not everything is about you, you know, Flame Colonel. I just came to deliver something.”

Lust reached behind her, and dragged none other than Edward Elric into the room.


“Edward,” Roy breathed, and he didn’t think anything beyond the fact that he’s here before he acted. He nearly tackled the kid in his embrace. “You’re here.”

A moment passed in which Roy realized what that actually meant. He pulled back to look at Ed, but kept his arms firmly around his shoulders. Blood was trickling down the side of Edward’s head. Roy pulled him backwards and shifted around so that he was in between Ed and Lust, since he knew firsthand how dangerous she could be.

“You’re here,” he repeated, voice now filled with horror. “God, Edward what are you doing here? Don’t tell me you went looking for trouble again.”

“Well, of course I did,” Ed muttered, with a small huff. “But I didn’t find anything. They found me, and next thing I know I wake up here, and I’m brought to you.” He shook his head in disbelief. “You’re supposed to be dead, Roy. Everyone thinks you are. I thought you were. What… what happened to you?” He gave a pointed look to the visible lump of bandages on Roy’s stomach.

“That doesn’t matter right now,” Roy said. “What did they do to you? Are you hurt?”

Edward gestured to the blood still dripping down his face with no small amount of sarcasm. “Head aches like a bitch, but I’ll be fine,” he told Roy. “Think they knocked me out to get me here. I have no idea why they took me, though.”

Roy had come up with a few reasons, none of them good. It was possible they thought using Ed would give Roy some extra incentive to talk, and they weren’t exactly wrong. Roy could handle torture himself just fine, but if they were hurting Edward… Roy knew he wouldn’t be able to take it. But more likely, they needed Edward himself. The question was, for what?

And then it hit Roy. They’d used the phrase to describe both of them now. Sacrifice.

“I’m an idiot,” Roy whispered.

Ed snorted, despite everything. “What gave it away?”

“Edward, they’ve called me a sacrifice, too. They’re going to use both of us for… something. I think they’re trying to transmute the whole country into a philosopher’s stone. That’s what I was trying to tell Hughes when they got to me. It’s possible they need alchemists to power it, most likely as many as they can get their hands on,” Roy told him in a hushed voice. It didn’t really matter if Lust heard, but he’d still rather the enemy not know everything he knew. “And leaving us in the outside world poses a threat, because we were close to figuring them out.”
Edward’s eyes had widened. “A transmutation circle the size of the whole country?”

Roy nodded. “I know,” he said solemnly. “But if we can get out of here, and warn the others before it’s too late, then—”

“That’s enough,” Lust interrupted them, her voice raised and impatient. “I only brought the brat in here so you could see each other. You’ll be kept in separate rooms, of course. That way if either of you tries to escape, we can punish the other. It’ll make it a bit easier to keep you both in line.”

Edward visibly paled as Lust strode into the room and reached for him, fingers already slightly elongated and razor sharp. “No,” he said, softly. “No, no, wait, please.”


“You’ll what?” Lust asked, not stopping. “You can’t use your alchemy. Face it, Colonel Mustang; you’re weak.”

“I don’t want to go with her. Please, please, do something Roy,” Edward begged. “Don’t let her take me away. She’ll kill me. I’m so… I’m so scared.”

Roy turned and opened his mouth to reassure him, to promise that no harm would come to him, that their captors needed them alive, at least for now.

No sound came out. Because this… this was not the Edward Elric that he knew and cared for so much. His golden eyes were full of fear, not the fire of determination that Roy had grown so familiar with. And he was shaking. The Fullmetal Alchemist didn’t beg for his life, and he certainly didn’t literally tremble with fear.

Once he noticed this, everything fell into place. The defiant attitude was close, but not exactly right. Edward didn’t call Roy by his first name, either, it was always ‘Colonel’ or ‘Mustang.’ Hell, even a simple ‘bastard’ would have been more believable. Edward wouldn’t have let Roy hug him just like that, either, at least Roy didn’t think so. He also would’ve been more reluctant to let go of the fact that Roy was known to be dead as well—knowing Ed, he would’ve found a miraculously living and breathing Roy to be too good to be true. He would have asked several more questions.

But first and foremost, Edward didn’t give up. He was a fighter, even more so than Roy himself. Unlike Roy, he didn’t need special gloves or transmutation circles to use his alchemy. So why wasn’t he fighting back? Why was he so scared of Lust, when he should be clapping his hands together and making a stone wall collapse on her? The answer, of course, was simple.

Roy stepped out of the way, leaving Lust with an open path. “You’re not Fullmetal,” he said simply, voice cold as ice.

He remembered too well the vision of Riza pulling the trigger. And, like an idiot, he’d fallen for the same trick once again.

Edward burst into laughter that wasn’t his own. He recognized this voice, and so too did he vaguely recognize the figure that appeared before him in the kid’s place with a crackle of red light.

“You’re good,” the imposter said, clapping Roy on the back with such force that it caused him to stumble forward. “Really thought I had you with that one. It’s a shame, it would’ve been fun to have you watch him be tortured. Though I imagine that’d still be pretty entertaining, even if you know it’s me.” They paused. “Hey, how did you know it was me, anyway? I’m a very good actor.”

I know my kid, Roy thought, but he said nothing. He wouldn’t give them the satisfaction.
“What? Not gonna speak to me?” the fake said, with an equally fake pout. “But you were so happy to talk to me before, when I looked like your precious subordinate. Maybe if I change back you’ll be more open to conversation.”

Lust sighed. “Envy, come on, let’s go. You had your fun, now leave it.”

“I don’t think he gets it, though,” Envy said, taking a step closer to Roy and staring him in the face. “That may not have been the real Edward Elric, but it still shook you up, didn’t it? Hearing him begging you for help. I can do that again.” They took another step, a sadistic smile spreading across their face. “And I can do worse. I can make you watch as every single person you love dies right before your eyes, and then bring them back so I can do it over, and over, and over again.”

Roy didn’t say anything. He couldn’t. The mere idea… it terrified him, real or not.

“Do you understand?” Envy demanded. Roy still didn’t answer. “Hey, bastard, I’m talking to you. Do you understand me?”

Roy couldn’t help himself. He knew he’d probably be punished, but… fuck it. He spat directly in Envy’s face.

Envy just blinked up at him for a second, expression unchanged. And then they began to laugh. A slow, unamused laugh that froze Roy to the core. “Oh, you’ll pay for that,” they muttered.

Once again, Roy couldn’t resist. He just didn’t know when to keep his mouth shut. “With what?” he asked, as Envy wiped the spit from their face. “You don’t have anything I actually care about, and you know it. That’s why you have to resort to using your disguises. But you just proved that you can’t even act like them. And why would I care what happens to you? You’re less than nothing, to me. You’re scum. You’re—”

Envy seized his arm and flipped him onto his back with surprising speed and strength. Roy lost his breath. His stomach already seared him again with the forced motion, and then Envy lifted a foot and pressed it to the wound. Roy cried out in pain.

“You’re… you’re h-heavier than you l-look,” Roy finished, still struggling to breathe.

Envy let out what could only be described as an angered roar, one that sounded as if several voices were screaming at once. They pushed harder with their foot, and Roy choked on air. Blood was beginning to seep through the fresh, pristine white bandages.

“I’d be careful of that tongue of yours, Colonel Mustang,” they growled. “One of these days I might just get bored enough to cut it out. We don’t really need you to be able to talk. I don’t think you want to tempt me. You have no idea what you’re dealing with.”

Roy didn’t dare say anything more. His wound had been reopened, and if Envy wanted to they could end him for real right then and there. He didn’t even know if he could speak.

“And just because we need the Fullmetal shrimp alive doesn’t mean everyone you care about is safe,” Envy continued, leaning down to get in Roy’s face once more. “We have no use for that sharpshooter Lieutenant, or… what’s his name? That friend of yours, Hughes. He’s been pretty devastated as of late, apparently. I’m sure he’d love to spend some time down here, keep you company.”

Fury flickered to life inside Roy once more at the idea of any member of his team stuck in this hell with him. “Don’t…” he trailed off, and sucked in a shuddering breath. “Don’t you dare.”
Envy smiled down at him. “If you stay in line, we won’t have to,” they said cheerfully. “No more of that looking for an escape business. And yes, we did see that. We’re keeping a very close eye on you, Colonel, as well as all your friends on the outside. You can be sure of that.” With one last slight push of their foot that had Roy seeing stars, Envy stalked out of the room, Lust following behind with an eye roll and a door slam.

Roy was left breathing heavily on the ground, in too much pain to sit up, and afraid not just for his own life, but the lives of the people he considered his family.

But as the door opened once again moments later, and Roy watched Marcoh rush into the room through already darkening vision, a stone clutched tightly in his hand, ready to undo the damage their captors had done once again… he knew.

Roy wouldn’t give up. He’d have to be more careful, but… he could count on the people he loved to take care of each other, out there. He knew they would all be safe, or at least he hoped so. They were strong, and he knew it. They could watch each other’s backs.

But Roy didn’t have that luxury. They all thought him dead. There would be no Havoc, kicking down the door with guns blazing. There would be no Riza at his side, the picture of calm but eyes furious as she took down his captors one by one, precise and deadly. There would be no Maes rushing to his side before anything else, crouching down and asking if he was all right with a soft sort of anger in his voice, anger Roy knew was never meant for him. And there would be no Edward Elric, with his hands pressed together, fire in his eyes, and hell to pay.

He’d known it from the moment he’d woken up here, but now it felt real. Roy had to get out of this one by himself. If anything, Envy’s actions had only made him more sure of it. He wouldn’t be a pawn in whatever game these monsters, these… homunculi had planned. He’d escape.

Or he’d die trying.

Edward sat on his bed, arms crossed, and avoiding the pointed glare he could feel Winry giving him. If Al could glare, he’d certainly have replicated it. As things stood, he just kept shooting Ed looks that he had no means of deciphering.

“You should apologize,” Winry said, finally, breaking a silence which had lasted several minutes by this time.

Ed scowled at the floor. “For what?”

Winry just gaped at him in disbelief, so Al spoke up.

“You hit Lieutenant Colonel Hughes, brother,” he said, voice soft as ever, if reproaching. “And… you said some pretty rude things, too.”

“I wasn’t the only rude one,” Ed muttered angrily. “Hughes also—”

“You provoked him,” Al interrupted. “And he’d been shot, brother. He’s in the hospital now, you shouldn’t have yelled at—”

“Well, he shouldn’t have let Ross get away!” Ed exploded, pushing himself off the bed. “Now Mustang’s killer is just… just loose, who knows where doing who knows what! What if she hurts
someone else, all because Hughes hesitated to take the shot?”

“I don’t think Mr. Hughes should have lied to you and Al,” Winry said, her lips pressed together in a tight line. “But I also think you should hear him out.”

“What, like he heard Ross out? No, I actually want to catch whoever killed the Colonel, thanks,” Ed snapped. Winry’s frown deepened.

“Maybe if you had stopped to think about it, you would’ve realized that there’s no actual proof that Maria Ross killed him,” she pointed out. “I like to think I know Mr. Hughes pretty well, and he isn’t an idiot. He wouldn’t have just let her escape. Not if he thought she was connected to the Colonel’s death.”

“I thought I knew him well, too,” Ed said, refusing to budge. “And then he lied to us.”

“Even if he shouldn’t have done that, he did it to spare our feelings, not to be dishonest,” Al reminded him. “Colonel Mustang may have been important to us, but he was important to Mr. Hughes, too. They’ve known each other for a very long time, and Mr. Hughes seems to want to figure it out just as much as we do, if not more. Solving crimes is his job, after all.” Al paused, then pressed on. “I don’t think Maria Ross did it. Maybe Mr. Hughes thought the same thing.”

“Then why did she run?” Ed asked them. Neither Al nor Winry had a reason to this. “Exactly! She ran because she was guilty!”

“I highly doubt that.” All three of them whipped around at the sound of a third voice to see none other than Ling, the useless, freeloader Xingese prince, crouching in their windowsill. “I think it was more likely because she would’ve been executed if she hadn’t.”

“YOU!” Edward shouted, then picked up a pillow and launched it at Ling, who dodged easily out of the way. A plainly fake expression of shock and hurt came over his features. “Hey, you could’ve knocked me out of the window, and we’re very high up! Trying to kill me, my short friend?”

“Trying and failing, apparently,” Edward said, with what he hoped was a murderous glower. “Don’t call me short, or your friend. I’m not sure which is more insulting.”

Ling clutched his chest. “You wound me,” he deadpanned, before climbing the rest of the way indoors and making himself comfortable beside Winry on Al’s bed. “But as I was saying before my life was rudely threatened, I was in prison with Ross when she escaped. I was actually broken out at the same time, by the same person. I can shed some light on the situation, if you’d like.”

Ed positively hated this guy. “What information could you possibly have that we don’t already know?”

“Apparently a lot, if you think that Maria Ross is actually guilty,” Ling fired back. “I was in a cell close to hers. She certainly spent a lot of time crying. That woman wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

“Shot Lieutenant Colonel Hughes!”

“Probably because he asked her to,” Ling said, as it were the most obvious thing in the world. Ed just stared at him incredulously, which brought a smile to the other’s face. “Do I have your attention yet?”

“You had it when you climbed in through the window,” Winry said, and scooted a little further
away from him. Ling laughed. Edward still had no idea what was going on.

“Hang on,” he interrupted, holding up his hands. “I still don’t get why Ross escaped if she wasn’t guilty. If she didn’t have anything to hide, then it all would’ve been sorted out at the trial.”

“My poor, sweet, naive alchemist,” Ling said softly, shaking his head to further the condescension. “Where we were locked up? Didn’t seem like anyone was going to get a trial. I most likely would’ve been released with proper bail and a slap on the wrist, but Maria Ross was headed straight for the gallows, clearly. They interrogated her, and then put her in the papers right after. Saying she was already convicted.” Ling paused, and considered his own words. “Actually, I don’t know that they wouldn’t have killed me, too. Amestris doesn’t exactly have the best track record when it comes to citizens of other countries.”

Edward opened his mouth to protest, then closed it. That was... actually fair.

“But why wouldn’t they try Ross, first?” Al wondered aloud. “They can’t just convict her with no evidence!”

“And yet they ordered to shoot on sight when she got away,” Ling said, tapping a thoughtful finger to his chin. “Not bring her in alive if possible for more questioning. ‘Shoot on sight.’ Why do you think that is?” No one answered, and Ling sighed. “Oh, come on. I’ve been in your country for less than a month and even I can see that your military is deeply out of whack, so much so that I have half a mind to send for some assassins, or something, for your Fuhrer. He’s extremely sinister.”

“Assassins?” Winry echoed, eyes wide with disbelief.

Ling nodded. “Sure. I know quite a few, though most because they’ve made attempts on my life.” He flashed her a winning smile and a wink. “Things in my country are very interesting. You should visit sometime.”

The pillow Ed threw this time struck Ling directly in the face. Winry and Al were both laughing. “Could we get back on topic?”

“Of course, my young—”

“We’re the same age!” Ed said, outraged. “But anyway, what are you trying to suggest? Some sort of military cover-up?”

Ling grinned. “That’d be just the tip of the ice berg. I don’t know for sure. What I do know is that whoever broke Ross and myself out of jail showed her the paper, and when she very emphatically said that she didn’t do it, he told her that his death was going to be pinned on her anyway if she didn’t escape, which is what made her decide to go with him. And then he led her straight to Lieutenant Colonel Hughes. No one knows what happened between them, and no one knows where she is now. But I’d guess she’s well on her way out of the country.”

“Out of the country?” Edward repeated, aghast. “How could you possibly know that?”

“I don’t. It’s just a guess, since he only let me out once I said I was from Xing. He asked for some directions,” Ling said, and his words were immediately followed by a knock on the door. As Al got up to answer it, Ed watched Ling close his eyes for a moment. Just a moment. When he opened them, his smile had grown wider. “I think she might be able to explain it in more detail, though.”

The door swung open to reveal Lieutenant Hawkeye. She smiled at all of them, and if she was surprised to see a Xingese teenager in the room, she didn’t show it. “Hello Edward, Alphonse,” she said softly. “May I come in? I think we have a great deal to talk about.”
Gracia Hughes had been pregnant once before with her daughter and light of her life, Elicia, so she was pretty confident that she knew what it felt like.

It had felt an awful lot like this.

She sunk onto the floor beside the toilet, breathing heavily. Yes, she remembered this feeling. The struggle to keep food down is one aspect she certainly didn’t miss.

She simply couldn’t be pregnant, though. It was just… not the time. Sure, they’d been trying for another baby, but that was before… everything. Maes was so preoccupied with his work and what had happened to Roy that he hardly spent any time at home anymore apart from when he ate and slept, which wasn’t often. For goodness sake, he was in the hospital now after getting himself shot by that Ross girl, and Gracia just knew he’d done it on purpose. She could read her husband like a book.

At first she’d only thought that she was late, and then maybe that she’d just skipped a month, but… she knew she wasn’t sick. She didn’t feel sick, she felt pregnant. So lately, when she’d started throwing up at odd hours… well. It was getting hard to keep denying it.

The universe would be this cruel, to give her and Maes something they’d wanted for so long only after taking something else away. God, how could she tell him? How could she expect him to put everything he was doing on hold for a new baby, when finding Roy’s killer mattered so much to him?

“Mommy!” Elicia called from outside the bathroom door. “What’s taking so long? You said you would read me a story!”

Gracia flushed the toilet, getting rid of the evidence. “I’m coming dear,” she replied, pushing herself to her feet. “Just give me one more second.”

She washed her hands, brushed her teeth, and opened the door. Her daughter wrapped her arms around her knees.

I’m just imagining things, Gracia told herself. And… and even if I’m not, it won’t show for a while, anyways. It’s not like the baby will come tomorrow. I have time.

She hugged Elicia back, and hoisted her up off the ground, putting a smile on her face.

Maes doesn’t have to know. Not yet.

Edward felt like a complete asshole after Hawkeye’s explanation. But he was still confused. “I don’t understand,” he said, for what felt like the millionth time. “I mean, I guess I do, but why didn’t Hughes just tell us all of this himself?”

“He wanted to protect you,” Hawkeye told him. “Roy was killed because he knew too much, or at least we think so. The Lieutenant Colonel hoped that if you two didn’t know more than the public,
you wouldn’t be in danger of the same fate.”

“He should really worry about himself, first,” Ed muttered, then hesitated. “How… how is he? Not that I care, but… is he going to be all right?”

Hawkeye smiled that knowing smile of hers. “He’ll be okay, in time,” she assured him. “But you’re right, I wish he would slow down and consider his own safety. He’s running himself into the ground trying to find out what really happened.”

Edward didn’t know what to say to that. Hawkeye put a hand on his shoulder, and continued.

“You really should talk to him, Edward,” she said. “I think you both said some things you regret. I know you want to find Roy’s killer, too, and maybe if we all work together, then—”

“Does he even want to work with us?” Ed interrupted. “It seems like he doesn’t even want us to know what’s going on, let alone help with it. Besides, he clearly blames me for dragging Mustang into this whole mess, anyway.”


“Then why did he say that—”

“Again, you both said some really hurtful things,” Hawkeye told him. “The Lieutenant Colonel has been very stressed lately… we all have. Unlike the investigations he does for the military, his emotions are intertwined with this situation. It’s personal. He lashed out at you, and he shouldn’t have done that, but you shouldn’t have lashed out at him either.” She paused, as if unsure whether she should keep going, then pressed on regardless. “Hughes blames himself, Edward. And I get the feeling you blame yourself, too. Neither of you are at fault as far as I’m concerned; neither of you actually pulled the trigger. But when you started accusing him of being at fault, he… snapped. You were essentially confirming his worst fears, and so he pushed back.”

Edward felt awful. He knew Hughes wasn’t to blame, of course he knew that, and Hawkeye was right… deep down he’d always considered himself more at fault. He’d begun to regret the harsh words he’d said to the Lieutenant Colonel immediately after he said them, and then the whole thing with Ross happened, and Ed had been so sure of her guilt that he’d… that he’d gone too far again. But he still couldn’t bring himself to forgive Hughes completely, because… because… “He still lied to us,” he whispered. “Even if his intentions were pure, I… I don’t know if I can forget that so easily. I’m sick of being treated like a kid, and he knows how important Mustang is to us. Was.” Edward shook his head. “No, is. Even if he’s gone, Al and I… we still owe him everything. We’d still be in Resembool with no hope of recovering what we lost, if it weren’t for him. And Hughes tried to keep that from us, like it wouldn’t matter. I’ll… I’ll talk to him, and I’ll apologize, because I know I crossed the line, but… I need some time, before I can do that. To think. I still haven’t really given myself time to even process Mustang’s death, you know?”

Hawkeye’s soft smile turned sad. “I know what you mean,” she said, voice quiet. “It doesn’t feel real, does it?”

“No,” Edward replied, swallowing down the lump in his throat. “No, it doesn’t. It’s all so wrong.”

Hawkeye nodded, and stood to leave. “I should get back,” she said. “But I wanted to make sure I told you everything. There shouldn’t be any more secrets, between us. More lies will just lead to more hurt. And Edward?”

He looked up at her.
“You have every right to be hurt that he lied to you,” she said, with another small smile. “I wasn’t in support of that decision myself. But please remember that Hughes is hurting, too. That may not excuse his actions, but it can explain them, and that should count for something. This is hard on all of us. I know you wouldn’t have said some of the things you did if you had given yourself more time to process then. As it is, take as much time as you need. We’re here for you when you need us.”

“Thanks,” Edward mumbled. “But you shouldn’t have to comfort me. I mean, it’s probably even worse for you, right? He was your…” Edward trailed off. He didn’t know what word he should use.

Hawkeye’s smile faltered, but it remained. “Like I said, it’s hard on all of us. We all have to be there for each other in times like these. If we don’t stand together, then we’ll all fall. And I think it’s better if none of us fight alone.” She headed towards the door, then stopped and looked over her shoulder. “Think about everything I said. Hughes really does care about all of you. Please consider giving him another chance, and I’m sure he’ll do the same. Roy… Colonel Mustang wouldn’t want the people he cared for most to fight.”

Ed watched her go.

“This Colonel Mustang sounds like a wonderful man,” Ling said, breaking the silence. His words were surprisingly kind. “It’s a shame I never got to meet him. For what it’s worth, your goals and mine both center around the philosopher’s stone. If there’s anything I can do to help, I’m at your service.” A mischievous grin spread across his face. “After all, it’s the least I can do. You did treat me to a fine meal.”

“Thanks,” Edward said, and he meant it. For some reason, he was grateful that Ling was here.

“Brother,” Al spoke up, his voice wet with unshed tears. “Are you all right?”

“No,” Ed answered honestly, and Winry took his hand. “But… but I think I will be.”

Chapter End Notes

Happy thanksgiving! Please let me know your thoughts down below in the comment section, I was unsure about the direction I took this one.

If there are any typos, my apologies! I put this as a draft on my computer and then edited it on my phone bc it’s crunch time but I think I got everything. AO3 does that thing where it takes away spaces when I use italics,,, it’s not ideal.

Hope you enjoyed!
Thank you so much for reading again, and HAPPY HALLOWEEN! Roy's not actually undead, he never actually died for real, but I hope this is spooky enough for you, and I hope you're as excited for what comes next as I am! I wonder what'll happen with Maria Ross...? Please let me know your thoughts in the comments down below.

Also, it's time for me to link another work that I really love and was inspired by! Akarri's Postmortem (https://archiveofourown.org/works/16652845/chapters/39045565) is an ICONIC fanfic that I read after I started working on this AU. The concept of this work is that Roy dies instead of Maes, but doesn't actually die, very similar to mine as you now know. I was undecided on actually killing Roy off when I started mapping out this AU ages ago, and this work helped me make up my mind in favor of the Major Character Undeath trope. I strongly recommend giving it a read! While I plan to stay as true to the show's plot line as possible, Akarri has their own unique plot that's very well thought out, and also unlike my AU, this one is finished, so you won't be betrayed by cliffhangers. Seriously, go read it.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!