Distance
by SomethingIncorporeal

Summary

If anyone was going to change the path of Albus Dumbledore's life, he certainly didn't expect it to be the obnoxious blond boy with the Napoleon complex. However, we can't always pick who the universe throws our way and Nicolas seemed perfectly content with their new research partner.

Whether the wizarding world would still be standing at the end of their collaboration however, was another question.

Notes

This has been in the works for a very long time. I'm so glad to finally get this out of my head and I really hope you enjoy reading it.
Chapter 1

December 1918

Nicolas leaned back against the wall, a pint of now lukewarm beer still clasped in his hand. The table was littered with parchments, an ink pen sitting jauntily atop the mess of research. There was something horribly demoralising and frustrating about reaching a dead end in your life’s work. It was the first time in his life that he had reached such a huge roadblock. He took a sip of his beer and pulled a face as the warm liquid washed over his tongue. Nicolas set the pint tankard down on a wedge of folded parchment with a thud, wiping his mouth as he did so.

He absentmindedly glanced down at his pocket watch, pointedly not looking at the obnoxiously high pile of papers sitting haphazardly atop the table. Albus was late yet again, leaving him alone in the lounge with pages of unsolved formulas and frustrating questions.

The thought had passed his mind that maybe it was just impossible. However, people had called the creation of the panacea impossible and while it was still incomplete, he had proven that it was at least achievable. It was just obscenely difficult and of course it was typical of Albus to leave him stewing in his own frustration.

This was a day when Nicolas really couldn’t be blamed for his annoyance with Albus. The younger man had convinced him to move their weekly meeting to the local pub. The uncomfortable upholstery, cloying smell of smoke, and loud, raucous conversation from the working class on the other side of the bar did not provide a fruitful atmosphere for research. Nicolas would have given anything to be back in his house with a warm cup of tea, L’Orfeo in the background and stimulating conversation from one Albus Dumbledore. However he was stuck in this smelly bar until the younger man decided to grace him with his presence.

The blast of cold air from the opening of the door attracted Nicolas’ attention and he turned to see a young man stalk moodily into the pub. The boy made a beeline for the bar, looking thoroughly out of place in the lounge, with an old brown coat and an equally tattered bag thrown over his shoulder. However he soon shrugged the coat off and threw it over one of the scratchily upholstered chairs to reveal a crisp white shirt, waistcoat and tie. The young man turned back to the barman and muttered something quietly under his breath to which the landlord scoffed and handed him a pint of beer and gestured to the boy’s coat with a rather weary expression. The young man absently waved a hand and threw himself into the seat opposite Nicolas, beer in hand.

Young people nowadays had no respect for their elders or betters, he thought, after a glance at the boy’s coat.

Nicolas ignored the disrespectful boy and directed his gaze back down at the papers on the table. If Albus was going to keep him waiting all night then he should at least try to be productive. He pulled out his first formula for the panacea and took out the three remaining pages of his chrysopoeia notes.

The transmutation of lead to gold was such an imprecise science and last week a bout of angry frustration had led to him throwing years of notes into the fire. It was no great loss; the majority of it had been pure speculation and outlandish combinations of natural philosophy and chemical
He picked up the pen and pulled out his translation of ‘The Ripley Scroll’. Nicolas knew that there had to be more information to glean from the document but at the moment pouring over every nuance in wording was not an exciting prospect. He bent over the low gilt table and started to write out possible combinations of runes, going back to chrysopoeia seemed to be the next logical step.

A sudden movement in front of him made Nicolas pause and look up. The grumpy young man sitting opposite him had picked up his notes and was loudly riffling through them, a strange look on his face. Nicolas was taken aback.

“Excuse me?”

The boy didn’t react, he simply threw down the pages he had read with a thud and continued to flick through the remaining work.

“Young man—“

“This is all wrong.” He interrupted, not looking up from the page he was reading, “Your theories are completely flawed and have you even considered the moral complications of chrysopoeia?”

Nicolas was taken aback at the young man’s audacity and watched in shock as the boy pulled a small worn leather notebook out of his bag on the floor. He grabbed Nicolas’ pen and began to copy out his best formulas, drawing circles around certain runes and underlining whole sections.

“If you ever created these reactions then you wouldn’t get what you wanted. See here?” The boy laughed jauntily, “I think you forgot that you can’t just change the laws of physics whenever it suits you.”

“These are not finished formulas, just ideas.” Countered Nicolas, spluttering with indignation.

“Never too early for a second opinion, it’s pretty obvious that you need one.”

“And what gives you the authority to give that opinion?”

The boy shrugged nonchalantly.

“I guess I’m just a genius.”

Nicolas scoffed loudly.

“You’re a little boy with more pride than is healthy.”

Nicolas was met by a sharp golden stare.

“Who are you calling little?” he asked dangerously.

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Of all the things Albus expected when he walked into the pub, it wasn’t this.

Nicolas was sitting next to a small blond boy with the most outrageously long hair he had ever seen. The other man was intently focused on the notebook the boy was writing in. His hand was flying over the page, drawing intricate symbols and making tiny notes in the margins next to each
Nicolas’ papers were organised into piles on the table and at a quick glance, Albus could see they were grouped into the different alchemical goals Nicolas had set.

The two were now engaged in what seemed to be a vigorous debate over one page in particular.

Albus ordered a scotch whiskey with a raise of his finger; it was probably going to be a long evening. A few minutes late and Nicolas had already lost interest in their weekly meeting.

“Oh Albus! I didn’t notice you there, sit down sit down!” Nicolas said, gesturing enthusiastically to the plush chair opposite. “Edward here was just…Oh yes, this is Edward.”

The little blond boy cracked a small smile and boldly extended his left hand. Albus took his hand gingerly, slightly miffed at both the sudden appearance of the boy and the left handed greeting.

“I wasn’t aware that we were expecting company this evening, Nicolas.”

“Neither was I!” Nicolas replied, a grin still on his face.

“Oh?” Albus asked, sitting down and taking a sip of the whiskey in front of him.

“We’ve been spending the evening correcting this…well…this.” Edward said, waving his hand over the neatly stacked piles of papers on the low table.

Albus raised an incredulous eyebrow, correcting? Nicolas was, and always had been, at the forefront of alchemy. He had spearheaded the institute in Cairo and been one of the greatest inspirations to aspiring new wizards. How could this boy even help to improve Nicolas’ work?

To his shock Nicolas let out a hearty laugh and clapped the boy on the back.

“A genius, no, no, no – a prodigy! He just sat down opposite me and…well,” Nicolas gestured wildly, “We just started debating and it’s solved almost every problem we’ve ever faced, Albus! We were just talking about…Oh, what were we talking about?”

“I was trying to explain the differences between these two runes when you use a secondary arc, it means that the con…”

Albus cradled the thick glass in his hand, swirling the golden liquid and watching a new conversation start. Whatever doubts he had entertained about the boy’s aptitude were swiftly melting away. Albus found it difficult to remember being that young and enthusiastic. His interest in alchemy had been slowly waning over the years and there were far more important things occupying his time now. Every week he was finding it more and more difficult to dedicate an evening of his time to Nicolas’ ideas and conversation. It was so easy to become disillusioned when all of their ideas seemed to come to nothing.

The blond boy suddenly cut off in the middle of his sentence and looked up sharply.

“Oh, what’s the time?” he asked urgently.

Nicolas flicked open his pocket watch.

“Nine.” He said after a cursory glance at the clock face.

“Damn.” The boy cursed, grabbing his notebook in one hand and stumbling to his feet. “Sorry… Need to go, I’m more than a little bit late.”
“Edward?” The boy’s head jerked up as the word left Nicolas’ mouth, “Same time next week?”

The look on the boy’s face was one of surprise and amusement.

“Sure.” He said, “Sure.”

He stuck out his hand, balancing the coat, bag and book between his shoulder and chin.

“It was nice meeting you.” Nicolas said with one of his signature beaming smiles.

Edward was already halfway across the room, waving a hand in goodbye.

Albus turned his attention back to the older wizard.

“So, that was interesting.” He said with a small smile.

“I’ve never met anyone like him.”

“I assume he’s a wizard, he can’t have left school that long ago?”

Nicolas paused slightly and rubbed his beard in thought.

“Come to think about it, he never mentioned anything about practical applications of alchemy, let alone magic. As for how old he is, I didn’t really think to ask. I was more surprised by his intelligence, he doesn’t look the type, does he?”

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Albus replied, leaning forwards in concern, “You don’t know who he could be. Do you really want to risk it all on a stranger?”

“Albus; he solved problems that I have been struggling with for years. After a glance he could tell me the answer to every question I’ve ever had. If he is a Muggle then so be it. I cannot look over knowledge like that because of something as petty as blood or age.”

“I’m not saying that you should. I just…I merely advise you to use caution.”

Nicolas nodded and started to shuffle his notes back together into one pile.

“I understand what you’re saying, if someone had just told me the same thing, I would probably be thinking the same as you.” He paused slightly with his hand hovering over the last paper, “Albus, do you still want to continue this work with me?”

“Of course I do.” He replied quickly.

Nicolas made a small humming noise and looked down at his forgotten drink that was sitting on top of a loose paper.

“Above all you are my friend. I don’t need to tell you that you are free to tell me the truth?”

“I am telling you the truth, Nicolas. I am just busy at the moment.”

“Too busy for me?” he asked, a smile overtaking his serious expression, “You seem to be very much in demand at the moment.”

Albus smiled and took another sip of his whiskey.

“So, talk me through your new discoveries.”
Albus arrived a little earlier the next week, aware that his friend would not take kindly to another significantly late appearance. Nicolas was sat at a table, a scotch in one hand and a notebook in the other.

“Ah, at last my friend!” he said, raising his glass in salutation, “I’m starting to feel that moving our meetings to the pub was a poor idea. Perenelle seems far too happy to have me out of the house.”

Albus joined him at the table with a chuckle, gesturing for a scotch from the bar.

“That poor woman does put up with a lot. How many rooms have your laboratories taken over now?”

“You should have seen the workshop in France!” he exclaimed with a grin, “This is the smallest one yet.”

“I would have loved to see it.” Albus replied, shaking his head with a small smile.

“Ah, well, there’s nothing we can do. The Muggles start to get overly curious when we stay in one area for too long. It’s much better in a more magical area like this.”

It was true. Godric’s Hollow was almost entirely populated by Wizards, although there was a growing number of Muggles. Such a community was rare, but integrated communities were becoming more and more common. Even with the growing Muggle community, it was still unquestionably the best place for Ariana.

“So, how has your research been going?” Nicolas asked, shaking Albus out of his train of thought.

“I must say, recently my mind has been elsewhere. My friend Gellert has some dragons blood that he’s not sure what to do with, so I might have a play with that.”

Nicolas raised a sandy eyebrow but any reply was cut off by the thud of Edward throwing himself down in the opposite seat.

“Sorry if I’m late.” The young man muttered, shrugging off his ratty coat.

“Not at all, we were just discussing our research plans. Have you been working on anything?”

“Haha, why? Looking for some better ideas?” he asked with a wolfish grin.

Nicolas grumbled something under his breath about the impedance of youth and took a final hit of his Scotch.

“If you’re going to insist on being difficult, take a look at this.” He said thrusting a page towards the boy.

Edward leaned back and studied the sheet of formulas carefully. After a moment he pulled out his leather notebook and a stub of a pencil from his pocket.

“You’re on the right track, this part is perfect but I think you’re over complicating things here. Maybe this would be better?” he said scratching out the ink and replacing it with his own pencilled in equation.
Nicolas leaned over to watch the boy work; he really was incredible.

“So Edward, how did you come to study Alchemy?” Asked Albus, “It’s quite an unusual subject for a young man.”

Edward paused, pencil hovering over the paper. He opened his mouth to answer but seemed to think better of it.

“I guess I’m always looking for a new challenge.” Edward started, his speech carefully considered. “To be honest, I’m more surprised to find that other people are also studying,” he gestured at the papers with his hands, “this.”

Albus and Nicolas exchanged a quick glance. It was true that Alchemy was an unusual area of study, however it was certainly not unheard of. There was a chance that he was trying to disguise the magical links through careful phrasing. That, or he was a remarkably informed Muggle.

Albus made a noise of appreciation when Edward gestured that he was done and he leaned over to see the younger man’s ideas.

“Have you been in Godric’s Hollow long Edward?” Nicolas asked while Albus studied the revised notes.

“Just under a year.” He said dismissively, “My Dad moved here, so I didn’t really have much choice.”

“Not exactly the perfect place for a young man, is it? I’ve long been telling Albus here the same thing.”

“At least there are some other scientific minds here. I was starting to lose hope.” Replied Edward.

Albus smiled and passed the notes back to Nicolas who peered at them curiously.

“This is fascinating.” He said, scratching his sandy whiskers curiously.

“I mean, it’s totally theoretical of course.” Edward said quickly, “If any of this was possible, chrysopoeia in practice would send the world into total chaos.”

Nicolas nodded in understanding before flipping his notebook open to another page. They spent the next few hours talking over various equations and debating over theories. Before long the lounge was almost empty and they were left in the half-light of evening. Edward flipped open a pocket watch and let out a frustrated sigh.

“I’m going to have to go.” He said, tying the leather strap around his notebook and shoving the pencil, now even stubbier, back into his pocket.

“Oh, I didn’t even notice the time!” Exclaimed Albus, getting to his feet.

“So, umm, next week?” Edward asked, uncharacteristically shyly.

“Absolutely, absolutely!” said Nicolas, “Would you mind us moving to my home next week? I would rather not take some of my more delicate research outside, if you can understand. I’d love your opinion.”

“Sure. Where-”

“It would probably be best to meet outside the pub. I would hate you to get lost.” Nicolas said with
a quick smile.

“Next week at three.” Edward said before awkwardly shrugging his jacket back on. “See you then.”
Chapter 2

The next week came around quickly, and as he rounded the corner, Nicolas spotted Edward leaning against the wall of the pub. The young man was flicking his pocket watch open and closed with his left hand, his breath misting in the cold air. Before Nicolas had a chance to call out a greeting, the younger man noticed his approach and dropped the large silver watch into his pocket with a small smile.

"You took your time!" Edward said, pushing himself off the wall to stand upright.

"Ah, apologies. My wife wanted to tidy up before anyone arrived. I'm afraid I was also put to work." He replied with a wry smile.

"Is Albus always this late?" Edward asked, shifting onto his other leg with a small grimace.

"Ah, yes. Our esteemed friend has a small problem with timing." Nicolas said, his breath forming small clouds between them.

Of course, those problems were entirely understandable. He had been forced into his role as the head of the household far too early. Not to mention the added burdens of an unstable sister and a frustrated brother. Nicolas simply could not imagine what it was like to lose so much so young. Albus had too much on his shoulders for such a young man.

Not that Albus had ever been willing to share his burdens, Nicolas thought with an internal sigh. Albus barely breathed a word of his worries but it was still clear how much they weighed on him. Young men these days seemed so stubborn, Nicolas had seen quite a few youngsters in his time and Albus was no exception to this pattern of stoicism. His partnership with Albus had started so fruitfully. The boy had excelled at Hogwarts and their collaboration had always been something fresh and exciting. The potential he held was remarkable. However, things had started to change recently and the late arrivals were the least of his concerns.

"How did you two start working together?" Edward asked, jolting Nicolas out of his ruminations, "Seems like it would be difficult to find someone to work with on such a specialist subject."

"Not at all! Albus actually approached me. I have a bit of a reputation you see, a few books here and there." Edward's eyes gleamed hungrily at the mention of books.

"You've published books on Alchemy? I had no idea that there was enough of an audience for works on theoretical Alchemy." Edward babbled, a wide grin stretched across his features.

"You've never read any works on Alchemy?" Nicolas asked, frowning.

Edward paused slightly with his mouth open, before answering.

"I was mainly taught by my Dad. I learnt the basics from his notes before moving on to my own research." He replied with a nod of finality.

"I'll lend you some of my books, although I'm sure you'll find some way to pick holes in all the theories."

Edward smirked knowingly before they fell into a companionable silence. They didn't have to wait
much longer before Albus rounded the corner.

"Yes, yes, late I know."

"I didn't say a word." Nicolas said, raising his hands innocently. "Right, we're all here then. I'll lead the way. Oh, and be sure to take care on the cobblestones!"

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Nicolas' house was huge. At least, it was huge to Edward who had been living in a single room in his father's rented home for almost a year. Not to mention the Amestrian military accommodation he'd become accustomed to before that. Ed was now so desensitised to cramped and dirty spaces that almost anything could have impressed him. The laboratory stretched over a number of rooms and all the walls were lined, floor to ceiling, with mahogany bookcases. The books appeared to span the entirety of human existence; everything from mechanics to the artistic techniques of the masters seemed to have a place. Even more impressive were the work surfaces. Each table was covered in experiments and the latest scientific equipment.

Edward had almost given up on the idea of any sort of Alchemy existing in this world. But this set-up? This looked far more than theoretical. Ed almost couldn't believe his luck. The familiar equations had immediately caught his eye in the pub lounge, although Nicolas had somehow managed to totally mangle some of the most basic theory.

"So, you said something about your books?" Edward said, looking over at the shelves eagerly.

"Ah, yes, of course." The older man mused under his breath, "I think...yes, I think this would be the most appropriate."

He pulled a beautiful tome from the shelves and placed it reverently upon the table.

"I'm planning on composing an updated edition soon, I have the feeling that we're just on the edge of a breakthrough which will render all of this obsolete."

Edward examined the cover of 'De la Transformation Métallique', breathing a quick sigh of relief when he noticed the translation credits underneath the author's name. He started as his eyes drifted over a familiar word.

"Flamel? That's your last name?"

"Oh, so you do know my research?"

"No," said Edward with a smile as he stroked the embossed cover with a gloved finger, "Just a weird coincidence I guess."

Nicolas raised a curious eyebrow but dismissed any thoughts of questioning the boy when Albus returned with the tea.

"Ah, thank you for that Albus." He said, taking a mug from the tray, "I was just showing young Edward around the laboratory."

"It's really quite remarkable." Albus replied, "I'd love to have something like this one day."

"Give it a few years."
"Perhaps more than a few." Albus fired back with a quirked eyebrow.

Nicolas chuckled and pulled three chairs around one of the larger tables. On the table was a roughly hewn piece of wood covered in carvings. Edward recognised a number of runes but it was clearly an unfinished work. Although, the carving was impeccable, not a single mistake.

"I was wondering if you wanted to pass an opinion on this Edward? It's a continuation on the chrysopoeia research that we were talking about earlier."

"What is it with you and gold?" Edward asked, lifting the wooden plank with a grin, "Well, this part looks pretty good, I can see where you changed this arc. I don't recognise these runes though, never seen anything like it before. Can I see the notes you were working from?"

This world's Alchemy was strange. Just as he was starting to get used to the dearth of Alchemy on the other side of the gate, something like this was thrown at him. However, if this was going to be his home long term, at least there was something familiar. It was just a shame that they were clearly decades behind Amestrian Alchemy.

"Everything should be in my book." Nicolas replied, patting the heavy tome.

Edward shrugged off his coat and hooked it over the back of his chair with his good hand. It was amazing how warm Nicolas was able to keep his house. Hohenheim's house had been constantly cold since the end of September. Ed flipped open the book and within minutes, found himself lost in the pages.

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"So, you're living with your father?"

Edward made a vague noise of agreement through his tea.

"He is also a learned man?" Nicolas joined in, "You mentioned that you studied from his notes."

The blond set his mug down on the saucer with a clink.

"I guess you could say that. Don't have a clue what he's working on these days though."

"Has he published anything?" Albus asked, looking for any information.

"He may have done. I really couldn't care less." Edward shrugged, "If he has released anything, it'll be under Van Hohenheim, or something similar anyway. Knock yourself out."

Albus hid a frown. The name didn't ring any immediate bells. He regularly kept up to date with Wizarding community in Godric's Hollow, however, Edward had mentioned something about only living in the area for a short period of time. Perhaps there were some magical links he was simply unaware of.

Nicolas interrupted Albus' train of thought by pulling out a metal contraption with a large handle. The ungainly device's weight caused the machine to drag across the work surface with an unpleasant creak.

"Have you seen one of these before?" he asked, not waiting for an answer. "Fantastic device. Quite revolutionary if I do say so myself! You may have seen something similar used for dairy products, but this is far more sophisticated. You turn the handle," Nicolas rotated the heavy arm to demonstrate, "and the solids and the liquids will separate, given enough time and energy."

Edward's eyes lit up at the device. Albus frowned; Nicolas had already talked him through the applications of such a machine. It had recently been playing a significant role in Nicolas' research on perfecting the panacea. Was he really going to introduce the boy to his life's work?

"I can see you want to give it a try." Nicolas said benevolently.

Edward's eyes lit up like a child presented with a new toy. The blond boy rolled up his sleeves and grasped the handle, turning it vigorously with his right forearm braced against the top of the machine. As he turned the handle, the test tubes of liquid started to revolve in the machine. His eyes glistened with fascination as the viscous liquid began to separate.

Albus couldn't help but feel that something was strange. He watched Edward operating the device for a beat longer before it struck him. Albus frowned curiously as the strangely solid appearance of the boy's right arm became apparent. Edward stopped mid turn, noticing the stares directed to his arm.

"Ah, this, right?" Edward smiled in a way that didn't quite meet his eyes, "Got the full set." He said, lifting a trouser leg to reveal the prosthetic underneath.

"Can I ask-"

"What happened?" Edward cut Nicolas off, leaving an awkward silence hovering after the unasked question. Nicolas inclined his head.

"Just a mistake when I was a kid. It's been like this for so long, I barely notice it anymore."
He sat back down with a small thump, leaving the machine on the surface, the handle still turning slowly.

It answered a lot. The strange way he moved, the unconventional left handed handshake; it all made sense.

Albus opened his mouth to say something, but before he had a chance Edward was flicking his pocket watch open and cursing once more.

"Sorry, lost track of time again." He paused slightly before adding, "Nothing to do with this by the way," He gestured to his prosthetics, "Really."

"It is getting rather late. Don't worry. I'll be expecting you next week, mind you." Nicolas said, pressing his book into Edward's good hand.

Edward left after a few quick words of farewell, his awkward obvious now they knew to look for it.

Albus let out a sigh when he heard the front door close with a click. Nicolas was still watching the door the younger man had left by.

"That was rather abrupt." Nicolas said, breaking the silence.

"Do you blame him?"

"No, I suppose not."

"What could do something like that to someone so young?" Albus thought out loud, "Childhood accident? I can't think of many mistakes that would lead to a double amputation."

Nicolas hummed thoughtfully but did not reply. He paused for a moment before returning his carved chrysopoeia formulas to their place against the wall.

"He is brilliant." Nicolas said after a beat, "If what he said is true, I've never met anyone with such an instinctive understanding of Alchemic theory."

"Nicolas, he's a Muggle, you can't be thinking-"

"He's a genius. He told me himself and he has certainly proved it." Nicolas said seriously, "Can you imagine the advances we could make if he was aware of the world beyond mere theory?"

"You would be risking too much! I can't believe you're even contemplating this!"

"Albus. I have made more progress in the past few days than in the last ten years. I simply cannot let an opportunity like this slip through my fingers."

"This is ridiculous! This is illegal!"

"They aren't all bad Albus." Nicolas said quietly, not meeting Albus' eyes.

Albus paused for a moment before his face contorted with a strange emotion.

"You can't understand." He said quietly, "I'll see you next week."

"I'll be expecting to see some of that dragon's blood research." Nicolas replied, a sad smile on his face.
A few minutes later, Nicolas was left alone in the quiet laboratories.

Edward cursed under his breath. The old man was going to be pissed again. This evening had been weird, a strange mix of elation and pure mortification. For the first time since he arrived in this world, he had felt something other than crushing boredom and misery. The prospect of something to challenge and engage his mind filled him with a new sense of hope.

Trust the fucking arm and leg to get in the way. He could see the pity on their faces and he couldn't be more disgusted. In this world he was a cripple, almost worse than useless. Hohenheim had been talking about building some new prosthetics, ones that did more than just hang uselessly. Still, that was a long way off. He laughed hollowly, why had he ever complained about Winry's automail? He'd trade his remaining limbs to only have to deal with achy ports again.

Edward suppressed a shiver; England was so cold in winter. The trees were bare and the sky was the dullest shade of grey. The old man had said something about snow coming soon and Edward couldn't say he was thrilled about it. It had taken him almost six months to get used to balancing on the new leg and he wasn't looking forward to adding icy surfaces to the equation.

He arrived back at the house feeling both grumpy and cold. The lights were still on downstairs so that was a guarantee that the bastard would be up reading in his study. Maybe he could sneak in without him noticing. Hohenheim was the last person he wanted to talk to in such a foul mood. He was far more interested in reading Nicolas' book than talking with the old man.

As he had guessed, the only light on was the one in the study. The door was open a crack and he could see his father's head bent down over his desk.

"You're back late." Hohenheim murmured quietly, not looking up from his notes.

"It's barely dark."

"I can't imagine what is suddenly so important that you need to be out all hours of the night. When you get hurt I'll be the one who has to pick up the pieces." He replied, twisting round in his seat.

"Is it so surprising that I've found people who are interested in what I have to say? I can't just stay here and rot forever you know!" Edward replied, gesticulating angrily with his good arm.

"Do you appreciate all I've done for you?"

"Oh, I owe you did I? You know I didn't ask to be dropped here!"

"And I didn't ask for you to be here, but look where we are!"

"Fine! I'll just leave if I'm such a fucking burden to you!"

"You know that's not what I mean, Edward." Sighed Hohenheim, rubbing his face with his hand, "Look, we're both tired. Let's not argue about this now."

He did look tired. He was pale and drawn, with noticeable creases around his eyes.

"Fine, whatever." Edward muttered before starting to slowly climb the stairs.

Where did that bastard get off guilt-tripping him like that? He'd taken care of himself for almost as
long as he could remember. It was just this world, this dull grey world that had rendered him useless for the first time in his life.

Edward made it to his room and sat heavily on the creaky bed. He hadn't wanted to mention it to Hohenheim but the leg socket was killing him. He unclipped the heavy attachment and laid it on the bed. Honestly, he felt incredibly vulnerable without the prosthetic. However a year had taken a serious toll on his body and he'd found himself losing both muscle mass and weight. As difficult as it was to admit, the leg was just too heavy for constant wear.

He ran a hand through his hair, pulling it out of the high ponytail. The last few days had been more exciting than all his time in England combined. Nicolas and Albus represented a way out of the endless tedium of his current existence. Slowly, the prospect of being trapped here was beginning to look slightly less bleak.

Perhaps he could find a purpose here after all.
The next week, Edward arrived at Nicolas’ house slightly later, crossing his fingers that things weren’t going to be weird after the previous week’s disaster. Perenelle greeted him at the door with a smile and directed Ed to her husband, whom she indicated was in one of the living rooms. Albus was already engaged in deep conversation with his mentor. A smile covered Nicolas’ face as he noticed Edward’s arrival.

“Hello again my friend!” he exclaimed happily.

Albus was looking slightly drawn, frown marks creasing the skin around his eyes. He looked like he hadn’t slept properly for a month. However, despite his obviously exhausted exterior, he still nodded a greeting.

“Sit, sit!” Nicolas exclaimed patting the chair next to him.

Edward sat, pulling ‘De la Transformation Métallique’ from his coat and placing it on the side table.

“Thanks for letting me borrow it.” He said, “I’ve made a few notes though.”

“I’m sure you have!” Nicolas chuckled, “You did leave the actual book alone though? It’s one of only a very few copies…”

Edward explained a few of his theories, pointing to a few sections of the remarkably unmarked book. Nicolas listened politely for a few moments, before his expression turned serious.

“Albus and I have been discussing some things we think you ought to know.”

Albus couldn’t have looked more uncomfortable. His forehead was creased and he seemed to be shifting in his seat every few moments.

“Right…” Edward said slowly, looking from one man to another. This was not exactly what he had expected of the evening.

“Nicolas is taking a risk telling you this.” Albus said quickly, eyes now firmly fixed on the blond.

Edward frowned and looked to the older man for answers.

“It’s true, but to keep this from you would be foolish.” He said, inclining his head to Albus. Whatever hidden message that passed between them was a mystery to Ed.

Edward fought the urge to roll his eyes. Trust things to already be getting weird, it seemed like strange situations followed him around like a plague. Nicolas leaned forward, eyes gleaming slightly.

“You are a man of science, correct?”

Edward cautiously nodded his agreement, unsure of where this was going.

“What would you say if I were to tell you that the laws of science are not the be-all and end-all of the forces in the universe? What if I were to suggest there was something more.”

Albus tensed imperceptibly, his tensed hand hovering over his trouser pocket.
“I’d probably ask you to stop being so cagey and just get on with it.” Edward said bluntly.

“To put it simply? Magic.”

Edward barked out a disbelieving laugh, looking from one man to another. Their faces were deathly serious.

“Oh, hell you cannot be serious.” He said, still searching their faces for any trace of a joke.

“I told you this was a bad idea…” Albus muttered quietly.

“Crap. You’re serious, aren’t you?” Edward said, face falling. “You’ve got to be joking. Please tell me you’re joking.”

“I promise you that I am being truthful.”

“What is it with you people? Why is it that everywhere I go I’m faced with nutters with power fantasies? Isn’t the science enough for you? Who cares about making it all happen, it’s just—”

Nicolas cut him off with a raised palm.

“Perhaps it would be better to just show you.” Nicolas said, whipping a long stick from his corduroy trousers.

Before Edward had a chance to protest, the older man shouted something unintelligible and a sound like a gunshot cracked through the room. A plume of smoke shot from the end of the stick, accompanied by…something yellow? After a moment, the smoke cleared to reveal that the room had somehow been filled with twittering yellow birds.

Edward paled.

He quickly rattled through every possible theory in his mind and nothing would add up. Where did they come from? He scanned the room for hiding places he could have overlooked. But surely he would have heard a bunch of birds if they had been in the room? Perhaps some sort of soundproofing? But why go through that effort for something so insignificant? Why was this stunt so important to warrant a large-scale construction project? Not to mention the smoke, he could think of a number of ways to produce the smoke, but originating from such a small source?

He obviously looked panicked, because he could feel a hand on his shoulder. Nicolas’ mouth was moving, but all he could hear was rushing in his ears. Edward found himself unable to take his eyes from the yellow birds. Nothing was making sense. What was equivalent about birds coming from seemingly nowhere? If it wasn’t an elaborate trick, how did this sort of transmutation work? Edward had more than enough experience of failed transmutation attempts on this side of the gate to know that an Alchemical explanation was impossible.

A bird landed on the arm of his chair, tilting its head inquisitively.

Was it impossible? Part of him desperately wanted to believe that he’d simply failed to understand the mechanics of transmutation on this side of the gate. However, another stronger side of himself was screaming that this was a trick and he needed to get out as soon as possible,

Nicolas flicked the stick again and the birds promptly vanished, each turning into a small puff of smoke.

Edward took in a choked breath and saw his vision go spotty.
He pressed his head between his legs, trying not to hyperventilate. It was real. He’d eliminated everything and seeing them vanish into thin air sealed the deal. He kept his head between his legs for a few more seconds before the world started to come back into focus and he could hear Nicolas’ frantic voice.

After a second that felt like an eternity, Edward sat upright with his face schooled into a calm expression.

“So, magic?”

A huge smile broke over Nicolas’ face.

“Magic.” He confirmed, “Do you need any more demonstrations?”

“Just...Just give me a moment.” Edward said while trying not to break into hysterical laughter.

Albus hadn’t moved but his face had softened considerably.

“So, is this just you?” Edward asked Nicolas, “Or are you also able to create birds out of thin air?”

He looked at Albus with a raised eyebrow.

His breathing was starting to slow, but he couldn’t stop his hands from shaking.

“Both of us. In fact, almost everyone in this village is a magic user.” Albus replied, a strange look on his face, “People like you are in the minority.”

“People like me?”

“Muggles.”

“Non-magic users,” Nicolas clarified, “The Wizarding community has its own unique lexicon. You’ll get used to it fairly quickly, most people do.”

“Right.” Edward said before adding, “Was I the only person who didn’t know about the whole hocus pocus thing?”

“No, not at all. We keep our existence a closely guarded secret.” Albus replied quietly.

“So, why tell me?” Edward asked, “If it’s such a secret I mean.”

Nicolas looked thoughtful for a moment before sitting back in his seat.

“You’re brilliant Edward, but you already know that. Everything we were discussing before? It is all feasible. The advances that we have already made surrounding Alchemical theory are remarkable, but together we could revolutionise the way people understand magic and Alchemy!”

“So, how far does this all go?” Edward asked slowly.

“What do you mean?”

“Can you go about turning people into frogs or pull rabbits out of your pocket?” Edward was making a serious effort to control the manic laughter that was trying to seep out.

“I don’t know why we would want to, but I suppose it would be possible.” Replied Nicolas, pulling a face at what obviously seemed to be a bizarre question.
Edward nodded silently and looked down at his hands in thought. They’d stopped shaking.

The next hour passed in a blur. Nicolas and Albus seemed to be working hard to totally flip everything Edward understood about this world upside down. It was terrifying but he couldn’t deny the excitement that he felt. This was something new, something to be poked and prodded.

None of it made sense, absolutely none of it. After some gentle cajoling from Nicolas, Albus displayed a number of spells. He turned the silver teapot into an alarm clock before making it levitate a foot in the air.

Edward struggled to even count the number of natural laws they were breaking. While Alchemy looked like magic to the average observer, that couldn’t be further from the truth. Every Alchemical transmutation was backed up by science. There was always a rational explanation for each and every phenomenon. As far as Edward was concerned, this magic had to be the same, just science he had yet to understand.

As he walked home, Edward grinned into his collar. Maybe practical Alchemy was not as lost as he had once thought.

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Nicolas found himself unable to wipe the smile from his face as he sat back in his armchair, a celebratory whiskey in hand.

“I dare say that could not have gone any better.”

“If we forget the part where he nearly fainted.” Perenelle said as she placed the teacups back on a tray.

“Yes, let’s wipe that from our collective memory.” He replied, pointedly ignoring her smirk and raised eyebrow.

“You know that you’re going to have to keep this quiet though?” Perenelle said in a matter-of-fact tone of voice, “The Ministry will have his memory in a heartbeat if they find out about this, and goodness knows what they will do to you.”

Nicolas waved his hand dismissively and grumbled under his breath at the mention of the Ministry.

“Don’t you make those noises at me.” She said, pointing a silver teaspoon at her husband, “It’s no good ignoring the facts for the sake of your own ego.”

Nicolas grumbled something that sounded accepting and took a sip of whiskey.

Perenelle, now appeased, leaned over and stacked the saucers on the side table. Nicolas passed his wife the silver teapot, which had finally been dismissed from its role as an alarm clock.

“I do wonder if it was a good idea to have Albus here though.” He mused.

“That boy is truly in a difficult place.” Perenelle said sadly.

“If he would only talk to me! I cannot help if he insists on keeping all his troubles to himself. It seems as though he’s withdrawing more each day.”

“You were saying that he was losing interest in the research?”

“Albus has so much potential, he just needs to break through this shadow hanging over him.”
Nicolas said with a touch of frustration.

“Doesn’t he have a new friend around his age?. I’m sure that will help. The poor boy just needs something to distract him from all the chaos at home.”

Nicolas swirled the whiskey in his glass and smiled up at his wife.

“I am sure you are right. You always are.”

“I’m glad you recognise it!” she winked and picked up the tea set. She started to walk to the kitchen before turning back and adding, “Don’t dwell too much on these things my dear. The heart has a way of mending itself.”

“I hope you are right my dear.” Nicolas said quietly into his glass.

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The next week, they agreed to move their meeting back to the pub lounge, as Perenelle had some ladies visiting. When Edward arrived, the cobblestones were already dusted with snow and the paths were growing more treacherous by the minute. It took twice as long to walk to the pub as usual. The leg didn’t do well in the cold and every step sent a jolt of pain through his body.

The barman in the lounge gave him another suspicious look when he entered. Edward refrained from making an obscene gesture.

Although, the room was practically empty today, so it wasn’t like there were any delicate upper-class sensibilities to offend.

Albus was already set up at one of the tables. He noticed Edward’s arrival and pulled out the chair next to him.

“Sorry to say Nicolas won’t be joining us today.”

“Really? Why not?”

“I believe he was sucked into Perenelle’s book discussion evening.” He replied with a shrug. “No matter. I’m sure he’ll manage to escape next week.”

“Have you known them long?” Edward asked. He had yet to fully understand the relationship between the two men. The age difference was certainly not insignificant, so it was very unlikely that they were contemporaries.

“No longer than three years.” Albus replied thoughtfully. “Although it certainly seems like longer. I was curious about his work and I did my best to convince him to take me on as an apprentice.”


“Well,” Albus smirked. “That was how it started anyway.”

“I hope Nicolas is watching his back!” Edward replied with a laugh.

“Something like that anyway.” Albus said with a smothered grin. He handed Edward a tankard of beer and refused the coin purse that the younger man offered. He chuckled slightly. “After last week? You look like you need it.”
“Yeah, can’t say I’m quite over that yet.”

“Understandable. You took it a lot better that most though.”

“Had some bad reactions?”

A funny look flashed over Albus’ face but it was gone before Edward had a chance to analyse it further.

“You could say that.”

“Is it okay to talk about,” Edward looked around shiftily, “that sort of stuff here?”

“Don’t worry, we’re the only ones in here and even if we weren’t, you would be surprised how much people miss. Hiding in plain sight is a surprisingly effective tactic.”

“I suppose so. God only knows how you’ve maintained a secret like this for so long though.”

“There have been breaches.” Said Albus. “And we don’t just rely on people keeping quiet. Quite a lot of the world is physically separate.”

Edward obviously looked puzzled because Albus started to elaborate.

“There are certain spells that can be used to disguise an area entirely. A wizard could conceivably spend his entire life never meeting a single Muggle.”

“Non-magic people, right?” Edward leaned back in his seat when Albus nodded in confirmation. “Wow, isn’t that a bit messed up? Living in such a segregated way.”

“For some it’s the only way to live in peace. Did you know they used to try to burn witches and wizards? Who’s to say that won’t happen again? Adults can protect themselves, but what about children? I can’t bring myself to condemn people just trying to protect their families.”

They were silent for a few minutes, both staring at their drinks awkwardly.

“I understand what you mean.” Edward said quietly.

“Sorry to be so serious.” Albus said with a smile playing over his lips. “It’s a complicated issue.”

“No, no. This is all new to me and I’m probably going to say some stupid stuff. Apologies in advance.”

“Accepted, of course.” Said Albus in a jocular tone.

The rest of the evening continued in a far less serious vein. Albus described the wonders of some of the hidden Wizarding communities. Edward was entranced by the idea of a hidden school for young wizards. He was only slightly disappointed by the lack of an alchemy class. Edward was not unfamiliar with the idea of beautiful spaces dedicated to academia; the Central Library was a perfect example of that sort of decadence. However Albus’ description of the school far surpassed anything he had experienced in Amestris. Edward couldn’t help but try to puzzle out the logistics of an ever-changing ceiling that reflected the night’s sky. Something like that would be nearly impossible with conventional scientific alchemy. Nearly impossible, but if anyone could find a way to make it reality, Edward knew he could.

Not that he could think of any application for something like that. But still, the theory was fascinating.
After a while Edward sensed the barman’s eyes on the back of his head and started to feel that they might be outstaying their welcome. Albus obviously had the same thought because he was getting to his feet. Edward levered himself up awkwardly and shrugged his jacket back on.

For the first time he noticed just how heavily the snow had been falling. As they stepped out into the cold air together, the state of the roads became clear. At least three inches already covered the cobblestones and the snow showed no signs of stopping. Edward tried not to curse but he found himself hard-pressed to keep silent.

“Are you going to be okay getting home?” asked Albus, the concern clear in his voice.

“Yes! Of course, it’s just a bit of snow.” He grumbled.

Five steps later the leg slipped out from under him and Edward found himself flat on his back.

“Edward!” Exclaimed Albus, rushing to the other man’s side. “Are you okay?”

“Ugh, yes.” He ground out, rolling onto his side in the snow and pushing himself upright.

Before he could say another word, Albus had hooked an arm under Edward’s armpit and was pulling him to his feet.

“Which way is home?”

“You really don’t have to-“

“Edward.” He said with a serious look on his face. “Which way is home?”

Edward grumbled under his breath but reticently pointed the way. Albus offered an arm and the blond steadied himself against it grumpily.

They walked for a while before Albus broke the silence.

“I do understand. But you should know that it doesn’t make you weak.” The older man said quietly.

“The world just loves to find creative ways to screw with people, huh.” Edward said bluntly.

“I suppose, that’s one way of putting it.” Albus replied diplomatically.

Edward noted that he should probably make an effort to tone it down. It wasn’t that he was bitter to be here. In fact, it was pretty low down on the list of crappy things that have happened to Edward Elric. But still, he didn’t have to accept everything without a struggle.

They made it to the door in over twice the time it would have taken Edward on a normal day. He tried not to let the frustration bleed into his voice as he thanked Albus stiffly. Albus waved off the thanks with a small smile and strode back down the snowy cobblestone path. Edward tried not to notice just how much faster Albus was without him. He let out a frustrated breath, the air in front of him misting before his eyes.

Edward swiftly unlocked the door and made his way upstairs, ignoring Hohenheim’s inquiring voice.

Ed shut the bedroom door hard behind him.

He didn’t want to talk tonight.
Hohenheim was staring at him from across the breakfast table. This had been continuing for around three minutes and Edward’s left eyelid was beginning to twitch. He fidgeted under his father’s stare; it couldn’t be natural to not blink for this long. Finally Edward hit the ceiling of his patience and ripped the bread roll from his mouth with a snarl.

“What is it old man?”

Hohenheim simply smiled in response, tilting his head affectionately.

“Okay, well, if you’re not going to say anything, I’m going out.” Ed muttered, tearing off a chunk of bread angrily.

The older man put down his teacup on the mismatched saucer, still not breaking eye contact.

“You’re starting to look like yourself again.” He replied simply.

Edward saw red.

“And how would you know who that is?” he snapped, “Don’t even start to pretend to know me old man.” Ed stuffed the rest of the bread into his mouth before levelling an aggressive glare at his father.

Edward chewed angrily for a moment, mouth too full to berate the man any further.

They’d been arguing almost every day recently and it was starting to wear on Ed’s patience. Maybe it was a symptom of spending almost everyday together for far too long, or perhaps it had something to do with the old man’s lack of social interactions. Hohenheim had spent most of the last year locked in his office. Sure, Ed had already done some pretty stupid stuff in this world, but the old man had been blowing up so easily recently.

“I had a letter this morning.” Hohenheim said, seemingly not even aware of Ed’s outburst. “The University of Berlin has expressed some interest in having me take up a lecturing position.”

“You can’t make me go back to Germany.” Edward replied simply in a matter-of-fact tone.

“You said the same thing about coming to England in the first place.” Hohenheim said, refilling his teacup from the pot on the table.

“If you’re so desperate to leave, just go on your own.”

Hohenheim paused slightly before continuing to stir his tea.

“You know I can’t do that Edward.” He said, an emotion dancing in his eyes that Ed couldn’t recognise.

“Whatever.”

They sat in silence for a moment, the rain hammering against the windows. Edward buried his face in his arms, watching Hohenheim sip his tea.

“Anyway,” Ed continued, “S’not like the weather in Germany was any better than here.” Edward’s words were muffled by his sleeve.
Hohenheim chuckled deeply.

“Very true indeed.” he replied warmly.

Edward took his plate to the pitcher of water he had filled earlier that morning. He rinsed it off, trying to avoid putting too much weight on his bad leg. It wasn’t doing well. Every step sent a new jolt of agony up through his hip.

Clearly Hohenheim had noticed his gritted teeth, because before he had a chance to deny the pain, the old man had maneuvered him into one of the kitchen chairs.

“The port?” he asked, bending down to take a closer look at the prosthetic.

Ed nodded grumpily, reticently allowing Hohenheim to manipulate the joint of the fake knee

“Can you extend both legs for me?”

Edward complied and the older man examined both legs together before making a funny noise.

“What?”

“I was hoping that maybe you had simply outgrown the prosthetic, but that doesn’t seem to be the case-”

Edward suppressed a growl, poorly.

“-the leg still seems to fit very well. But, you’ve clearly had a bad reaction to the winter here and the prosthetic is simply too taxing on your frame. It’s just not automail, you’re going to have to relearn how to live with these new limbs.”

Edward knew all too well that it wasn’t automail. If he ever saw Winry again, Ed’s first priority would be to apologise for everything he had ever complained about.

“Don’t even bring that up old man.” Ed grumbled, jerking his leg out of Hohenheim’s hands. “This world doesn’t even have anything approaching automail.”

Hohenheim paused slightly, a pensive look on his face.

“I think...I think perhaps we might be able to do a little better than this.” Hohenheim started, “It wouldn’t be for a while, but I have some contacts who might be able to help with improvements. No promises though.”

Edward nodded; it was the closest he could bring himself to saying thank you to the bastard.

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After a short while, the rain let up just enough to allow Ed to visit Nicolas for their now regular afternoon session. He ignored Hohenheim’s probing questions about his destination and began to make his way to the Flamel house.

Edward made it to the door, thankfully without a single slip on the slick cobblestones. He really wanted a word with the people who had designed this village.

Nicolas opened the door with his customary broad smile.
“Ah, Edward, just in time! I’ve something to show you!”

Ed found himself being steered through the older man’s laboratories and into a room he hadn’t seen before. It was much like the other rooms in the grand house; only these walls were devoid of any bookshelves. A large square table was the centre-point of the room, the surface covered with trays and trays of small vials.

Nicolas’ eyes were dancing with excitement.

“We have been talking about chrysopoeia recently, have we not?”

Edward nodded slowly, that was something he had been meaning to bring up with Nicolas and Albus. Ever since the bombshell that was dropped on him a few weeks ago, he had been questioning just what Nicolas was planning to do with this research. Chrysopoeia was a particularly dangerous line of study, Edward knew from experience. He’d seen Amestrian alchemists go mad over the idea of transmuting gold; there was a reason it was forbidden.

He wasn’t going to sit back and watch another great mind fall to hubris. He’d learnt that lesson the hard way.

“Well,” Nicolas continued, “I was playing with the machine we were using the other day and something rather interesting began to happen…” he trailed off, leaning down to pluck two vials from the table.

“This is the solution I’ve been working from for many years.” he swirled the golden liquid in the vial. “It has many different properties, a panacea for lack of a better word.”

Edward narrowed his eyes, but if Nicolas noticed, he didn’t seem to show it. Instead, the older man presented the second vial to Ed.

“Would you believe me If I were to tell you that these emerged from the same solution?”

Inside the vial was a collection of tiny red stones, almost like magnified sand. Edward paused slightly before answering.

“I could be convinced.”

“The main components of the panacea are, of course, salt for the physicality, sulphur as the vibrational essence and mercury as the etheric component.”

“And so you used the sulphur of gold?” he asked.

Nicolas paused slightly.

“Yes, exactly. How did you know?”

“Just a lucky guess.” Ed replied with a wry smile that didn’t meet his eyes, handing the vial back. Nicolas nodded slowly and looked into the vial pensively.

“The panacea has been operational for years, but I’m just on the edge of reaching the pinnacle of my life’s work. You know what I speak of, don’t you Edward?”

Edward felt something in his blood turn to ice.

Nicolas was looking at his over his spectacles expectantly but all Edward could focus on were the
emotions mounting within him. He was swept up in some combination of anger, sadness and a bone-deep weariness.

The universal target of all great alchemists. The thing that had defined his very existence for almost as long as he could remember.

The thing he couldn’t seem to escape from.

“...The Philosopher’s Stone.”

Nicolas nodded, oblivious to the typhoon of emotion swirling through his companion.

“Indeed. The current solution works as a far less effective version of the so-called universal medicine, but it’s served me well over the years. The real thing though, the possible applications are simply phenomenal. We could increase quality of life for people across the world-”

“What do you plan to sacrifice for it?”

Edward’s eyes were hard, fixed on the vial intently.

“What exactly do you mean?” Nicolas asked with a frown.

“You know what I mean Nicolas. That sort of power isn’t free, it can’t be. What’s equal in value to that sort of control over the laws of the universe?”

Nicolas paused slightly.

“I think I understand where you’re coming from.” Nicolas said slowly.

“There has to be equivalence! You can’t receive more than you give; it’s a fundamental law of the universe. There are very few things that match up to a stone and you don’t have the right to sacrifice any-”

Nicolas let out a sharp noise of understanding.

“Ah! Yes, you are absolutely right!” he replied. “And that would be entirely true if you attempted to somehow remove magic from the equation. Of course, it’s the reason why all Muggle scientists have failed; without magic the formula is incomplete.”

Edward’s mind was racing. If Nicolas was telling the truth, this was not the same stone that he was familiar with, it couldn’t be.

Ed leaned forward, fixing Nicolas with an intent stare.

“The applications of a fully developed stone, what sort of effect could it have on human life?” Ed started, carefully constructing his question. “For example, purely hypothetically, could it bring someone back from death?”

Nicolas let out a sigh and shook his head sadly.

“I’m afraid that its capacities mainly lie in curing illness and extending life. Now, there are some magical artefacts which have been rumoured to be able to bring people back from the other side, however I’m unaware of any reliable examples of this being achieved. Anyone who claims to be able to do this is either lying or far beyond my abilities.”

Edward felt an invisible weight leave him. This was not the same force that he was familiar with.
Or at least, he didn’t think it was. Nicolas’ openness with sharing his research was a big reassurance. That being said, he wasn’t jumping at the idea of bringing another stone into the world, no matter how different it might be. The idea of dealing with such unbelievable power again was almost unimaginable, but at this point, it seemed as if he didn’t have to worry about that.

What he did have to worry about was understanding how this magic and the alchemy he was familiar with linked together. Obviously there were similarities but the differences were proving even more significant.

Just reading about the theory in books was proving insufficient. How was he meant to understand all of this without any first-hand experience? There had to be a way for him to experience the magical world without having any so-called magic himself.

Similarities between this world and Amestris kept coming up when he least expected it. He wasn’t going to leave such a similar similarity alone; he had to be involved in this research. Edward couldn’t pass up a potential route back home, back to Alphonse.

It was funny; he had spent so much of his life chasing after the stone.

Now it seemed to be the one following him.

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Before long, Edward had become a firm fixture in the day-to-day life of the Flamel household. When Albus would arrive for their evening discussions, the young blond would almost always be there. Sometimes he could be found in the study, with his nose buried in a book, other times Edward’s argumentative tones would greet him before Albus had even opened the door, and on one particularly memorable occasion, Albus had found him in the living room, fending off Perenelle’s offers of cake and tea.

This new routine meant that Albus was entirely unsurprised to open the door to find Edward and Nicolas, both absorbed in their respective books. Edward was somehow holding a book that looked to be almost the same size as him. It was impressive but Albus knew any comment would instantly be interpreted as an insult to the boy’s height, so he remained silent. As he shut the door quietly, Nicolas raised his eyes in greeting. Edward didn’t acknowledge Albus’ arrival, instead remaining fixated on the pages before him, a small frown dimpling his forehead.

Only a few months ago this behaviour would have frustrated Albus, but he now recognised the extreme focus as just one of Edward’s many quirks. It was strange how quickly he had become accustomed to the blonde’s idiosyncratic behaviour.

Albus pulled out his quill and a few bound rolls of parchment. He had been toying with a few theories and he was finally making some headway, albeit slowly. He worked in silence for a few minutes before the room’s tranquillity was broken by an almighty crash.

“IT’s no good!” Edward spat, having thrown the leather-bound book onto the table in disgust. “There’s too much assumed knowledge here. Where am I meant to start?” He looked thoughtful for a moment, occasionally glancing at the book with his nose wrinkled, like it had been dragged out of a sewer.

“What are you having trouble with?” Nicolas asked with a frown, “I don’t remember that edition having any particularly difficult concepts.”
“It’s not the fucking conceptual material Nick!” Edward replied, the frustration bleeding into his voice, “I just don’t know how I’m meant to read something when every other sentence is some ridiculous magical analogy. How am I meant to interpret Hufflepuff-esque? What’s a fucking Hufflepuff?”

Albus strained with every fibre of his being not to laugh.

Nicolas nodded thoughtfully, obviously taking Edward’s words quite seriously. He turned and pulled a handsome looking book, bound in burgundy leather, from the shelf behind him. The spine, unlike most of the books in Nicolas’ library, was unbent and the cover was pristine. He placed it in front of the fuming young man.

“You have a brilliant mind Edward, but you cannot run without walking first. Perhaps you would benefit from covering some of the basics of our world, before trying to break it down.”

Edward smirked at Nicolas from under his fringe.

“Understanding, deconstruction, reconstruction: we really do think the same way old man.” He said, picking up the book from the table and turning it over in his hands.

“I’ve yet to read this particular publication, however I have heard nothing but good things. I think it would be a good place to start.”

Albus immediately recognised the book as Mrs Bagshot’s book on the history of Hogwarts. She was a fantastic witch, and sharper than anyone he knew, except perhaps her nephew.

Before long Edward was once again lost to the world, absorbed in the book before him. Albus had started to experiment with the Gellert’s spare dragon’s blood but the tedious task of compiling the new data was still waiting for him. At present his notes were scattered over various scrolls of parchment, with a few conclusions scribbled on the back of a beer coaster. He had felt compelled to take the circle of cardboard with him as a memento of sorts; Albus had always found the ingenuity of Muggles fascinating.

He spread the notes over one of Nicolas’ empty tables and started to redraw his diagrams in a more legible fashion.

The room was silent, albeit for the scratch of quills and the turning of pages.

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In a week, Edward had raced through Albus’ first, second and third year Hogwarts textbooks. Rather than quelling his curiosity, the research seemed to only further his thirst for knowledge.

Nicolas had tried to convince him that his current level was more than sufficient to understand any obscure reference. However Edward, tenacious as always, was a man on a mission and he would not be stopped in his information seeking endeavors.

“But how does it work?” he asked, playing with the ends of his ponytail, “And more to the point, why don’t people notice?”

“Don’t you remember reading about the charms?” Nicolas asked, slightly puzzled, “Magical locations are almost always hidden by a series of enchantments.”
“Yes, of course I remember! But what about Squibs, strong willed muggles and people like me who are in the know?” he replied.

“Ah, I understand where you’re coming from now. Well, squibs are, of course, an exception. They are very closely monitored and must apply before travelling to a magically protected area. That way, everyone remains safe and secure.”

“And people like me?”

“Well, if you are aware of the existence of a place, the enchantment becomes almost completely ineffective.”

Edward nodded, a small smile turning up the corners of his lips.

“What was that about strong-willed Muggles, Nicolas? Surely there’s no distinction between normal Muggles and those with ‘strong wills’.” Albus said disbelievingly.

“Ah yes,” Nicolas looked slightly uncomfortable about the subject, “some muggles, although otherwise entirely un-magical, have a talent for seeing through illusions. Of course, muggle society usually deems these individuals insane and shuns them from society. However we have had a few…unfortunate incidents in the past.”

Albus frowned; he didn’t want to imagine what those incidents involved.

“Anyway, for that reason, now almost every magical location requires at least some display of magical ability to enter. It would be impossible to a Muggle to enter alone.”

“And what if they weren’t alone?” Edward asked, a smirk growing on his face.

Nicolas replied by rolling his eyes and dropping the final seventh year textbooks in front of him with a bang.
Edward grumbled to himself as he rounded the cobblestone pathway that led to the house he shared with the old man. The snow and ice had long since melted and it seemed like spring had finally taken hold of Godric’s Hollow. Despite that, the combination of the bumpy road, stupid leg and satchel full of textbooks still made getting home a pain in the ass.

He only had a few more of Albus’ books left and he wanted to finish them as soon as possible. The school textbooks were exciting, but Edward knew that there was still far more left to discover.

As he opened the door, Ed noticed that Hohenheim was still out doing whatever it was he did during the day. He slammed the front door behind him. Edward was always glad when the old man was out.

For one thing, it left him free to climb the stairs as slowly as he liked.

It was beyond a relief to finally get back to his room. It had already been two years, longer than he could remember living in one place, but it still didn’t feel like home. Then again, he wasn’t sure if he could remember what home felt like anymore.

Edward tipped the books out onto the bed; he had almost finished with the final textbook for History of Magic. The definition pages were surprisingly useful but only highlighted just how much of the world he had yet to properly understand.

He found that his knowledge of everyday objects and concepts was still painfully incomplete. Even if he had his Alchemy, it wasn’t like he would be able to use it. It was like being a child again, being forced to understand how things were put together before being able to take them apart.

It was unbelievably frustrating. Ed wanted to race to the heart of all of his questions, but at the moment it was proving impossible. Without the grounding in the sort of things even magical children understood, the very idea of researching the possible relationship between magic and alchemy was laughable.

Thankfully, Edward was starting to get to grips with the muggle world, but every day was still a struggle.

He flipped the the back of the book to continue reading.

The ‘W’ section of ‘A Directory of Magical Terminology in Context’ only had one significant entry.

‘W.O.M.B.A.T (Wizards’ Ordinary Magic and Basic Aptitude Test): A series of exams designed to determine the familiarity of an individual with the wizarding world and magical theory. Running from levels one to six, a top level pass is equivalent to six O.W.L.s (pg. 469). The top level exams were first designed for squibs seeking high level administrative roles in the Ministry of Magic, but many wizards now take the tests to prove their aptitude in theoretical magic. Some notable muggles have taken and passed the tests. Sir Robert Peel, a notable muggle politician, famously took the level one examination in 1810…’

Edward snapped the book shut, a scheming look growing behind his eyes.

This could be a way forward.
Ed couldn’t bring himself to wait another week to talk to Nicolas, so the next morning he was banging on the Flamel’s front door.

Just before he could start grumbling about the old man under his breath, Perenelle opened the door.

“Edward!” she exclaimed, “I didn’t know we were expecting you!”


“He’s caught up in one of his experiments right now, but I’m sure he’ll be done soon.”

“Oh, I’ll just come back-“

“No, no! Come in! You can wait inside, I’ll fetch some tea.”

Edward found himself being steered into the parlour and before he could blink, a tray of tea and biscuits was in front of him.

“T-thank you, but-“

“Nonsense, eat up! You’re a growing boy and they would just go to waste otherwise. It’s not like Nicolas needs them.”

Edward didn’t dare to question the force of nature that was Perenelle. He couldn’t even begin to imagine how the couple had met and he wasn’t sure if he wanted to either.

She sat down in the opposite armchair and looked at him enquiringly.

“So what brings you here so early Edward? You don’t usually arrive until at least past lunch.”

“Just, something I saw in a book last night.”

“Oh really? It must have been quite something.”

Even without looking, Edward could sense the twinkle of curiosity in the older woman’s eyes. He pulled the book out from his satchel and opened it up to the page in question.

“Have you heard of this?” he asked, passing the book over, the gilt bindings glimmering in the morning sun.

Perenelle took the book with a curious frown and flipped it open to the marked page.

“W.O.M.B.A.Ts?” she asked, clearly surprised. “Of course, they’re some of the most notorious examinations in the wizarding world. It was quite some time ago, but I once knew a Swiss wizard who was exceptionally proud of his level six pass. He only received an ‘Acceptable’ grade, and yet he told every witch he met!”

“They’re difficult then?” Edward asked, leaning forward in his seat.

“Yes, very much so!” Perenelle replied in a slightly puzzled tone. “But I fail so see what has you so…”

The witch paused as she looked down at the single line that Ed had underlined in the book.
Before Perenelle could pass any comment, Nicolas burst out of his study with his customary broad smile.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, you know how some of my experiments can be, leave something alone for a minute and you come back to a new hole in the floor!”

Ed was indeed unfortunately quite familiar with that particular problem. Most of his clothes had suspicious looking marks and holes from forgotten experiments. Al would probably be rolling his eyes if he could see the state of some of his coats.

Nicolas looked curiously at the book resting on Perenelle’s lap.

“What’s this?”

Perenelle handed it over wordlessly.

Nicolas’ eyes flicked over Albus’ well-worn textbook before looking up at Ed, something unreadable in his eyes.

“Well?” Ed asked, trying to keep the enthusiasm from his voice. “What do you think?”

“W.O.M.B.A.Ts?” he said, repeating his wife’s earlier question. “What about them?”

The question was disingenuous, and Edward knew it.

“You know what I mean. The only way for me to understand this stuff is for me to see it-”

Nicolas opened his mouth, but Edward didn’t let him interrupt.

“I want to help you with this research Nick. But before long we’re going to hit a point at which I can’t engage with the work. You know this makes sense. How am I going to help with this research when there’s so much I can’t possibly understand? Anyway, there’s already a precedent, right? If squibs can get access to wizard only zones with this test, why can’t I? It’s not like I’d be the first muggle to do it either.”

Edward pointed to the underlined quote in the book Nicolas was holding. The older man frowned slightly as he examined the page.

“Well...Perhaps the muggle Prime Minister was a slight exception? But that being said, even he only took the level one. That’s hardly an adult qualification.”

Ed silently cursed his lack of familiarity with this world’s politics. That was the sort of mistake he needed to nip in the bud as soon as possible.

“But there is precedent, right?” he said, looking back at Perenelle who had her lips pursed in a thoughtful expression.

“...That’s true,” she said slowly, “and it would be far more difficult to argue against your involvement in this research….were anyone to find out of course.”

Nicolas was nodding; a resolute expression covering his face.

“I need to make some inquiries.” he said after a long moment. “But I think we might be able to do this.”

After another beat he added:
“You would have to pass through.”

Ed simply raised an eyebrow in reply.

Perenelle stifled a snort behind the back of her hand.

“Yes, yes, we’ve had the genius conversation before.” Nicolas conceded.

The older man plucked a thickly bound parchment notebook from the handsome writing desk in the corner of the room. He flipped through the pages quickly before pausing somewhere near the end with a triumphant sound.

“Aha! Just the lady I was looking for.” he looked back at Ed, “This might take a while.” He warned.

Ed shrugged and fell back onto the armchair behind him.

The older man bustled around the room for a while before pulling out a small cushion and settling himself before the fire. He had taken a velvet pouch from the desk in the corner of the room and after stoking the fire slightly, he threw something that looked like sand into the flames.

After a moment of expectant silence, the flames began to distort and morph into something recognisable.

Before long a woman’s features had emerged from the dancing flames and embers.

“Nicolas! To what do I owe the pleasure?” the disembodied head in the fire asked.

“Oh, Idris, I’m dreadfully sorry to bother you, but do you have a moment?”

The middle-aged woman in the fire smiled, her impressively tall coiffed hairstyle bobbing as she shook her head affectionately.

“Anything for you my dear.”

“It’s a slightly strange one…”

“Isn’t it always?”

They continued to make inane small-talk for a few minutes and Ed found himself tuning out of the conversation. He watched the flames licking the face suspended in the fireplace. The powder was clearly derived from floo or something close enough to provide similar effects. Although, the limited range was impressive, if Nicolas leaned too far forward, what would happen? Would he find himself in, well, wherever this lady was? This was definitely a line of questioning to be pursued later.

Edward found himself brought back into the conversation as he heard Idris giggle in a girlishly.

Nicolas’ cheeks had coloured slightly and he appeared slightly flustered.

“Oh you really do know how to reach my heart!” she crooned in reply.

Edward could see Perenelle rolling her eyes, but chose not to comment. Somehow he had a feeling that staying on Perenelle’s good side was the best course of action.
“Let’s say I had a new research partner.”

Idris’ disembodied head nodded, her expression turning serious.

“Let’s say that this research partner had the potential to help to revolutionise the way we understand the world.”

“Alright.” she said slowly.

“Now imagine that this person was not exactly, how can I put it...magically inclined.”

“A squib? Nicolas, you should know that there’s no issue with a squib taking the tests!”

Nicolas pulled a slightly pained face.

“Take it one step further.” he said, the words long and drawn out.

Idris’ eyes widened before her brow wrinkled in a confused frown.

“Are you really suggesting-”

“Yes, I really am Idris.”

The face disappeared, the sound of rustling book pages replacing the echoing voice.

“There’s some precedent…” her voice was muffled, “but nothing even close to what you’re suggesting.”

“But there is precedent.”

“Yes but,” her face reappeared in the flames, “what you’re proposing is a world away from anything that’s been done before. Even the legality is questionable.”

“He’s brilliant.” Nicolas replied simply.

Idris was silent and pensive for a moment. Before her features hardened.

“Well, I’ve never been one to stay away from risk, have I? I suppose it wouldn’t do to start now.”

Nicolas beamed.

“But only because it’s you Nicolas!” She continued, “Anyone else and I would be contacting the Ministry!”

“And I appreciate it greatly.” he said genuinely.

“I need to go and do some research.” she said, “Not to mention find some people to support us.”

“Very well, I’ll speak to you again in a few days then.”

Idris nodded wordlessly, her eyes softening.

Edward watched the embers flare and then die down as the face vanished.

Nicolas turned around from his seat on the floor. His face covered by a smile stretching from ear to ear.
He was buzzing by the time he left. Despite Nicolas’ original misgivings, it seemed like this had a chance of happening. Edward couldn’t wipe the smile from his face. He needed to go and do something. Adrenaline was pumping through every artery and filling him with a familiar high.

He hadn’t felt this way since-

Well, he hadn’t felt the same way since he last fought. That felt like a lifetime ago now.

Ed found himself walking the familiar route to the local pub.

By the time he made it through the door, the sky was already starting to darken. English weather was just something else. Edward threw himself down in his usual chair, the barman looking like he was about to cry in response.

However, before he could order a drink, Edward noticed someone familiar in the corner.

“Ed!” Albus called, waving an arm. “I wasn’t expecting to see you here!”

Albus was sat in the far corner of the lounge with another taller blond. The other man had fine features with a distinguished looking nose.

“Please, come sit with us.” he said, gesturing to the empty seat.

Ed ignored the barman’s expectant look and moved to the table Albus was sat at behind. He really couldn’t be bothered to order a drink. The blond man raised an eyebrow as Ed settled himself into the plush upholstered chair.

“I don’t believe we’ve been introduced?” he said in a neutral tone.

“Oh do forgive me!” Albus said quickly before gesturing to Ed, “This is Edward, I think I might have told you about him before?”

“Oh yes, I remember, you met here, did you not?”

“That’s right.” Ed cut in. “And you are?”

“Grindelwald, Gellert Grindelwald.”

Edward couldn’t imagine what sort of parents would choose to land their child with a name like ‘Gellert’. However, it seemed to be a wizard thing. The wizarding history books had a truly horrendous collection of bizarre names.

"Are you from around here?" Ed asked, trying to be polite for once.

"No, not originally anyway. But I have family here so..."

"Same as me then."

Gellert straightened the pile of books on the table before meeting Ed's eyes in a questioning fashion.

“So where did you go to school Edward?” Gellert asked curiously, placing his tankard down on the
“I didn’t really.” Edward shrugged. “My brother and I mainly taught ourselves.”

Gellert frowned.

“That’s...unusual to say the least. And the Ministry allows you to keep your wand?”

“Don’t have one to be taken.” Ed replied simply.

Gellert’ expression went slightly blank before he nodded, a taut expression pulling at his high features.

"Ah, I see."

Albus looked between them with a slightly pained expression. Before Albus could explain whatever it was he was opening his mouth to elucidate, Ed cut him off.

"'Magic,'" Ed said, making little finger-quotes around the words, "Isn't the be-all or end-all. Magical theory doesn't require any application to be sound, y'know what I mean."

"I suppose so." The other man said, fixing Albus with a hard stare.

Albus squirmed almost imperceptibly under the the other man's gaze.

"Ah, my apologies, I seem to have lost track of time. We'll talk again soon Albus." The blond man said curtly before packing up his books and leaving the table silently.

Ed regarded the empty seat silently before a quick movement in the corner of his eye drew his attention.

“I should really go after him.” Albus said, throwing the bag of parchments over his shoulder. “Sorry by the way, he’s...well, he’s not usually like that.”

“No, sure. No problem.” Ed said, watching Albus hurry though the still open door.

Ed wasn’t bothered, his attention was already taken by the book Gellert had accidentally left on the seat.

A book with a strange triangular symbol on the cover.
Chapter 6

It had taken almost three months of negotiations and wheedling from Nicolas' contacts, but somehow, Ed had been entered for the W.O.M.B.A.T examinations. He still hadn't met the woman, Idris was it? Who had been campaigning on his behalf, but he was sure it was only a matter of time.

Edward had spent those months studying every book he could get his hands on. Not to mention helping with Nicolas' research. Ed still wasn't quite sure about the stone research, but the more time he spent with Nick, the more certain he became of the older man's innocent intentions. It was strange to be researching it all again, but studying for the exams had given him something else to focus on.

He wasn't quite sure how he was going to explain all the annotations in the books to Albus, but he was sure he'd find a way. Ed had long since moved on from the school textbooks but the combination of Albus' collection of esoteric magical books and Nicolas' alchemical tomes were more than enough to keep him going.

Nicolas had given him detailed advice for exam technique, study advice and even what seemed like fashion tips. Ed had of course ignored it all. If he was going to do this, he was going to do it his way.

On the day of the exams, against all of Nicolas' advice, Ed found himself awake before the sun rose. He had given Hohenheim a halfhearted excuse, something about buying bread, before making his way to Nicolas' house in the morning chill. He was buzzing with nervous energy and Ed couldn't put his finger on why he was quite so anxious.

Maybe he was nervous because it was important.

That was the sort of thing Al would have said anyway. The Al voice in the back of his head was almost never wrong. Just like the real Alphonse. However, at this point he'd give anything to have the real Al nagging him, instead of simply a self-righteous version of himself. Research alone wasn't going to cut it anymore. The only way Ed could see to get back to his world, was finding a way into this one.

Unusually, Nicolas answered the door on the first knock; dressed in the most revolting shade of purple Ed had ever seen.

"Ah, Ed, you're early! Do come in, come in!" Nicolas said, with a slightly frantic note in his voice.

Ed tried not to stare at the glittery floor length plum robes. He wasn't sure he was. "All set to go Edward?" Perenelle asked from the sofa, needlework resting on her lap.

Edward looked down at his satchel and tattered brown suit.

"I guess?"

Perenelle chuckled and shook her head affectionately.

Nicolas and his vomit inducing outfit were next to the fireplace. He was humming something vaguely operatic under his breath as he filled a briefcase with a collection of heavy looking parchments. He shut the clasps with a metallic snick and pulled a soft drawstring cloth bag from
"We're slightly early, but that's no concern really." he picked up the briefcase, "Ready" he asked with a slightly mischievous glint in his eye.

Ed regarded the bag suspiciously. He'd been reading about Floo travel and he couldn't exactly say that he'd been enchanted.

The lady appearing in the fire a few weeks ago had piqued his curiosity and he wouldn't be surprised if any wizard had researched Floo travel more than him. Of course, the fact he had yet to experience it, as with all of this magic, put a slight dent in his research. However, hopefully after today that would all change.

"You're all insane." He muttered to himself, suppressing a grin. He grabbed a handful of powder, "This good?" he asked, the shimmering powder spilling from his clenched fist.

"Looks perfect!" Perenelle said from the armchair.

Nicolas nodded his agreement and gestured for Edward to enter the tall fireplace.

"Try to be as clear and commanding as possible." Nicolas instructed. "Also, enunciate, you want to go to The Ministry of Magic, if you're not clear. Who knows where you might end up."

"He's not joking you know." Perenelle said with a smirk. "He once spent a lovely night in Cork, it was just a shame that the conference was being held in York."

"Yes, thank you." Nicolas said with a quick clear of his throat. "Of course, that was back in the days when the network had set running times. There's very little to worry about now that it's constantly maintained."

"Thanks for the reassurance." Ed said with an arch of his eyebrows.

Perenelle gave him a final, amused smile before he stretched out his arm and called out his destination.

A heartbeat later the world turned into a kaleidoscopic whirl of colour and sound. What could only have been a few seconds flying through space felt like an eternity. The psychedelic blur ended abruptly as he hit the floor with a hard jolt.

Everything was white and buzzing.

The world began to come back into focus as a strong pair of arms pulled him to his feet. Edward looked up into Nicolas' beaming face.

"Good work! Good work indeed!" he said, clapping Ed on the back. "I wasn't certain if it would work, but there was clearly no reason for concern!"

"Not sure it would work?" Edward asked, the world still slightly blurry.

Nicolas looked slightly sheepish.

"As far as I'm aware, you might very well be the first Muggle to have travelled by Floo." He said, flashes of green light reflecting off his spectacles.

"Well, I guess that just makes it the first remarkable achievement of the day," Edward said, slightly more casually than he actually felt. He tried not to think about which limb he could have
potentially lost this time if it had failed.

Ed was still unconvinced that this world's magic had no built in equivalence. Nicolas had claimed otherwise, but Edward couldn't bring himself to believe the older man. There had to be something.

As his vision began to clear, Edward noticed the vast scale of the hall before him. The atrium was bathed in a luminous golden light and the floors were polished to a mirror shine. The walls of floor to ceiling fireplaces periodically roared to life, spitting harried looking wizards from the green flame.

The sheer number of people was possibly the most impressive aspect of the grand hall. Edward couldn't even see the other end of the room for the volume of wizards.

"Try to stay close to me, it wouldn't do for you to get lost before we get you registered. Rush hour is always dreadful at the ministry." Nicolas said, pulling Edward away from blocking the fireplaces.

They made their way through the early morning rush to a desk set up in front of a large ornamental fountain. A large banner was floating above the desk, fluttering in an invisible wind. It read: 'W.O.M.B.A.T REGISTRATION' in large golden letters.

A smart looking Witch was sat behind the table, dressed in black with a sharply pointed black hat topping off the ensemble.

"Names and wands." She stated, not looking up from the paperwork on the table.

"Nicolas Flamel escorting Edward Elric." He said, placing his wand gently on the table.

The woman's eyes lifted slightly at Edward's name, but her face remained otherwise impassive. She measured Nicolas' wand and made a few notes on a long parchment. Ed could just make out 'maple, quite flexible,' before she pulled out a second parchment and ticked off their names.

"Are we too early?" Nicolas asked, watching the people hurrying around the atrium.

"No, not at all. In fact, most candidates prefer to get here early to prepare. You're amongst the last to arrive."

Ed fought off the urge to smile triumphantly at Nicolas, and failed.

The witch, ignoring Ed's antics, pulled a bundle of papers from a pile and handed them to Nicolas.

"These are the guidelines and preparatory information for today's examinations. Please ensure that the candidate is aware of what is required of them in the event of both a pass and a failure."

"Where's the test?" Ed asked, peering at the papers.

"All the information is there," she said leaning around Edward and Nicolas to speak to the mother and daughter waiting in line behind them. "Next!"

"Charming." Edward snorted under his breath as he followed Nicolas through the extravagant hall.

He couldn't stop looking around. Even the government buildings in Amestris couldn't compare to this opulence. At the end of the hall were a collection of gilded elevators, with three young witches in highly tailored blue robes standing outside the golden gates. Their hair was pulled up into tight buns, with miniature caps pinned in place.
Although the whole room was bathed in a golden light, the amount of gold adorning the elevators was slightly obscene. That being said, there was no denying how awesome it was.

As they approached the elevators, one of the ladies pulled open the gate with a polished smile. The mother and daughter behind them had caught up and followed them into the burgundy-carpeted elevator.

"Where to?" the witch asked, positioning herself next to the controls.

"The Department of...Wizarding Examination and Testing." Nicolas replied after flicking through the wedge papers he was holding.

After the girl's mother had indicated that they were going to the same place, the lift operating witch closed the gates with a metallic crash.

The small brunette girl was staring up at Ed with obvious curiosity. He tried to avoid the urge to stick his tongue out at the child.

"Mummy, mummy," she whispered, pulling on the sleeve of her mother's robe, "Look at that boy's hair!"

The slightly plump witch's cheeks coloured and she smacked her daughter on top of her head.

"Joscelind! Do not be so rude!" she hissed.

The little girl pressed her lips together in a pout and stared into a corner grumpily. Edward could hear Nicolas trying not to laugh in the corner.

Before Edward could hit the old man, the elevator operator flipped a lever on the wall and they started to move.

For the second time in less than an hour, Edward felt his stomach drop out from under him. The uniformed witch was somehow able to stand perfectly upright throughout the short journey. As the elevator came to a stop, her carefully coiffed hair was intact and the jaunty little cap was also totally unmoved.

Ed, on the other hand, could feel his ponytail had all but exploded.

"Level Three, The Department of Wizarding Examination and Testing." She said in a professional tone.

The gates opened to reveal something far more familiar. The hallway in front of Ed could easily have been Amestris. The hallway walls were half lined with simple well-polished oak. However the soaring paper aeroplane shaped memos gave it away as somewhere far removed from the normal world.

Edward felt a sharp pull on his sleeve. He turned to look and the large blue eyes of the little girl met his.

"Mummy says I should say sorry, because it's not nice to say things about people when they can hear." She started. "I'm Joscelind Wadcock and I'm going to play Quiddich for England. Mummy is making me take level three even though Quiddich players don't need it."

Ed blinked.
"Also I turn seven this week, but Daddy said I couldn't have a party until after the test. Which one are you taking?"

"Uhh…six, I think." Ed replied, Joscelind's eyes still fixed on his.

"Oh, wow, that's meant to be really hard. Isn't it?"

"I think I've taken harder tests." Edward shrugged in response. Nicolas, the traitor, was talking to Joscelind's mother and clearly trying to hold back a smirk at Edward's predicament.

The little girl looked decidedly unimpressed at Edward's flippant attitude and skipped down the hall to a large open door. Outside the room was a sign with W.O.M.B.A.T written in curling letters.

Edward followed Joscelind into the room, where a fairly large group was already assembled. The vast majority of people in the room were dressed in bright jewel toned robes, although none were quite the same vomitus shade as Nicolas' outfit. Edward only felt slightly out of place in his worn brown suit, which had admittedly seen better days.

The room was clearly not built to accommodate the number of chairs that had been squeezed in, but it was an admirable effort. At the front of the room was a large podium raised on a makeshift stage. On both sides were two large doors with intricate scrolling designs carved into the wood.

They took some of the last remaining seats at the back of the room and watched a few more latecomers scurry in behind them.

The low murmur of conversation hushed as a large man with a thickly waxed mustache took the podium.

"To all of today's examinees and their escorts, welcome." His voice boomed throughout the room. "I am Penley Marchbanks and I will be asking as chief invigilator of today's testing. The W.O.M.B.A.T examinations have long represented the highest standards throughout the wizarding world. I would like to congratulate you all for making the decision to seek academic excellence today.

Not all of you will pass the tests you will be attempting today. I do not say this to discourage you, but to remind you of the standards we hold here. Today, first and foremost, is a day for people of all backgrounds to come together and celebrate their passion for magical theory."

Ed could have sworn that the man's eyes had met his at 'all backgrounds', but Marchbank's gaze was now turned down at his notes on the podium.

"First of all…ah yes…First of all we would like to ask all candidates for levels one to three to enter the examination hall on the left. As always, do not forget that an impressive score could lead to a scholarship, or an award from Minister Spavin in the case of squibs."

Joscelind grinned toothily at Edward as she got to her feet.

"That Hogwart's scholarship is mine!" She said confidently, dancing her way to the open door.

After a moment, all of the lower-level test takers had filed out. Ed breathed a sigh of relief; it had been a squeeze with so many people crammed into the briefing room. It had clearly not been built to accommodate so many people and the witch in front of Ed didn't seem to have appreciated him stretching out his bad leg.

The room slowly fell back into a hush.
"Now," Marchbanks continued, "I'm afraid there's not scholarship for those of you attempting levels four to six." He said with a small smile. The room, now almost entirely composed of adults, chuckled in union.

"However, I'm quite sure that a pass will be reward enough in itself." He lifted a hand and the second door opened. "Please take your assigned seat and prepare you writing implements. Also, I would like to remind you that no magic is to be used during the examination. If our charms detect anything, it will result in an immediate T grade and you will be removed from the examination hall."

Nicolas whispered a quick good luck as Edward made his way to the open door. Ed looked back with a confident sharp-toothed grin. The unsaid 'I've got this' was clearly understood by the quirk of Nicolas' lips.

The examination room was full of simple school tables in rows. Each table had a slip of parchment with a name and number written in emerald ink. It didn't take long for Ed to find his name on one of the desks.

The exam papers were already set on the tables, with instructions to write their name and candidate number of the front sheet of parchment. Ed pulled a ink pen from his bag and filled in the empty spaces.

The door shut sharply, cutting out the murmurs of the friends and family outside. These exams were clearly a big deal, some people seemed to have their entire extended families accompanying them. Ed's fellow test takers were almost universally over forty. There were a lot of distinguished looking beards and half-moon spectacles. Edward didn't care how out of place he looked, he had this thing in the bag.

The large man was now standing at the front of the room. His large frame and sharp mustache reminded him painfully of Armstrong. It was strange, Ed never thought he would find himself missing Alex Armstrong's unique personality, and yet here he was. Although, he really couldn't imagine the exam invigilator with his shirt off. Marchbanks' physique looked like it was built of less muscle and more roast dinners.

The man shuffled his papers and levitated a large ornate egg timer onto the desk before him. The timer was filled with burgundy sand, the wood carved into swirling dragon motifs.

"Okay. I hope you've all read the instructions on the first page by now. Any questions before we start? No?" Marchbanks counted down the seconds before declaring the start of the test and with a flick of his wand the timer turned over.

"Begin!"

Ed flipped open the first page and began reading.

"Which of the following would, in your opinion, Provide the best security for a convention of broomstick salesmen in a large, firebolt shaped marquee?"

**Fidellius Charm**

**Muggle-repelling charm**

**Confundus charm**

**Disillusionment charm**
Unplottable Marquee

Forgetfulness charm

Giant three headed dog

He grinned, this was going to be easier than he expected.
Chapter 7

Ed felt slightly blurry as he left the exam room. The word shellshock came to mind. However, compared to his fellow candidates, Ed was practically working at peak capacity. During the test, one wizard had left the room crying, while another had put down his quill at the halfway point and proceeded to spend the rest of the exam staring blankly into space.

Marchbanks had called the end of the exam to the rather undignified sound of groans from a number of candidates. The change in attitude from these previously up-tight wizards was hilarious. Most of them were trailing out of the examination hall like scolded school children.

The written paper for the state alchemy certification had been pretty similar. There was something about burly old men being reduced to tears that made Ed cackle internally. Occasionally it made him cackle externally as well.

He spotted Nicolas and his purple robes sitting in the same place as before, with Joscelind kicking her legs beside him.

“Ed!” the little girl called out, raising her arms for attention and garnering some disapproving glances from the surrounding wizards.

Ed maneuvered awkwardly through the once again crowded briefing room. The lower levels had obviously finished significantly before them and had already taken the decent seats. For all the gold and ornamentation around this place, their ability to allocate sensibly sized rooms was seriously lacking. After a bit of pushing and shoving, he finally made it back and collapsed in the chair next to Nicolas.

“How did it go?” the older man asked.

Edward made a vague groaning sound and rolled his head in response.

“That well, hmm?” Nicolas chuckled in response.

Joscelind leaned over Nicolas, a smile spread over her face.

“Well, mine went really well. But I was so quick and I had to wait forever for everyone else to finish. When do you think we’ll know our results?”

Ed blinked as he watched the small girl who was practically vibrating with energy. He was reminded of the frantic buzzing of a swatted fly, that moment when they spin in circles before the sudden drop. Ed had a feeling that she would be sleeping like a dead fly that evening.

He watched the last few exhausted looking candidates trail in before Marchbanks shut the doors firmly behind them. He took the podium at the front of the room, the raised dais creaking slightly under his impressive weight.

“All right then. First of all, I wish to congratulate all of today’s candidates. Simply making it through these examinations is an achievement. Upon arrival you should have all been issued with an information pack. Inside those pages is all the information you need to inform your next step. For those of you who do not pass, or wish for a better grade, I look forward to seeing you next year. We will be contacting all candidates by owl shortly. Once again, thank you for your hard work today and I wish you the best of luck in your future studies.”
There was a small smattering of applause as he inclined his head to the room.

“Now, I would like to ask you to leave in an orderly fashion. Back row first, if you don’t mind.”

Ed sat patiently as the room emptied row by row. He could see Joscelind’s mother fidgeting impatiently in the corner of his eye. As soon as the row behind her cleared she stood, taking her daughter’s hand.

“It was lovely becoming acquainted with you Mr Flamel,” she said with a short incline of her head to the man, “However we must be going; come along Joscelind.”

The little girl waved over her shoulder in a slightly awkward single-handed way, she hadn’t stopped beaming all morning.

“Alright, shall we move on?” Nicolas asked with a small smile.

Ed’s stomach suddenly let out an aggressive rumble in response.

“I’ll take that as a yes then!” he concluded with a chuckle.

As they wound their way through the many abandoned chairs, Ed heard a disturbance from behind the heavy doors. He pushed them open and was greeted by flashing lights and a barrage of voices.

“Mr Flamel, Mr Flamel! Is it true that you willfully broke the statute of secrecy to fulfil your own fantasies of power?”

“Mr Elric, Witch Weekly here, how did you find the examination? What do you plan to do if you fail?”

“How were you able to convince Mr Flamel to enter you in the W.O.M.B.A.T s?”

“What wa-”

“Enough!” silence fell as Marchbank’s voice boomed through the room. “We will not be conducting impromptu interviews in a hallway.” His voice was firm, eyes fixed on the swarming journalists.

A few of the camera-toting wizards shuffled their feet in embarrassment.

Alright then. Now, I believe that, with Mr Elric’s consent, there is a room prepared for an interview with the Prophet.”

There were a number of angry murmurs about special treatment and Ministry bias in response.

“No, this has been approved in advance. If you wish to conduct any further interviews then please go through the proper channels.”

There were some more vaguely dissatisfied grumbles as people started to leave. Ed watched them all leave for a moment before leveling a glare at Nicolas.

“An interview?” he said with a raised eyebrow.

“It was one of their stipulations.” Nicolas replied with an apologetic shrug. “The exam board members want control over how the news of your existence reaches the general public.”

“And you conveniently forgot to tell me?” Ed hissed.
“Of course. You would have said no otherwise.”

“Yes, Of course I would have, bu-”

“So you agree. Excellent.”

Edward chose to ignore the slightly smug look on the older wizard’s face. Although after a moment Nicolas’ expression sobered and he added:

“There was very little I could do about this Ed. As you can probably tell, I’m not going to be getting the best press in most publications either. However, I do apologise for springing it on you so suddenly. I thought it might be better for you to focus on today’s events, rather than the possibility of media attention.”

Ed had to hand it to Nicolas, although he’d never say it, the man was right. Any further distractions would have been less than welcome, he was ready to drop already. His stomach let out another impatient grumble to only hammer the point home.

However, his internal complaining was interrupted by a voice from the remaining group of wizards.

“Mr Flamel? Helbert Smudgley from the Prophet here, we were wondering if you and Mr Elric had a moment for a few questions?”

The man who spoke was wearing a suit a good few sizes too big for him, completed with a distinctly unattractive bowl haircut. All together it resulted in the image of a child dressed up in his father’s clothing.

Nicolas glanced over at Ed, his eyes clearly asking for permission.

“Fine,” Ed sighed, trying to keep his tone polite, “but only a few minutes. It’s been a long morning.”

“Of course.” Smudgley said kindly, beckoning over another wizard with a camera. “We have a room prepared, if you don’t mind joining us.”

Ed shrugged, muttering something about it not mattering one way or another.

The room they had ‘prepared’ simply had three chairs placed in the centre with a small table set off the side of one of the seats. The reporter, Smudgy or whatever his name was, gestured for them to take a seat. Ed slumped over, trying not to look as grumpy as he felt.

The reporter sat opposite them, setting a large roll of parchment and a bright red quill atop the side table. The man with the camera simply stood off to the side of the room, looking slightly awkward.

“So, Mr Flamel, Mr Elric, thank you again for agreeing to this.”

Ed nodded in response, remaining in a remarkably slumped posture.

“Ok, right then.” Smudgley said, clearing his throat. “First, how did today’s exams go?”

“Fine, I guess?” Ed shrugged. “I mean, it could have been a lot worse.”

Ed noticed the red quill spring up at the sound of his voice and start scribbling across the page in time with his words. It looked like an auto-dictation charm, a relatively new invention according to the ‘Charms Today’ magical journal.
“Well, I wish you the very best on results day. I hope you will be proud not matter the result.”

“Quite right.” Nicolas said with a smile.

“I understand your current address is registered at Godric’s Hollow? Quite unusual for a muggle to be living in such a wizarding area!”

“I think it’s more like sixty-forty to be honest. Maybe it’s just too hard to tell muggles and wizards apart?”

Smudgley nodded pensively, the red quill dancing over the parchment.

“It may be a little direct, but can I ask how you became aware of the existence of the wizarding world? I’m sure you’re aware of the laws in place to ensure secrecy. Did living in a highly magical area contribute to your exposure to our world?”

Ed found himself sitting up slightly at the man’s line of questioning. By telling the truth, would he be throwing Nicolas under the proverbial bus? Nicolas had taken a huge risk telling him, hadn’t he? But what would be a believable lie?

Before he could answer, Nicolas chuckled and leaned forward slightly.

“I believe that it’s mostly down to me.” he said, a strange smile playing on his lips. “Not to mention Edward’s insatiable curiosity. Sharp minds do not always come in magically enabled bodies you know.”

“You’re working together?” Smudgely asked, the surprise evident in his voice.

“My research would not have progressed at the rate it has without Edward’s input, his help has been invaluable.”

The red quill was darting over the page, recording Nicolas’ words precisely.

“Fascinating.” Smudgley said, shaking his head in slight disbelief. “And so how did you meet?”

Nicolas gave a brief run-down of their meeting. Ed couldn’t quite remember being quite as obnoxious as Nick was describing, but it made a good story. The reporter was gripped, hanging on Nicolas’ every word. Nicolas had always been surprisingly eloquent for an alchemist. They weren’t exactly renowned for their talent with words. Ed knew that he was personally part of the ‘transmute and explain later’ school of alchemists.

Although maybe, being a wizard, Nicolas was a special case.

“Well, it certainly seems like you work well together.” the reporter said after Nicolas had finished explaining their meeting. “Now, I have what may be a difficult question for you Mr Elric.”

Ed raised his eyebrows in expectation and Smudgley cleared his throat awkwardly at his expression.

“I’m sure you’re aware that not all segments of society will be thrilled to learn of your existence. Does this worry you? There have been some rather...unpleasant groups in the past.”

“You mean like the Accionites?” Ed asked, scoffing slightly. “No, I am not afraid of bigots who rely only on magic. It speaks volumes that their leader was crushed by a cow. Prejudice is a sign of stupidity, and I refuse to be intimidated by stupid people.”
Edward’s eyes were sharp and fiery. He had been angry, but not surprised to learn that the same sort of prejudice existed in this world. Amestris was clearly not unique in that regard.

The reporters questions took a slightly lighter tone after that and Ed allowed himself to zone out of the conversation. Nicolas was doing a pretty good job at fielding the questions about their research and other areas of interest. The bright red quill was still moving over the parchment, although slightly more slowly now, but after a moment it stopped and dropped sideways onto the page.

“Well, I want to thank you both for giving your time today. Mr Elric, best of luck with your results and Mr Flamel, I hope that your research partnership continues to be successful.” he beckoned over the photographer, who had been lingering in the corner for the duration of the interview. “If you wouldn’t mind, we’d just like to take a couple of pictures for the article.”

Nicolas quickly acquiesced to the request on both of their behalves and a few bright flashes later, they were free.

“Well, that was interesting.” Ed said once they were alone in the hall.

“Yes, yes it was.” Nicolas replied pensively before he turned to Ed with a smile. “Shall we go and get something to eat? I invited Idris to meet us in London.”

“The woman who convinced them to let me take the exam?” Ed asked as they walked back down the paneled corridor.

“That’s the one! Idris Oakby is a force to be reckoned with. Although, something tells me that you might get on unfortunately well with her.”

Ed grinned evilly.

They had the lift to themselves on the way back down to the atrium which was also far emptier than when they arrived. The morning rush hour was clearly over and Ed could now see clearly from one side of the grand room to the other. At the other end of the room, Ed noticed a line of red phone boxes.

Ed gave Nicolas a blank stare.

“Really?”

“It’s the easiest way to travel back to the surface without being detected.” Nicolas said with a defensive shrug. “Come on now.”

They both stepped into the small box which, after a few words from Nicolas, began to rise to the surface.

“I really cannot believe that no one has ever noticed things like this.” Ed said, as they ascended.

Nicolas simply smiled.

“People only ever seem to see what they want or what they expect.” he explained.

As they approached the surface, Ed heard the thrum of voices. Daylight flooded the phone box and with it, the journalists crowding the exit became apparent.

“Seriously?” Ed muttered in disbelief. “They were just waiting outside?”

Nicolas let out a frustrated breath.
“Ed, I need to go and meet Idris, we’re late as it is. Can you make your own way? It’s just the place across the road.”

Ed paused before nodding unenthusiastically.

“Just-” Nicolas seemed to be trying to gather his words. “Just try not to hit anyone.”

“No promises.” he replied, eyeing the circle of reporters.

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Nicolas smiled at Idis benevolently as they waited for Edward. The woman had truly done them a favour and as such it would be in bad taste to reject her attentions so obviously. However, part of Nicolas had always wondered if the flirting wasn’t just a method of entertaining herself. Idris had always been a rather batty witch, for lack of a better word. That being said, she did have a quiet touch of steel somewhere underneath her frivolous exterior.

And that, of course, was why he put up with her.

Over his many years Nicolas had amassed quite a collection of contacts, but Idris was probably the only one mad enough to have spearheaded this particular cause.

She sipped on her tea, tucking a slightly purple lock of hair behind her ear. Her usual tall hair was pulled up in it’s customary style, although the journey had clearly knocked a few hairs out of place. Idris almost always travelled by broom with an invisibility charm for security, so the loose wispy purple hairs were no surprise. Although, he had chosen not to ask Idris about the colour. It looked like a blue rinse had gone slightly awry and instead of a clean white she had been left with a strange purplish stain.

Although knowing Idris it could very well have been intentional.

Nicolas stirred his tea slowly, he hoped Edward was okay. Perhaps it was a little cruel to leave the boy in the lurch, but Idris had been just about to leave. Not to mention, it would have been impossible to fight through all of the journalists together, not when Ed was the one they really wanted to talk to.

Finally Nicolas heard a bang on the door and excused himself from the conversation. Edward was waiting in the doorway, his customary satchel slung over his shoulder and a scowl on his face.

“They wouldn’t let me go.”

Nicolas gave a sympathetic wince and waved the younger man into the room.

This pub’s private rooms were a delight, not that Edward was likely to appreciate it, as grumpy as he was. However, in Nicolas’ opinion, nothing was better. It was all well and good sitting in a lounge, but the comfort afforded by a private room was incomparable. It was rare to find such a well-appointed place in muggle London, but Idris was an encyclopedia of knowledge on muggle England.

Nicolas ducked out of the room to order drinks and food at the bar. He was quite sure that Ed would eat whatever was put in front of him at this point. By the time he returned to their room,
Idris and Ed were already in conversation.

“So you’re the one Nicolas has been on about? Hm? How did today go?”

Ed shrugged and leaned back in his chair lazily.

“Who knows. Best not to over-analyse these things, y’know? Not after there’s nothing you can do about it anyway.”

It was a miracle the boy’s chair hadn’t tipped over with the way he was leaning on it.

“Anyway,” Ed continued, “I don’t get why we have to wait so long for the results. I can think of a dozen spells that would have marked all the papers by now.”

“Tradition!” Idris exclaimed, “Plus, isn’t the anticipation far more enjoyable?”

“Not for those of us who took the test for a practical purpose. What good is tradition when it gets in the way of progress?”

Nicolas met Idris’ eyes, she was smiling fondly.

“You’re young Edward.” Nicolas answered for her, “Who knows, maybe you’ll change your opinion when you’re older.”

Ed scoffed and kicked his feet.

“You know, you’re only serving to prove his point.” Idris noted, the smile still evident in her voice.

Before long there was a knock on the door and a well dressed muggle entered the room carrying their drinks and food. Ed’s eyes noticeably brightened at the sight of something to eat.

“So, Idris, what is it that you do exactly?” Ed asked, without taking his eyes from the man holding the tray of soup.

“Hasn’t Nicolas told you?” she asked, turning to the older man with scandalised eyes.

The man with the soup placed the bowls on the table and left the room quickly. Clearly Idris had the power to even intimidate people she was not targeting. Nicolas noticed Edward out of the corner of his eye, he was staring at the soup like a starving man.

Nicolas laughed slightly at Idris’ words. It was the sort of laugh that he was sure sounded more guilty than amused. Idris simply rolled her eyes in reply.

“I am an advocate for Squib rights.” Idris explained, “Anything that involves the crossover of muggle and wizarding Britain has probably had my input at some point.”

“So you’ve been involved in the W.O.M.B.A.T s then?” Ed asked curiously.

“Oh yes, those examinations are very close to my heart. They are simply a perfect way to strive for further integration in everyday society. I’ve been a consultant for the exam board for years.”

Edward had clearly not been able to withstand the proximity of the food and had pulled a bowl over while Idris was talking. Nicolas had never seen anyone but Edward Elric eat with such gusto.

“And that’s how you were able to push for my inclusion.” Edward concluded through a mouth of soup and bread.
“Exactly.” the lilac haired woman replied with a smile.

“Speaking of that, I think Ed and I would both like to thank you sincerely. No matter the result, it’s certainly a landmark achievement.”

Idris nodded, but her face had turned serious.

“You don’t need to thank me, but I feel like there are some things I should warn you about. Not everyone at the Ministry was happy about this. A lot of the old prejudices are still alive and well; as I’m sure you know. A lot of people will not be happy to see you in our world Edward, and that includes the Ministry. Some people are already calling for your memory,” she paused before looking at Nicolas, “both of your memories.”

“Wait, what? I thought this was approved?” Ed asked.

“Approved with the people who matter, but there’s always dissent and those people will not be in charge forever.”

“So what do we do?”

“Stay as public as possible. Today’s interviews, no matter how painful, will be worth it. Bad press or good press, you need to be a public figure. The last thing you want is to make it easy for someone to make you conveniently ‘disappear’.”

Nicolas nodded quietly. It certainly made sense.

“Well, we will have a better idea of what to do when you get your results.” Idris said, taking a sip of soup.

“Yes.” Nicolas said quietly, “We shall indeed.”
Albus ran a hand through his hair in frustration.

“What do you mean, ‘you lost it’?”

“I fail to see how I could be any clearer. Do I need to write it down for you? Or would yet another repetition suffice?”

“You know what I mean, Gellert. Anyway, are you sure you didn’t just leave it in a different bag? Maybe your aunt simply tidied it away?”

“Do you not think I would have checked everywhere before telling you?” Gellert said angrily before slumping down bonelessly into his seat, “I’m sorry Albus, I know there aren’t many in print.”

“No, it’s alright. We all misplace things now and again. I can probably remember the contents. More or less anyway.”

Gellert simply shook his head and shuffled some papers around the table, a small scowl on his face.

To be honest, Albus could understand why his friend was looking so frustrated. It had taken them an age to find a book that treated the Hallows as something academic, rather than a simple children’s parable. The books had gone out of print long ago, and few copies still remained. But there was no use in complaining, what was gone was gone.

“Who knows, maybe you’ll find it again.” he added, putting a comforting hand on Gellert’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry Albus. I know this has set us back a while.”

“It’s not your fault my friend. These things happen to the best of us after all.”

Gellert hummed something unsure before he pulled a loose parchment from a bundle on the table.

“Have you made any advances with the blood?” he asked, looking at Albus from behind his papers.

“Somewhat, I’ve found a few new applications that I want to experiment with. Although Nicolas’ research has been ramping up recently. I don’t know how much time I’m going to have in the next few weeks.”

“Doesn’t he have his muggle now? He’ll be fine, you can afford to think of your own work now and again.”

Albus hummed in reticent agreement.

“Not to mention,” Gellert continued, “you’ve been doing so much for others recently.”

“I suppose.” he replied, looking out of the window absently.
“Oh, can you keep an eye out?” Gellert started, “The paper should be here any moment. I just want to neaten up these references.”

Albus nodded and turned his attention back to the window. Waiting for an owl to appear.

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Edward had been staring at the same beaker for around three hours. It was a rather nice beaker, as far as beakers went anyway. It had that nice silver inlay that people in this world seemed so fond of and the glass had been cut in a rather attractive manner. Edward knew, however, that noticing these things was the first sign of his impending descent into madness.

To be fair, he wasn’t watching the stupid beaker for no reason. They were just on the edge of achieving crystallisation of the stone with a new method and it was the sort of thing that could happen any moment. Edward’s job, for the last three hours at least, had been to watch the solution and record any changes as and when they happening.

So far? Nothing.

This was the slightly less glamorous side of science. It wasn’t all chemicals and explosions. Well, a good part of it was when Ed was involved, but sometimes it took a slightly more subtle approach. He tapped an ink pen rhythmically against the table, garnering a small frown from Nicolas.

“You know that being impatient won’t make it happen any faster?”

Edward grunted and tried to resist the urge to doodle transmutation circles on the graphs in front of him. He failed, but managed to constrain himself to just a small one in the right hand corner. Ed was more than certain that his muscle memory would never let him forget the intricate symbols and patterns, no matter how long he spent here.

“You getting anything yet?”

Nicolas had been given the task of monitoring both the control vial and a slightly different compound. The older man shot him a withering look in response.

“You will be the first to know.” he said frankly.

“Not if I keel over from boredom first.” Ed said, letting the words trail off into silence.

They sat in silence for a moment, the sounds of Perenelle bustling around the kitchen occasionally breaking through to the laboratory. Ed appreciated these quiet moments, they gave him time to think without being overwhelmed by the buzz of information in his head. There was a difference between lonely silence and companionable silence, that had been made more than clear in the last few years.

He couldn’t stand those moments of solitary silence. His thoughts were too busy and inevitably started to travel down roads he would rather not travel.

A sudden scratching knocked Ed out of his contemplations.

“What the hell is that?” he exclaimed, standing suddenly.
The noise was coming from the shuttered window. They had recently started covering the glass to prevent anything from interfering with the stone’s crystallisation process, and it sounded like something was not happy about the new additions to the laboratory.

Nicolas walked over to the window and unlocked the catch. As soon as the windows opened, Ed found himself being attacked by something large and…feathery?

“Oho!” Nicolas exclaimed happily. “Looks like you have a letter!”

“A letter?”

“On it’s leg.” he said, gesturing to the creature.

The dog sized owl perched on the table squawked at Ed indignantly, lifting it’s foot in expectation.

“Ok, so this is pretty cool.” Ed said begrudgingly, pulling a scroll from the pouch strapped to the creature’s leg.

Ed paused for a moment before adding:

“Wait, is this-?”

“I believe so, yes.”

Edward looked down at the scroll in his hands like it was about to spontaneously combust. The W.O.M.B.A.T wax seal gleamed in all it’s emerald glory. This was it, his ticket to a way home, or the end of the line. It was all well and good working with Nicolas, but he needed more. Getting access to the wizarding world had the potential to change everything, the potential contained in understanding whatever it was these people were doing was beyond words.

But it was strange, he had been so confident earlier, what had changed? He’d never felt so unsure about anything. What was so different?

Why was he doubting himself?

“Well, aren’t you going to open it?” Nicolas asked, crinkling his brow at Ed’s blank expression.

“What? Oh, yeah, yeah.” Ed said, tearing the seal and unrolling the thick waxy roll of parchment.

He looked at the scroll for long second, eyes wide before sitting back down with a thump.

“What, what is it?” Nicolas asked frantically.

He turned the page around to reveal the words written in ebony black ink.

‘This is to certify that Mr Edward Elric achieved the following results in the W.O.M.B.A.T s of 1919

Grade 6: Outstanding’
He couldn’t tell if his hands were shaking, or if his whole body was quaking. This was it, this was it. He had done it.

Before another thought could flash across his mind, he found himself in Nicolas’ arms. The man was a surprisingly good hugger, even if a slightly sudden one.

“I knew it! I knew you could do it” the older man exclaimed, grasping Ed by the shoulders. “Perenelle! Perenelle, the results have arrived!”

There was a small clatter from the kitchen as she came running to the room.

“And?” she asked, eyes wide as she peeked around the door.

“What do you think?” Ed said boldly before pushing the parchment to the end of the table.

Perenelle approached the table, glanced at the parchment and then brought her hands up to stifle the small squeak that emerged in response.

“Oh Edward!”

Once again, Ed found himself enveloped in a Flamel’s tight embrace.

“I’m so happy for you.” Ed barely heard Nicolas’ words, as squished as he was by Perenelle.

She finally released him with a broad smile still painted across her face.

“So…” Ed started, looking down at the paper in front of him.

Before he could finish his thought, there was a loud knock at the front door.

Nicolas casually called out for the visitor to let themselves in, which seemed to be standard practice in Godric’s Hollow. It reminded Ed of Resembool, that laid back attitude where everyone lived out of their neighbours kitchens. That sort of lifestyle had been next to impossible in Central.

“Nicolas, Nicolas! I just saw!” a voice called out.

The door to the room burst open and a panting Albus Dumbledore stood in the entrance, grinning ear to ear.

“Edward, congratulations!”

“Thanks, but, how do you know? I only just got the results.” he replied, looking down at the parchment on the table.

Albus turned his questioning gaze to Nicolas in reply.

“Don’t you take the Prophet?”

“The Prophet? We gave up reading that rag years ago.” the older man replied with a dismissive wave of his hand.

Albus pulled a paper from his bag and placed it on the table.

“It is the Prophet, as you say a bit of a rag, but you might want to take a look.”

Ed peered over at the newspaper, the moving advert of a dancing broom catching attention for a
moment before he focused on the headline.

‘A Muggle in our Midst?
A non-magical individual achieves full marks on W.O.M.B.A.T S - Ministry in shock!’

“Wait, what?” Ed couldn’t summon anything more eloquent than a slack-jawed stare.

“That’s not it! They’ve practically dedicated the entire issue to you both.” Albus said, flicking through the paper before pausing and adding, “Admittedly, it’s not all nice...But that’s the Prophet for you!”

Ed took the paper and leafed through the pages. Albus hadn’t been lying.

‘IS THIS THE END OF THE MAGICAL WORLD AS WE KNOW IT?’ questioned one headline in all capitals, while another proclaimed that ‘The Great Alchemist Nicolas Flamel has lost his Marbles!’.

However, after a quick scan, Ed quickly realised that the contents of the articles were not nearly as bad as the headlines suggested. Although, if your average wizard was anything like the people of Amestris, the headlines were all that mattered.

He flicked back to the front page.

“Is this true?” He said, staring at the headline. Below the bold words, there was a large picture of him standing next to Nicolas awkwardly. The Edward in the photograph was shifting around, muttering grumpily under his breath.

“Of course!” said Albus, looking slightly puzzled. “Didn’t you get your results?”

“Just said that I passed” Ed replied, handing over the scroll.

Albus took the parchment and unrolled it carefully. He looked at the paper, then back at Ed, before pulling a second sheet from behind the first. On the second parchment his score in each section of the test was noted in meticulous detail.

Ed’s eyelid twitched.

“I think this is a first Ed.” Nicolas said looking over Albus’ shoulder at the parchment.

“It’s a test that was designed to be failed.” Albus said in agreement. “No one has ever achieved full marks. It’s quite literally unheard of.”

“Well I guess there’s a first time for everyth-”

“Oh my goodness! You did it! When did it happen?” Perenelle interrupted with a cry, having returned with a tray of biscuits.

“What do you-”

Ed followed her eyes to the beaker sat on his worktable.
Inside sat a partially formed blood red crystal.
Ed attempted to resist the urge to smack his head on the table.
And failed.

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It had taken two more days to replicate the same crystallisation under supervision, and Ed had not allowed Albus to escape.

“I don’t care how busy you are. You interrupted me last time, so you’re helping.”

“I was just coming to say congratulations!”

“No excuses Dumbledore!”

After some cajoling from Ed, Albus finally acquiesced and was reluctantly put on beaker watching duty. The crystals that formed were not exactly complete, but it was certainly a starting point. Most importantly, they now had the data to work with.

Half of the beakers were filled with the same red sand that Nicolas had been creating for the last few months. However, the rest of the beakers were now filled with the new crystals. They had recorded almost everything of interest, and many things of no interest about the new stones. The diagrams, drawings and observations covered two workbenches.

“I need to get out and do something.” Ed said, stretched out over his notes on the table languidly.

“I can see that.” Albus said, with a pointed glance at Ed’s ponytail, which was dipped in his tea.

Ed glared at Albus, not lifting his head from the table.

“Where should we go then?” Albus asked, pulling Ed’s hair from the cup.

“Library.” he muttered into his sleeve.

“Ok, good, let’s go!”

“Can’t,” Ed said, lifting his head slightly, “we still have to write all this stuff up.”

“Go, go!” Nicolas said with a wave of his hand, “I can finish this off. You’ve both barely taken a break since we started. Go and-,” he paused slightly, “do whatever it is that young people do these days.”

Albus eventually pulled Ed over, grinned, and before he could blink, they were in London.

“Urgh, might give me some warning first!”

“Sorry, I couldn’t resist.”

“I don’t think I’m ever going to get used to that.” Ed said, picking himself up from the pavement.

“It takes a few times before you stop feeling sick. Apparation is convenient, but unpleasant. It’s
“Guess I’ll never know.” Ed replied with a wry smile. “So, where are we going anyway? You just dumped me on the floor.”

“Ah, yes, sorry about that by the way.” Albus turned and gestured behind him, “The British Museum of course!”

“Not a library?”

“They have one of those too.” he replied with a chuckle.

They made their way up the stairs to the grand building before them. The late spring rain had clearly driven off the pedestrians, as the street was almost totally deserted. The museum reminded Ed of old drawings he had once seen of Xerxes. The scrolling carvings and fluted columns were almost identical to the sketches. However the carved figures sitting atop the building were far more elaborate than anything he had ever seen in Amestrian or even Xerxian architecture.

Well, outside of anything Ed had made himself. Amestrian architects just didn’t have a proper appreciation for gargoyles and skulls. The noble looking figures on this building weren’t quite to his taste, but it wasn’t bad.

“This is a muggle place, right?” he asked as they entered the building. Hohenheim had said something about visiting a few months ago, although they had never gotten around to it. Ed still felt like he was a bit lacking in reference points for normal muggle life. It was just a blessing that Albus was also short of knowledge about muggle culture.

The interior of the museum was just as impressive as the outside. The white stone and marble floor was a fascinating contrast to the bright gold and polished black of the Ministry of Magic. Light streamed in through the large windows, making the curved hallway feel far wider and brighter than it really was.

“You could say that.”

“Argh!” Ed pulled at his ponytail in frustration, “You’re so cagey Dumbledore!”

“Well, if you didn’t react in such an interesting manner, maybe I would give you a straight answer.”

Ed forgot all his plans for a snappy comeback when he spotted a large sign next to a large entranceway.

“The reading room? This is it?”

Albus pushed open the door. It opened to reveal a huge room circular room with a grand domed glass ceiling. The walls were covered in rows upon rows of bookshelves and the center of the room was crammed with writing desks. Light streamed into the room from the windows, casting rainbow shades over the men studying at the tables.

It kind of reminded Ed of the library at Central, he thought as he followed Albus to a particularly grand bookshelf at the far end of the room. His fingers itched as they passed the heavily laden shelves.

“Can we just…” Ed looked longingly at the books.
“Well, we could. But I have a feeling there’s somewhere else you may prefer.”

“You are just a delight, aren’t you.” Ed said with roll of his eyes.

Albus just responded with an eye twinkle that seemed far older than his years.

They stopped in front of the largest bookcase in the library. It stretched all the way from floor to ceiling, stopping just before the large windows. A gryphon was carved into the right hand side, the wooden creatures eyes inset with what looked like amethysts. Without explanation, Albus started to pull books out of the case at random, leaving each one hanging precariously from the shelf. After he had pulled out over ten books, Albus stood back and nodded firmly.

“That looks about right.” he muttered to himself.

Before Ed could ask Albus what he was going on about, the other man had stepped forward and pressed the eye of the gryphon sculpture. The creature slowly turned it’s head to Ed and opened it’s mouth in a voiceless roar.

The bookcase shuddered slightly before sinking back into the wall and sliding behind the cases to the left hand side.

Ed looked around frantically at the men studying at the tables behind them. Not one of them had even turned to look.

“What-?”

“Enchantments are wonderful things, are they not?” Albus said, watching Ed’s bewildered stare with a smile.

“It’s just…weird, I knew that this was how it worked, but seeing it in real life is just bizarre. They really just…don’t notice?”

“You don’t need any sort of enchantment most of the time, people just see what they want to see.” Albus explained. “Similarly to when we apparated in. Even if we had been seen, people would either not have noticed, or just found a way to explain it away.”

Ed heard a small clicking sound as the bookcase finished sliding into place. Two more amethyst-eyed gryphons sat at either side of the doorway. The one on the right tossed its head and roared, while the other reared up on its hind legs.

“Come on.” Albus said, gesturing to the new entranceway.

Ed glanced at one of the gryphons, who seemed to smile in response, before stepping through the doorway.
Sorry for the delay in updates! After two hospitalisations in the family and problems with finances, writing was pushed to the back of my priority list. Thankfully everything is just about back to normal now. Thanks so much for your patience, you guys are just fantastic.

To everyone who comments, subscribes and bookmarks, thank you from the bottom of my heart. If you want to hear more from me and more about my writing, come and say hi on Tumblr!
After stepping through the doorway, the first thing Ed noticed was white. The majestic entrance hall they stepped into seemed to have been carved from pure, gleaming marble. At the front of the room was a huge grand stairway, gryphon statues standing at each side of the fluted pillars. The statues were similar to the ones on the bookcase, although they were far, far larger. Something of that size could only have been created by alchemy.

Or magic, he added as an internal afterthought.

He walked forward to take a look at the noble creatures. The statues really were ridiculously huge. Ed almost had to crane his neck to see the marble creature’s faces.

He turned back to look at Albus, who was still standing by the entranceway, a small smile on his face.

“It’s funny, watching someone see these places for the first time.” he said thoughtfully, “Someone other than a child I mean. Children are very rarely impressed or surprised by anything.”

Ed narrowed his eyes.

“What exactly are you implying Albus?”

“Nothing, nothing. It’s just…well, it’s nice, I suppose. You tend to forget just how spectacular some of these places are.”

Satisfied that the child comparison hadn’t been a sly comment about his height, Ed turned back to the survey the marble room.

“So, what is this place?”

“You are currently standing in the entrance hall of the British Wizarding Museum and just around the corner is the Bloxam Reading Room.”

“You’re kidding, just how big is this place?”

“It spans several stories. I think the seventh floor is mainly dedicated to Moroccan cauldron technology if I’m not mistaken.”

Ed gave him a blank stare before frowning and shaking his head.

“No, that can’t be right. That muggle building we went through, the windows, surely you could see…” he paused and thought for a moment before continuing, “It’s enchanted, isn’t it? You can’t really see out of those windows because this place is in the way.” Ed shook his head. “I didn’t even notice…”

“Of course you didn’t notice. Why would you? That’s the beauty of a proper enchantment. That being said, this is particularly beautiful magic. The ceiling of the Hogwarts Great Hall is quite similar. In fact I am quite sure that the spell smith was the same for both buildings.”
“Yeah, I read about it. I guess they also use the same enchantments on the ceiling at the Ministry.”

“Exactly, although they mainly use that ceiling for notices. It doesn’t quite compare to a sky mimicry.”

“It’s more art than magic.”

“I would perhaps argue that magic is art.”

“In the right hands? Yeah, I suppose so.”

Ed felt the same way about Alchemy. But it was weird to hear Albus talking about magic in the same way that he understood Alchemy. It was strange and almost slightly uncomfortable. He missed being able to talk about Alchemy and part of him ached to understand magic in the same way that Albus could.

No matter how much he studied, it still felt like he was looking in from the outside.

“So, what should we look at first?” Albus said, gesturing around the marble entrance hall.

“Why don’t we start at the top and work our way down?”

“Sounds like a good plan.”

---

Ed wasn’t sure when the uncomfortable prickling sensation at the back of his neck started, but experience told him to never ignore his instincts. Years of fending off everything from alchemical monsters to Winry’s wrench had given him a sixth sense for threatening situations.

He had managed to lose Albus somewhere around the Global Wizarding Art section and had been keeping an eye out for him ever since. That being said, most of his attention had been stolen by the many rooms filled with exhibits.

There had never been anything like this in Amestris, not that Ed had seen anyway. Most museums were dedicated to old paintings or sculptures of naked ladies looking forlornly over their shoulders. Not a subject matter that filled Ed with any degree of joy.

As the back of his neck continued to prickle, Ed turned to look over his shoulder and unexpectedly met the eyes of a plump middle-aged witch. The woman was staring unabashedly, a crumpled magazine clasped in her right hand. As he looked around, Ed realised that it wasn’t just the portly woman who was staring. Small groups of people around the gallery had, at some point, turned their gaze to Ed and the sound of whispers permeated the room.

Ed glanced back to the display behind him, for a moment wondering if something remarkable was happening that he had simply missed.

No such luck. Unless the idea of moving portraits had somehow become a novel invention to wizards once more.

Picking out individual comments from the hushed sea of voices was almost impossible, but Ed was able to discern a few snatches of conversation from the wall of sound.
“–him!”

“...can’t believe it...is it safe?”

“But, didn’t mother always say that they had scales?”

“–should go home Fiona.”

Ed looked around, trying not to look as frantic as he felt. He wasn’t stupid. There was no doubt that all eyes were on him, and it seemed as if the vast majority were not happy about his presence. Albus was still nowhere to be seen and the other visitors’ attention had long since left the gallery. He glanced around again, it couldn’t be said that all of the eyes on him were exactly kind. Usually that sort of thing wouldn’t bother him, but here? Ed couldn’t feel less confident.

The words started to swirl around him, the gazes of the wizards around the room pinning him to the spot. It was almost paralyzing.

Ed shook himself out of the panic and did the only sensible thing he could think of; he started to make for the exit.

“Yeah, get out. Your kind ain’t welcome here.” a man dressed in a long black robe said aggressively. His strong Glaswegian accent only strengthening the tone of his words.

A few other wizards chimed in with shouts of approval, while others simply looked down at their feet.

Ed ignored the angry wizard’s words and continued towards the hallway. The hot stares burning against his back. He quashed the urge to turn back and challenge the man to a fight or skip the challenging and just break his nose.

He pushed down the remarks about men in dresses and overcompensation and instead pressed forwards. He kicked away the stop and let the heavy wooden door slam shut behind him.

Thankfully the fourth floor hallway was empty and he didn’t have to control his facial expression. He let out an angry hiss of breath, rubbing his hand roughly against his face.

He couldn’t remember feeling angrier, more powerless, more-

“Ed?”

A small voice broke through his internal tirade. He swung around to look for the source, only to be met with an empty hallway.

“Pssst, back here!” the marble staircase whispered once more.

Cautiously, Ed went to investigate the hushed voice. As he rounded the corner, he was met by a small figure huddled under the stairs.

“No one saw you come around here right?”

“Wait, Joscelind?! What are you doing back here?”

“Shhh! Don’t be too loud, or Mummy will find me. Come down here before anyone sees.”

“Your Mum?” Ed asked, shimmying under the marble staircase.
The little girl nodded, chewing on her pigtail absentmindedly before folding a page over in her book.

“She made me come here today. Even though I told her I didn’t want to go and look at a bunch of dusty old things in a dusty old museum.” Joscelind’s eyes widened slightly. “She didn’t see you, right?”

“Well, she won’t have seen me coming down here at least.”

“What do you mean?”

Ed looked around with an almost imperceptible quirk of his lips.

“Well, after being practically chased out of an exhibition hall, I doubt the first place someone would look for me would be under the stairs. Most people would probably just leave altogether.”

“So nobody saw you come down here? Wait, wait a second. What do you mean ‘you got chased out’?” she leaned in close and whispered conspiratorially, “Did you do something bad?”

“What, no! What would make you think something like that?”

“Well mummy said that you were,” she wrinkled her nose in a mimicry of her mother’s tone, “different. Whatever that means.”

“Your mother-” Ed paused, wondering how to even begin to explain what the word ‘different’ meant to some people. “Ah, it doesn’t matter, but yeah, I guess it was something about that.” Ed replied, more to himself than the little girl. “People don’t really like things that are different.”

“Well boo to them then. I think it’s fantastic. Normal’s way too boring.”

Ed snorted to himself.

“Plus, I guess it’s pretty special to know someone who was in Witch Weekly.”

“Wait, what? Witch Weekly? I thought it was the Prophet?”

“The Prophet? I don’t know anything about that. I can’t really read the newspaper yet. Too many big words. But mummy loves the witching magazines. She has a collection this big at home.” she stretched her arms wide to indicate just how big this collection was. Judging by the width her arms were attempting to spread, it was beyond calculation.

“There was a big picture of you on the cover this week. I think they had some for free down in the entrance hall. I remember because mummy wasn’t very happy that she had paid for the subscription and they were just giving them away for free. That’s what she said anyway.”

“Oh, great. Well, that explains it I guess.” Ed said bitterly to himself, rubbing his face with his good hand. “I guess everywhere is the same when it comes to this sort of crap, never really understood what it meant to be on the other side until...Well, I guess I should just leave. Might as well-”

“Urgh, stop it!” Joscelind said, smacking Edward’s arm like one would reprimand a puppy, “Don’t be such a grump! Who cares about a whole load of stuffy old Mums and Dads? I don’t care what they write about you.”

“But, It’s not like you can understand what they’re writing, right?” Ed replied, a small smirk
blooming on his face.

“Okay, I don’t like you anymore.” she said, sticking her tongue out.

“That was a quick reversal.” Ed’s grin widened.

“I don’t not like you because you’re different, I don’t like you because you’re mean.” she said, trying to pout, but ultimately failing to hide her smile.

Ed laughed and sat back against the wall. Every now and again the sound of footsteps drummed overhead, it was strangely calming.

“How did the test go, Joscelind?”

“I passed,” she started slowly, “but I didn’t get the scholarship. Mummy wasn’t very happy, but I don’t really care.”

“You’re going to be a famous Quidditch player right? Why should you care, right?”

“Exactly!”

“You have to promise me something though.” Ed said, a serious expression covering his features.

“What?” the little girl leaned forward expectantly, eyebrows furrowed in what was clearly the most ‘grown up’ expression she could imagine.

“You need to get me free tickets to all your games.”

The little girl reeled back in a laugh.

“No! How would I make any money? I can’t give you anything for free, I might get told off!”

“Damn. Fine, I’ll pay but I better get good seats when I buy them!”

“Of course! Only the best.”

Ed nodded in agreement.

They sat in silence for a few long seconds before Joscelind spoke again.

“Ed,” she started in a quiet voice, “you know, I really don’t care what anyone says. And I don’t really think you should be friends with people who do care.”

Ed nodded, his eyes drooping as they continued to sit quietly under the marble staircase.

The sound of footsteps echoing above them.

-Albus understood for the first time what it meant to be the mother of a naughty child. He had searched every floor for Edward, he had even resorted to calling his name for a short while, before
it had started to feel hopeless and a little embarrassing.

Maybe a mother wasn’t the best example. Maybe he was understanding what it was to be an exasperated pet owner, regretting ever letting their dog off the lead.

Whatever he was, Albus knew that the next few hours were probably going to revolve around finding Edward and then scolding him for running off. Albus couldn’t help but feel a deep sense of responsibility for him. It was just a shame that Edward was so desperately curious by nature.

He couldn’t really blame him though, for someone like Edward a museum like this was the equivalent of a wonderland. Although personally, Albus would have preferred spending his time looking at the exhibits, rather than dedicating the best part of the day to chasing after genius with a tendency for wandering.

He hadn’t been too concerned before, deciding to let Edward have his fill of staring at the exhibits before dragging him away from the glass cases. Albus remembered briefly allowing his attention to be stolen by some exquisitely taxidermied pixies, clearly a recent edition to the collection, however by the time he had looked back, Ed had all but vanished.

He started to imagine how the conversation with Nicolas would go. He had never had to admit to losing a person before, not that it was through any fault of his own of course. Edward Elric could only be compared to a cat; acutely aware of his own importance and curious to a fault. It was useless; he had clearly seen something shiny and interesting and chased after it.

Or perhaps the temptation of books had been too great? He had sounded dreadfully excited at the prospect of the reading room and he certainly was not in any of the exhibition halls. Having eliminated the impossible, Albus nodded firmly and started to head towards the Bloxam Reading Room.

“Achoo!”

Albus turned slowly. The hallway was empty.

Just as he was about to continue on; blaming whatever he heard on a stress induced hallucination, the staircase sniffed loudly.

Albus narrowed his eyes.

“Who’s there?”

“No one! I’m...urhm..the enchanted staircase!” replied the voice of a little girl.

“Oh really, I wasn’t aware that enchanted staircases developed respiratory issues.”

There was a brief pause, in which the voice was clearly thinking very hard, before it hissed:

“Psst, Hey, wake up! What does respy-tory mean? Quick, it’s important!”

“Hn...What?” a second bleary voice replied, “Wait…” there was a small pause, “did I fall asleep?”

Albus started at the sound of the voice.

“Ed?”

“Albus?” The staircase replied in a deeper voice, sounding equally surprised.
Ed rolled out from under the stairs, a small girl clinging to his leg who Albus quickly recognised as the same young lady from the tests at the Ministry.

“What on Earth were you doing under there?” Albus asked, still doubting if he had really just seen Nicolas Flamel’s new protege roll out from under a marble staircase.

“Hiding from Mummy.” Joscelind said with a small naughty smirk.

“And angry bastards…” Ed added in a low tone.

Joscelind smacked him and gave him a stern look. Albus was only a little surprised to see Ed bow his head with a slightly chagrined expression. Albus gave Ed a silent look; letting him know that there was no way he was going to get away with not explaining this later.

“Don’t you think it’s about time that you get back to your mother? I’m sure she will be worried” Joscelind pulled a face and folded her arms over her book.

“He’s right you know. And this place is really cool anyway, I bet you’d find something you liked if you gave it a chance.”

“I guess so.”

“You do know that there’s a floor dedicated to the evolution of Quidditch, right?” Joscelind’s eyes lit up at the mere mention of the game.

“Would you like us to help you find her?”

“No, I’m fine. I’ve got something to do first.” she said with a broad grin.

“Have fun.” Ed said, the corners of his lips twitching.

Joscelind turned and ran up the staircase, grinning widely all the way. Albus couldn’t help but notice the way that Ed watched her as she sped along the upper hallway, there was something sad about the smile on his lips. It felt like the sort of thing he should know better than to ask about.

Once Joscelind had left their line of sight, Albus turned to Ed and raised an enquiring eyebrow.

“So? What was all of that about?”

Ed sighed audibly.

“Turns out I didn’t just grace the cover of the Prophet this week.”

“You mean-”

“They were giving out free copies of Witch Weekly in the entrance hall. I somehow doubt that they were as unbiased as the Prophet.”

Albus found himself unable to do anything but swear quietly under his breath.

“I’m sorry Ed, If I had known-”

“No, don’t worry. I can’t really bring myself to care about the opinions of a bunch of backwards stickwavers.” he paused slightly before adding, “no offence.”
“None taken.” Albus chuckled. “Well, what do you think to us attempting to get home with the minimal amount of attention? Can’t have you being swamped by autograph hungry Witch Weekly fans.”

Ed let out a bark of laughter.

“Something tells me that’s the least of our worries! But yeah, sounds good to me.”

“We’ll just have to leave the reading room for another time. It deserves a full day anyway to make the most of the facilities.”

“Can’t object to that!” Ed laughed in response.

- * -

They ended up Flooing back to Nicolas’ place. Ed vowed to never complain about the Floo network again, compared to Apparition it was luxury. He had refused Nick’s offer of an escort home and taken the short walk alone. He needed the time to think without being bothered by Hohenheim and his pestering.

It had been an interesting day to say the least. He had learnt more about wizarding history, technology and not to mention, the nature of said wizards than he could have ever imagined. Maybe more than he wanted to know, but it wasn’t like he could choose who he shared this world with.

Ed paused, his hand on the doorknob of the house he shared with the bastard.

It had been far easier to get on with him recently. At first life with the old man had been characterised by daily arguments and shouting matches across rooms. Not that it meant that he liked Hohenheim now, just that he was almost starting to tolerate him.

Hohenheim greeted him excitedly as the door clicked shut behind him. He was practically vibrating on the spot with excitement. After watching him for a moment, Ed decided to take pity and put him out of his misery.

“What is it Hohenheim?” he asked, fighting the urge to roll his eyes.

“I don’t wish to get your hopes up,” he started, clearly not really meaning his words, “However I have recently made the acquaintance of a prosthetics specialist. Going by what he says, and what he says might not be totally accurate, something close to Automail is eminently achievable. It will obviously take time and it will not be quite the same but-”

Ed didn’t hear the rest of Hohenheim’s rambling. The thoughts buzzing in his ears blocked out everything. Limbs that actually worked would change everything. Limbs that actually worked would change everything. He knew he shouldn’t be getting so excited about the possibility, but he couldn’t help himself. Hohenheim was still talking about something, but Ed just couldn’t bring himself to tune in.

“-So what do you think?”

“Yes.” Ed blurted out suddenly. “Yes, yes.”
“Should I take that as a ‘yes’ then?” Hohenheim asked in a strangely affectionate tone.

Ed just levelled a flat stare at him in response.

“Alright, alright!” He chuckled in response. “Can I take some measurements Ed? It will only take a moment.”

Ed grumbled slightly but started to shrug his jacket off none the less. For the first time, Ed was thankful for those months without Automail as a child. Being able to unbutton shirts and easily manipulate objects with his flesh hand had been a godsend in the last few years.

Hohenheim pulled out a tape measure from his inside jacket pocket and directed Ed to lift his arm. As Hohenheim started to jot down measurements in a small notebook, Ed briefly wondered why the old man carried a tape measure around. What sort of emergency required immediate measuring? Not that Ed had any place to question other people’s eccentricities of course.

Ed kicked his trousers off and let his legs undergo the same treatment, Hohenheim was also measuring his flesh limbs for what he assumed was for later comparison. He tried to ignore the awkwardness of sitting mostly undressed while someone who wasn’t Winry or Pianko measured his calves.

“These still fit you remarkably well Ed.” Hohenheim interjected.

“Hooray.” Ed replied flatly, he didn’t hold any affection for his current prosthetics. They were a stop gap, that was all. Having had the prospect of something closer to Automail waved in front of him only intensified those feelings. He knew that they had been expensive and that it was ungrateful to complain, but he couldn’t help himself.

“Okay, almost done.” Hohenheim said, looking up from his notes.

Ed grunted in response.

“By the way, I’m planning on going shopping tomorrow. Is there anything you want? I’m thinking of investing in a good new razor, it’s becoming prohibitively expensive to visit the barbers. I could pick one up for you too if you want.”


“Nearly.” Hohenheim replied, looking distracted and thoughtful.

Ed waited for a moment and when the measuring didn’t continue, he pushed Hohenheim’s hands away, threw on his clothes as fast as one working arm would let him, and limped out.

Hohenheim’s concerned gaze drilling into his back.
Chapter End Notes

A very delayed Happy New Year to you all! It’s not quite February yet, so I can still get away with it, right? Thank you all so much for your support. The end of last year was not fun to say the least. So I really appreciate the kind words!

I hope you enjoyed the new chapter! As always, your comments mean so much to me and I thank everyone who leaves them from the bottom of my heart.

Thanks again, you’re all stars!
Chapter 10

Hohenheim found it difficult to stop himself from waking early these days. He had hoped that getting away from the London smog would have done some good for his nerves. However, despite being as far away from civilisation as one could hope, he still found himself waking with the lark. Moving to the country had not been for just his benefit though, Hohenheim’s greatest concern had been Edward’s health.

He sat down at his desk, a full teacup held loosely between his fingers. The delicate bone china around the rim had long since been chipped and cracked beyond recognition. A side effect of living with Ed, he thought with a smile.

Moving to England had been their first significant argument. Many more had followed of course, taking a good deal of his sanity with them. Edward had not adjusted well to his new life and Hohenheim struggled to remember a year more difficult than the first one spent on this side of the gate. Barely a day had passed without Edward trying to get into a fight or running a dangerously high fever.

The fighting he had easily understood. Edward had been unstimulated, depressed and longing for home. Stopping him in his journey of self destruction had been nigh on impossible. Most days had ended with Edward staggering home, silent and swollen faced. There had been no other solution but to accept it and pick up the shattered pieces of his son night after night. The sickness though, that had been far more concerning. Hohenheim could only conclude that Edward’s tendency to illness was due to his bodies unfamiliarity with this world’s myriad of diseases. He had spent the best part of a year cursing the lack of medical progress in this new world. Moving from Germany to England had only worsened his condition and there had been nothing to do but move to somewhere with cleaner air.

Hohenheim remembered that train journey with alarming clarity. Edward had sat, squeezed in a corner, with his face pressed against the cold window. He had looked so young.

As the stretching green landscapes flashed by, Hohenheim had caught glimpses of Edward in the glass. A strange expression reflected back in the darkened glass. Thinking back on it now, it had been something like loss.

Hohenheim shuffled the papers absently. He had reams of correspondence to reply to and absolutely no desire to even begin reading through them. He took a sip from his tea cup, leaving a glistening brown ring on the papers, as he sat the cup upon them.

Even now he could hear the sounds of his son thumping around upstairs. The unmistakable combination of soft and hard footsteps as he stumbled around the bedroom. Edward was not exactly what one would call elegant in the early hours. It would be uncharitable to call that a natural trait though. The boy had lost his ability to be stealthy the first moment he set foot on this side of the gate. Hohenheim wished he could offer something better than the heavy old prosthetics his son was currently sporting, but any progress was proving difficult. Not from a lack of trying, but rather the simple logistics of time and technology. His contacts in Munich had made some progress recently, but anything even coming close to Automail was still years away.

So much was pulling Hohenheim back to Germany. However Edward’s vehement resistance quickly nipped any thoughts of return in the bud. He couldn’t find it in himself to force them back
to Germany, particularly now Edward finally seemed to be settling into life in England. For the first time in Hohenheim’s living memory he was seeing his son making friends, forming bonds and truly enjoying life. He couldn’t bring himself to tear Edward away from that.

No matter what the universities were offering in terms of progress or money, his son’s well being would always come first.

Edward, for all he had suffered and overcome, was very much still a child in Hohenheim’s eyes. Yet to grow an inch or even start shaving, Hohenheim was unable to distinguish the young man thumping around upstairs from the babe he and Trisha had carried home from the hospital. Edward’s lack of physical development was an area of concern, albeit not something he would ever mention to the boy himself. A part of Hohenheim did worry that the exposure to so much smog and pollution had somehow damaged the boy permanently. It was a part of Hohenheim that he did not allow to surface very often.

He ran a lazy had through his hair, there was no use in being overly concerned by these matters. Things would come right, in the end.

He leaned back, trying to gather the will to start work for the day. He had been putting off some of these letters for a very long time indeed. The sounds from upstairs were starting to intensify anyway, it was best to not risk further comments from Ed about Hohenheim being a layabout.

There was a slightly louder crash and Edward came flying down the stairs as fast as his legs would allow him, his customary worn satchel tucked under his arm.

“Going out old man.” he said while shrugging on his jacket carelessly.

“Where exactly are you-”

The slam of the front door cut him off.

Yes, he was going to be fine. One way or another.

- –

Edward was fuming.

He was pretty sure that if you looked carefully, the smoke rising from his ears would be visible. He couldn’t believe it, well, he could believe it. He just didn’t want it to be true.

He stormed out of the house, a strange emotion bubbling close to the surface. It was half anger and half simple disappointment. He wasn't entirely sure where he was going, all he knew was that he needed to confront someone, anyone about this. Ed couldn't even really remember where he'd picked up the damn book from. All he knew was that somebody had some serious explaining to do.

He marched down the street finding himself standing outside the pub without really being aware. Maybe Albus was around, it didn’t really matter though. He just needed to shout at someone.

Ed threw open the door and marched towards the barman.

"You seen Dumbledore recently?" he asked.
There must have been something slightly insane in his eyes, because the normally snobby and judgemental barman simply pointed to the rear of the bar.

Ed nodded brusquely and marched to the back of the lounge.

"Albus, what-"

A young man looked up, wide eyes locking with Ed’s.

"Oh, urhh, sorry. I thought you were someone else."

The young man frowned at Ed slightly before grinning sharkishly.

"Oh, you’re Elric, right? Please tell me what my stupid brother has done to earn your wrath. No, no don’t hold back. I need it today."

"Brother?"

"He hasn't told you? Only figures,” the man leaned back in his seat, stretching out his long legs. “My brother seems to spend rather a lot of his time trying to deny my existence these days."

"You're Albus' brother?" Ed asked, peering more closely at the man’s face.

"I thought you were supposed to be smart? Yes, I'm Aberforth, brother to the insufferable prodigy you seem to be spending an awful lot of your time with."

"Oh, right." Ed shuffled slightly on the spot, feeling exposed and uncomfortable. He didn’t like the idea that Aberforth seemed to know so much about him, particularly when Edward had been unaware of the man’s existence.

"Stop standing around like a lemon and sit down. You look like you could do with it."

Ed dropped down into the plush armchair and stared at the young man across the table. Now that he knew, the relation between Albus and Aberforth was plainly obvious. The long nose, high brow and strong jawline could have been identical. Not to mention those startlingly blue eyes.

"So, Edward, is it?" Ed nodded his assent, "Why are you looking for my brother today?"

"Ah, it's nothing."

"It doesn't look like nothing."

Ed shrugged and looked away. He didn't quite trust the look in Aberforth's eyes.

"Well, anyway. What do you think about my brother? I must say, I'm very curious about how he became friends with a muggle. It's...well, it's slightly out of character for him to say the least."

"In what way?"

"Maybe if you tell me what's got you so angry with my brother, I'll tell you some of his secrets." Aberforth said with a wry smile.

"You're a sneaky one, aren't you." Ed smirked.

"I like to think of it as one of my better qualities." Aberforth said with another grin.
He ran a hand through his shortly cropped auburn hair and leaned back in his armchair.

"So, what are you and my brother up to anyway?"

"Can't you ask him about that?"

"We don't exactly have what you would call the best relationship."

Edward nodded absently, not that he could really relate. He and Al's relationship couldn't really have been any better. It was sad to know that not everyone had that, but he was aware that sibling strife was more common than the relationship that he had with Al.

"We're just researching really. Made some pretty exciting breakthroughs recently."

"Yeah, I heard. I don't mean to be rude, but why is a muggle interesting in magical theory? I mean, how do you even research without magic of your own?"

Ed shrugged, he wasn't really offended by the question, it was only a natural thought progression. However the recent events at the museum had left him slightly touchy.

"You don't need to have magic to be able to understand it. To be honest, I think a bit of distance makes it easier to understand the science behind it." He answered, as politely as he could muster.

"Hmmm, not entirely sure I agree, but I think I understand what you mean." Aberforth smiled as he took a sip of his drink.

"I don't care if you agree," Ed snorted, "It's just how it is."

Aberforth nodded.

"I can't say I've ever had much interaction with muggles, so I guess I'll just have to take your word for it."

"Exactly." Ed said with a smirk.

The pub was strangely quiet this early in the day. Only a few regulars were sat at the bar and the lounge was almost totally empty. The sound of the barman polishing glasses and the hushed conversation of the two elderly men sat at the bar was the only noise to be heard.

It was slightly eerie.

"So, do you know where I might find your brother?" Ed tried again after a moment of silence.

"Looking for a fight?"

"Not so much. Just some explanations."

"I’m not against a fight, just to be clear. I’m always a fan of ‘hex first, explain later’. But I guess that’s not an option in your case. A good punch couldn't go wrong either, I suppose.”

"Really, just some explanations."

"Well, maybe I can help you with those, I'll let you know where to find the elder Dumbledore brother if you choose to let me into your secrets."

Ed gave Aberforth a sideways glance. It didn't look like he was going to give up easily.
After a moment's hesitation, Ed pulled the book from his satchel, the strange silver-embossed triangle design shimmering in the light.

Aberforth took one look at the book and his eyes rolled back in his head.

"Of course." he sounded exasperated.

"Of course?"

"And I thought this was going to be something interesting." he sounded disappointed. "So what, did Albus give this to you?"

"No, I think he or one of his friends left it around somewhere. I just picked it up by accident."

"Accident, huh?" Aberforth smirked, taking the book out of Ed's hands. "I don't recognise this particular book though."

"But you know what it's about."

"I'm his brother. Of course I know about his obsession with the Hallows."

Ed nodded slowly, taking in the new information.

"But why are you angry? The Deathly Hallows are just fairy stories for kids. I mean, Albus might be under some other strange delusions, but you're not stupid, right? I don't see anything worth getting angry about."

Ed looked down at the book.

"I'm always cautious of people claiming that something is 'just a legend'. I've been proved wrong more than once."

"Well, this really is 'just a legend', okay? Even if my brother is a little bit insane about this sort of thing."

"Not according to this book."

"My brother's not the only nutter out there, okay."

"You said you're never seen this one before, right?"

"This book? No, I haven't to be honest. I've seen most of Albus' books on the Hallows, but that's a new one to me."

"Huh, maybe it was his friends. What was that guys name...Gell-something. I dunno, can't remember."

"Gellert?"

"Yeah, that was it."

"You should stay away from that guy." Aberforth said, tone suddenly switching to something serious. "He's bad news through and through. I didn't know that Albus was spending time with him again."

"Seemed like they were pretty close."
Aberforth snorted.

“Anyway, if you still want to talk to Albus, I’m pretty sure he’ll be at the Flamel’s tonight.” he said, stretching out in his armchair once more.

“What, curiosity satiated?” Ed asked with a snort.

“Pretty much.” Aberforth replied with a grin.

“Well, I have some stuff to work on with Nicolas anyway, I guess it wouldn’t hurt to just head over now.”

Aberforth nodded and extended his hand to Ed.

“It was nice meeting you, Elric. Don’t be too harsh on my brother though, he’s not a bad guy. Just a bit misguided at times.”

Ed took the other man’s hand and smiled.

“Call me Ed.”

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Nicolas greeted him eagerly that evening, his customary smile firmly in place.

"I've been looking forward to seeing you Ed." Nicolas said, leading him through to the labs. Perenelle waved at them from the kitchen, where she was reading by the window. "How have things been recently?"

"Not bad. I met Albus' brother today."

"Oh really? Aberforth is an interesting young man. Much like his brother in many ways."

Edward laughed in agreement.

"They certainly have their similarities, huh. So, how's everything going in the lab? Any progress?"

"Somewhat. I'm eager for your opinion though."

Ed raised an eyebrow in curiosity as Nicolas pulled over the tray of red sand filled petri dishes. The tray of small red stones had increased in number since their last lab session. Clearly Nicolas had been busy.

From the pile of red stones he pulled out a particularly large, well formed stone. It was almost three times the size of the surrounding crystals.

"Wow." Ed said, surprised. "Did that form naturally?"

"I did a second round of crystallisation on this batch, but this one was the only one to increase in size."

"Hmm, I’m pretty sure we can improve on this." Ed said, looking intently at the small crystal.
They soon fell into the now familiar routine of experimentation and repetition, the table soon filling with notes and figures. Every now and again Nicolas would call Ed over for his opinion on something or other.

As he watched the beakers and played around with formulas, Ed let his mind drift to his earlier conversation with Aberforth. It had done something to calm his anger, but it was still bubbling somewhere close to the surface. He wondered if it was just a gut reaction. But reading about a stone that gave the owner power over death, the ability to return the dead to life; it all felt a little too familiar. He understood what Aberforth meant, about it all being a fairytale, but he couldn’t let himself trust it.

There was just no way that these parallels were simple coincidence.

Before long, the sky was starting to darken and the street lights began to flicker like fireflies outside the window.

"Wait, wait! Ed, Look! Look!"

Ed's head snapped round to look at the dish in the centre of the table. Sitting in the very middle was a single, fully formed stone.

Ed's jaw dropped.

He looked back up at Nicolas, unable to speak. Nicolas was just as speechless, looking more closely, he could see tears in the man’s eyes.

"It's...." he still couldn't get the words out.

"We did it." Nicolas said quietly. "Ed, we did it."

“We...We did. Didn’t we.” Ed’s voice was not much more than a whisper.

He looked down at the stone sitting so inconspicuously on the table. He didn’t know what to feel. As much as he had insisted to himself that he trusted Nicolas and his intentions, actually seeing the thing was different. This wasn’t the stone he knew though. He had to keep telling himself that. This wasn’t the stone that could conquer death that Albus was seeking.

This wasn’t the stone to be celebrated.

-*_-

Perenelle had been quick to break open some outrageously old and almost certainly outrageously expensive wine to celebrate. It wasn’t every day that someone achieved the impossible after all. Albus had joined them soon after the creation of the stone. He had been equally shocked, looking between Ed and Nicolas with his mouth open.

They were sitting in the candle-lit drawing room. Albus had a smile that could not be erased.

“I can’t believe you did it.” he said in wonder.

“We, Albus. It wouldn’t have been possible without your help.”
“Nicolas, don’t give me false credit. It was all down to the two of you.”

“Whatever you say Albus.” Nicolas said with a smile and an idle swirl of his wine glass.

“So, what happens from here then?” Ed asked.

“You need to present this to the world.” Perenelle said. “You can’t keep this to yourselves.”

“Of course not!” Nicolas chuckled, “I’m very much looking forward to basking in the adulation of all those who insisted that this was impossible.”

“So that would be most of the wizarding world then.” Albus smirked.

Edward snorted, he wasn’t surprised that so many had doubted Nicolas’ claims.

“There’s a conference coming up, right? I’m sure we would be able to present there. I think they’re still taking applications for presentations.”

“I was thinking of presenting there myself, actually.” Albus said, “However, I would be more than happy to let you and Edward take the credit for the stone. My input was limited to say the least.”

“Are you sure Albus?” Nicolas said with a small frown, “I really do mean it when I say you were vital in this discovery.”

“I’m sure. My blood research has been my main focus for a while now. I’ll be very happy to present that alone.”

“Well, only if you’re sure.”

“I am.”

Edward sat back and took a sip of wine. It wasn’t the time to confront Albus about anything. This was a time for celebration. And for now, everything was good.
Chapter 11

It was no surprise that Nicolas and Ed’s application for a spot in the presentation schedule of the Lügner Research Conference had made the papers. Although the media had no knowledge of their discovery, it clearly hadn’t stopped them from dedicating an entire article to their application.

Ed supposed it made sense. The entire wizarding world had been entranced by the news of the eccentric Nicolas Flamel teaming up with a muggle. It was only natural that they would be curious about what they had discovered.

That being said, almost no time had passed since the swathes of articles concerning his W.O.M.B.A.T pass. What more did they have to say? Not very much, it turned out.

He had been pleasantly surprised to come across Idris’ opinion piece on their partnership. There were, of course, some rather unpleasant opposing points of view, but Idris’ face beaming out from the paper warmed him. It was nice to know that there were at least some people on his side.

Not many, but enough.

He had spent the best part of the day preparing for the conference with Nicolas. Albus had also applied to present, following through with his plans to focus on the dragon blood research. It had taken a bit of cajoling, but Nicolas and Ed had eventually persuaded him to let them credit him as a contributor to the creation of the stone. Even if the bulk of the work had been done by the Nicolas and Ed, there was no denying the significance of Albus’ contribution.

Edward trudged down the now familiar cobbled street that led back to the house he shared with Hohenheim. He readjusted the heavy satchel that was swung over his good shoulder. It was filled with his normal books filled with notes and diagrams, but the weight that continually threw him off balance was down to one book.

The Deathly Hallows.

Even the name sent a strange shiver down his spine. He had been looking for the right time to confront Albus with his concerns, but he had been proving a difficult man to find recently. The righteous anger he had felt earlier had receded and he was simply left with a strange sense of dread.

Dumbledore’s brother had insisted that the so called Hallows were mere fables, simple fairy tales. Edward hoped beyond hope that this was the case. It all seemed far too familiar for comfort.

Ed opened the front door and dropped his satchel to the floor. He was about the call out a greeting to Hohenheim, when the man appeared in the hallway.

“Edward! Perfect timing, speak of the devil and all that.”

Edward paused, narrowing his eyes, “What do you want?” he asked, more than a little suspicious.

“You’re not overly busy, are you?”

“Well, no, but-”

“Perfect!” Hohenheim exclaimed, gesturing back at the study, “I have someone I would like to introduce you to.”
Ed considered refusing, but Hohenheim hadn’t been overly annoying recently. He could afford to cooperate a few times, without setting too much of a precedent.

Ed shrugged, and Hohenheim beamed in reply.

Sitting beside the desk in Hohenheim’s office was a man dressed sharply in a shirt and waistcoat. His wool jacket was slung over the back of the chair. Edward noted that he wasn’t a particularly young man, a receding hairline and lined face placed him at around sixty.

“Edward, I would like to introduce you to Mr. Hugo Junkers.”

“Uh, hi. Nice to meet you.” Ed said, sticking his hand out as an afterthought.

Junkers took Ed’s hand in a firm grip and smiled broadly.

“It is a pleasure to finally meet you, young man.” Ed blinked at the unexpected German accent.

“Hugo and I have been corresponding a great deal of the last few months. He is one of the foremost engineers in world.”

Junkers scoffed, “I do not know if I would go quite that far my friend. Aeronautical engineering is my particular passion.” he explained.

“Give him a pig, and he could almost certainly make it fly.” Hohenheim said with a hearty chuckle.

Ed struggled to hold back the urge to tell them that, in fact, he knew a number of people who could easily do just that.

“Well, I could probably put the pig in something that flew. I’m not quite sure about the biological side.” Junkers said with a quirk of his lip.

“However, flying pigs are not the reason I invited Mr Junkers to visit.”

“I’m shocked.” Ed said flatly.

“Indeed.” Junkers chuckled. “There are two things I wish to talk to you about Edward. First of all, as you know, I am an aeronautical engineer by trade, but I also have an interesting in mechanical engineering and anatomy. Hohenheim happened to mention your dissatisfaction with your current prosthetics, and he gave me some interesting ideas about possible improvements. I’ve made a very basic prototype from your father’s suggestions and measurements.” he pulled a strange tangled mess of metal, wire and cables from under the table, “Would you care to try it on? It’s clearly a work in progress, but the sooner we start perfecting the fit, the more effective it will be.”

Ed’s eyes had bugged out at the mere sight of the arm.

Hohenheim hadn’t been kidding. The old bastard had actually come through with one of his promises for once.

He ripped off his jacket, waistcoat and shirt with little regard for modesty. Who cared about the stuck-up rules of this world when he had the chance of a functional arm within his grasp? He didn’t miss the grimace on Hohenheim’s face as he removed his current, incredibly heavy prosthetic. The straps always cut deep red marks into his skin that lingered even when it was removed. He was sure that his arm wasn’t entirely pleasant to look at, but he didn’t know why the old man looked so guilty. Ed’s lack of limbs was no one’s fault but his own.
Junkers passed over the arm carefully and Ed smiled, turning it over in his hands. As Junkers had said, it was little more than a skeleton frame, but he could see the potential. The joints were painstakingly articulated and the fingers had been built with a fascinating gripping mechanism. He pulled the arm flush against himself and tightened the makeshift harness.

“What do you think Ed?” Hohenheim asked.

It was simple, almost primitive. If Winry had been presented with this contraption, she would have laughed until she cried.

Ed looked back up and locked eyes with his father, grinning ear to ear.

“It’s perfect.”

Edward woke early, the sun already streaming through the windows. It was the day of the conference and he wanted to make sure that he was as prepared as he could be. Admittedly though, that was only half of what had driven him to wake at such an ungodly hour.

After Junkers had fitted the prototype, he had asked Ed whether or not he would be interested in joining a research group in Germany. A few weeks ago, he would have scoffed at the suggestion, but in all truth, it sounded fascinating. It would also mean that the work on the arm would progress twice as fast. He had woken up, the thoughts of a possible future refusing to simply stay as dreams.

However, the world of magic was still so deeply exciting. He just couldn’t see himself leaving it behind for pure science. There was still far more left to learn.

Ed grabbed his satchel from where he had dropped it next to the door. Nicolas was bringing almost all of the important materials, but Edward couldn’t bear to leave the house without his notes.

Perenelle opened the door with an exhausted, but genuine smile.

“Good morning Edward! I’m sorry, it’s all a little hectic this morning.”

There was a muffled thud from the direction of the laboratories.

Perenelle cringed. “Would you care to join me for tea in the parlour while Nicolas prepares?”

“Are you sure I can’t help?”

“Very!” she chuckled, “You must understand, this is the culmination of a lifetime of work for Nicolas. I don’t blame him for being a little high strung, even if it is unbelievably wearing.”

“Well, I’m just glad that I’ve been able to help him to realise his dream. I guess this day has been a long time coming.”

“Longer than you might think.” Perenelle said with an almost imperceptible smile. “So, don’t be shy, come and relax with me while my husband runs around like a headless goose.”

Ed shrugged, “I have nothing against relaxing while Nicolas does all of the work.”

“I also have those little biscuits you like.”
At that, Edward needed no further persuasion. He followed Perenelle into the parlour and settled into one of the soft leather armchairs. They sat there for a good half-hour, eating biscuits and discussing international wizarding relations. He hadn’t realised that both Nicolas and Perenelle had travelled so extensively. It seemed as if they had connections all over the world.

Eventually, Nicolas blustered into the room, looking slightly wild-eyed and like he hadn’t slept a wink. He brightened slightly upon seeing Edward, who was still stuffing his face with biscuits.

“Ah, Edward! Just about ready to go?”

“I feel like I should be the one asking that!” Ed said, rubbing the crumbs from his mouth and suppressing a laugh. “Are you sure you don’t need to sit down for a few minutes before we go?”

He rubbed a hand over his cropped beard and yawned widely. “No no, there will be plenty of time to sit and relax while we watch the other presentations.”

“Whatever you say!”

Nicolas chuckled and swatted Ed around the head. “I’ve checked, double checked and triple checked everything. We are ready to go whenever you can bring yourself to part from the biscuits.”

“Oh, I dunno, that might be a challenge.” he said, pulling a mock-pained expression before his expression suddenly shifted to something more genuine, “Wait. No wait, really. Seriously? No, please tell me we’re not going by Floo again?”

Nicolas grinned broadly, and Ed groaned.

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The Floo journey was just as nauseating as the last one and Ed was more than certain that he was currently a rather putrid shade of green. Nicolas, damn him, stepped out of the fireplace a few seconds after Ed looking, somehow, less ruffled than he had when they had left the house.

“I hate you.” Ed moaned, rubbing at his eyes with the heel of his hand.

“Perk up Ed! This is it, the day we’ve been working for!”

Ed side-eyed his partner but decided not to make any comment. Floo most certainly did not agree with him.

The hall for the Lügner Research Conference was opulent and stunning. The same as every wizarding building he had ever visited. It was almost kind of...boring? There was almost no diversity of design in any of these places, they were all filled with gold and ornate carvings. The floors were universally gleaming without a single chip or crack. It made him curious about the economy of the English wizarding world. Suer, he had a good grasp on magical theory, but he was still rather in the dark concerning current affairs. When you could enchant everything to be beautiful, what was the point in spending money on anything but labour?

Amestris had been different. Alchemists were far scarcer than wizards seemed to be, not to mention the unshakable fact that alchemy refused to allow something to be created from nothing. That was something that Ed still had yet to understand. Just how did this so-called magic allow the creation of matter? The manipulation of behaviour?

Perhaps this conference could provide some answers.
The registration was thankfully, straightforward. Of course, Nicolas had to have his wand checked and then vouch for Ed. He didn’t really agree with it as a system, It seemed foolish to totally rely on wands for identification. What did squibs do? That sort of thing was Idris’ job, he supposed. Campaigning for their rights and petitioning to change the laws that made people’s lives so unnecessarily difficult.

Edward was watching the charmed quill at the registration desk fly over yards of parchment when Nicolas’ voice jolted him back to reality.

“Goodness, we’re on after the DoM!” Nicolas exclaimed, looking up excitedly from the timetable.

“The Department of Mysteries?” Ed asked. He had read a great deal about the secretive research that took place in the bowels of the Ministry. Not that much had been written about the details of their research. Ed could only imagine what new discovery they would be presenting.

“They present almost every year, I can’t think of many teams with better funding than that of the Ministry.”

“And we’re the ones following that? Great.”

“No, no! This is a great honor. It means that we are guaranteed a full audience for our presentation. Someone must have an idea about what we will be presenting, not to mention the draw of a muggle presenter! It’s in their best interest to save you until last. Everyone’s going to want to catch a glimpse!”

Ed smirked and shrugged lightly, he didn’t care all that much about how much attention they drew. He just wanted to hear more of these presentations, there was so much that he didn’t know, and it was almost too exciting.

They moved through the halls, Nicolas occasionally stopping to greet elegantly dressed wizards in flowing robes. Ed noted that a few of the attendees were dressed in muggle suits. Admittedly, they were generally rather alarming shades of green and purple, rather than the muted tones he had become accustomed to. However, it was one of the first times he had seen so many wizards dressed in something other than yards of swirling fabric.

Nicolas had clearly noticed his interest and laughed.

“It seems to be a relatively recent fashion.” he explained, “Muggle fashion has more of an influence here than you would think. And academics always try to get ahead of the crowd.”

“I’m not sure if I would call that fashion.” Ed said, eyeing a nearby wizard’s fushia jacket dubiously. “But I think I prefer it to the robes.”

“I just enjoy seeing change.” Nicolas said with a smile. “But I think you should give robes a chance. I’m sure they would suit you, and don’t worry, it’s no issue to get the hems taken up.”

Ed’s eye twitched, but he managed to control it with a few deep breathes, as Nicolas laughed at him.

“Oh Edward, you are far too easy to rile.”

Ed shot him a look that could have putrefied fruit and tried to stop himself from making a rude gesture. He wouldn’t have held back in the lab, but he didn’t want to ruin Nicolas’ reputation in public. Not too much, anyway.
“Nicolas, Edward!” a beaming Albus Dumbledore waved at them from across the room. “I’m glad to have found you! The first presenters are already setting up, in fact, I think Gellert is already ready to start! When are you due on?”

“We’re the closing act.” Ed said with a quirked eyebrow.

“I should have known.” Albus said with a chuckle. “I can imagine that you’re going to cause quite a stir.”

“Well, apparently we’re due a big audience, so that will be fun.” Ed only injected a hint of sarcasm into that statement.

“It’s true. Many people come late and only attend the final few presentations. And everyone always stays to hear the DoM’s new findings.”

“Did I not tell you?” Nicolas said with a smile.

“Hey, I’m a scientist, now your assertions have been peer-reviewed.”

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The conference was utterly fascinating, and their own presentation was an overwhelming success. As soon as they finished, the audience had been clamoring for answers to questions, confirmation of the finest details, and simply wanting to shake their hands.

He had gained the contact details of around ten different researchers within ten minutes of their presentation finishing. The enchanter who had presented on remotely activated magic had been very eager to talk to Edward, and he even snagged the details of one of the head researchers at the Department of Mysteries.

They had set up a makeshift panel after the conferences’ official conclusion, to field the many questions people seemed to have for them. Admittedly, most of the questions had been addressed to Nicolas, which Ed could understand. It was Nicolas’ life’s work after all.

“I would like to direct this question to Mr Elric.” A bespectacled witch started, “If, as you have proven, the creation of a Philosopher’s Stone is feasible, does this mean that other legendary magical artifacts could be recreated? Is there a chance we might be seeing another so-called ‘Merlin’s Box’ in the coming years?”

Edward started at being addressed and reached out clumsily for the charmed amplification device that had been provided for him.

“Thanks for the question.” he scratched the back of his neck awkwardly, “Well, first of all, there’s a big difference between something being possible, and something being a good idea. You know what I mean? Creating almost anything is possible, but there are some things that are too dangerous to even think about researching.”

“Can you give us an example?”

“Anything that created an immense imbalance of power between people, or anything that upsets the natural flow of the world is a good example.”

“I’m sorry, but can you explain what you mean by ‘the natural flow’?”

“Do you really want me to spell things out? Bringing people back from the point of death, playing
with power that you don’t understand, those sorts of things, y’know.”

“But is that sort of power really obtainable?” the woman was leaning forward in her seat.

“Sure it is.” Ed snorted, “But you’d have to be pretty stupid to play around with that sort of magical alchemy. I mean, the general principles wouldn’t be too far from the Philosopher’s Stone, but the potential applications are worlds apart.” he leaned down into the make-shift amplifier, “In short you won’t ever catch me trying to gain power that isn’t mine.”

The room went rather quiet, and Ed realised that he was talking to a room full of researchers who were searching for exactly that.

He cleared his throat. “I guess that’s a positive about being a muggle. I’m not under any illusions that I’m anything other than really, really ordinary.” he grinned and the tension broke as the room erupted into small chuckles.

As laughter bubbled over the room, Ed made eye contact with a steely gaze.

Gellert Grindelwald was most certainly not laughing.

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“Elric, what were you talking about back there.”

“What?” Ed swung around to meet the eyes of Albus’ friend, Gellert.

“Don’t play stupid, what do you know about the Hallows?” there was something wild and strangely desperate in his eyes.

“Nice to see you again.” he replied with a raised eyebrow.

“Tell me what you know.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Can you leave me alone? I need to pack up before Nicolas gets back.” he turned back to the table.

“I am asking you nicely, Elric. You couldn’t have been more direct, and my interest in the artifacts is no secret.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. But I really need to pack these things away, so I’d appreciate it if you would leave me alone.”

“As a muggle, I would have thought that you would have more respect for your superiors.”

Ed swung around with an incredulous expression.

“Look, I know you don’t like me, but seriously? Are you actually insane?”

Gellert locked eyes with Ed.

“If we’re not careful, I have a feeling that we’re going to have some problems, Elric. And I don’t think either of us want that.”

“Well that answers that, and speak for yourself.” Ed snorted, stepping back from the table.
“I obviously didn’t make myself clear.”

“Oh no, you did. I’m just choosing to ignore the shit that seems to flow in a constant stream from you.” Ed paused and then looked back over his shoulder, “Might want to get that checked out by the way.”

Something in Gellert’s expression twisted sharply, and he took a step forward. “You are treading a very dangerous line, boy.”

“Oh, am I? I must not be making myself clear enough then. Step off, leave me alone and get the hell out of my face.” he made to walk away, but turned back suddenly, “And, ‘boy’? Seriously? You aren’t that much older than me. Take your head out of wherever you’ve stuck it.”

Gellert’s hand spasmed angrily and Ed rolled his eyes. He knew Gellert’s type, all bark and no bite. He would threaten and monologue until he was blue in the face, but he was essentially impotent.

Edward twisted, just missing the burning jet of light that flew over his shoulder. Before he could do anything in retaliation, the other man was upon him. Ed found himself pressed against the wall, Gellert’s hand at his throat and a wand pressing sharply under his chin.

“You would be wise,” Gellert said, eyes wide and breaths carefully measured. “to not push me any further. I would not be accountable for my actions. Tell me what you know.”

“Oh really now? I mean, you’ve already confirmed to me that you’re fucking insane. So I guess that would make sense.” Ed grunted out as Gellert pressed harder against his throat.

Ed threw himself to the side, attempting to push Gellert off him. He kicked the desk sending a chair and his satchel flying.

The bag burst open, pages of both loose and bound notes spilled out, accompanied by one very large book.

Gellert’s eyes darkened, something brittle and cold overtaking his expression.

“You little thief.”

“I didn’t-” Ed started, but he was cut off by Gellert’s fist making contact with his face. His head slammed back against the wall, and Gellert reeled back, holding his hand. It was almost laughable really, Ed had taken hits ten times as hard in the past, and Gellert had clearly never thrown one. Nonetheless, it sent him reeling.

Just as the world started to right himself, he was blown off his feet by a jet of light. He tried to spring to his feet, but his body wouldn’t cooperate, every muscle was frozen in place. Suddenly it hit Ed that he was completely and totally defenseless.

Gellert crouched down next to him, pushing Ed’s hair out of his eyes with the tip of his wand.

“This is for your own good, Elric. You’re a muggle. You’re weak and you need firm direction. Personally, I think of it like training a dog. Most animals will fall into line if the pack leader asserts themselves. But sometimes the weaker dogs don’t know that they are weak. They need to learn it the hard way.” he fixed Edward with a hard look. “If you don’t choose to cooperate, I’m afraid that I’m going to have to show you how weak you really are.”

Ed wished his muscles would cooperate enough to allow him to spit into the arsehole’s face. Clearly he had enough control over his face to convey that thought, because Gellert laughed, a
strange hiss from between his teeth.

“Don’t say I didn’t give you an option.” Gellert said casually, flicking his wand between his fingers. “I suppose it’s the kindest thing to do.”

Without warning, everything was pain. Pain and cracking and something shattering. He was trapped, falling and the walls were closing in. Centuries passed in seconds and he couldn’t scream.

Just as suddenly as it started, he was released. He felt Gellert’s foot come down hard on his shoulder and then his body was released from its paralysis. Ed gasped until his lungs ached, his eyes stinging and streaming.

“I hope that was worth it, you pathetic creature.”

Ed couldn’t reply; he was still choking on lungfuls of air.

Gellert crinkled his nose at Ed’s prone form, nodded, turned on his heel and swept out of the room in a swirl of silken robes. He paused in the doorway, not deigning to even look back into the room.

“Leave Dumbledore alone, Elric.”

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